John Scotus Erigena: An Irish Biblical Scholar.

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At the beginning of the fifth century the Roman Empire was in disarray due to internal tensions and to external pressure from barbarian invaders from the East. In an attempt to consolidate the core of the Empire Roman legions were withdrawn from the frontier regions in north and west Europe, and, in particular, from Britain. This manoeuvre did not in the end secure the central area of the Empire and it was not long before Gothic armies were at the gates of Rome itself. Moreover, the Angles and Saxons swept along northern Europe and crossed into Britain.

These invaders did not come into desolated regions. Though the Roman armies had withdrawn the native people remained and amenities such as Roman roads survived. There was also the Church which since the time of Constantine had been spreading and increasing in wealth. In Britain, the natives, including the Christians, tended to retreat before the Saxon invaders into the Celtic fringe where the Church persisted and developed its own provincial ways of worship and life and also adapted its form of government to suit the tribal system. Church life was centred in the monasteries; the people of the tribe worshipped in the monastic churches and the monks attended to the pastoral needs of the people.

On the Continent, there was no similar option of withdrawal and the Church's life and worship was maintained under barbarian rulers who were at times hostile to the Church, but it was not long before these rulers found it to their advantage to patronize the Church. Some of these rulers had already encountered and embraced an Arian form of Christianity. Marriages to Christian princesses, as when the pagan Clovis married Chrotochildis, often led to greater scope for the Church. Queens, such as Radegundis, gained renown for their support for new monasteries and nunneries. Strange as it may seem, it was the monastic strand in Church life which, though dedicated to renunciation of the world, proved to be a powerful and stabilizing influence as the barbarian kings sought to renew and

impose an ordered society.

Moreover, the remote Celtic Church had not lost its sense of kinship with the Church on the Continent and this led to a remarkable outburst of missionary zeal which took Columba to Iona in 563, Aidan to Lindisfarne in 635, and Columbanus to Europe as early as 590. These pioneers saw themselves as voluntary exiles from Ireland for the sake of Christ and the spread of the Gospel. Columbanus founded a number of monasteries and he annoyed some European bishops by bringing his own Irish bishop with him and incorporating him into his monastic system as was the Irish custom. It would, however, be incorrect to regard him as an unwelcome intruder into an area provided with Benedictine monasteries. The field was open for those who could gather a community and secure the support of powerful patrons, whose gifts of land and money made monastic foundations possible. As yet each monastery was autonomous; the abbot devised its rules, laying down some of his own and borrowing from others,as others also drew from him. Columbanus soon won the respect of Merovingian kings who were emerging as strong Frankish rulers; he also influenced other monasteries by his emphasis upon penitential severity, biblical learning and evangelical preaching.[1]

The civilizing process was slow and imperfect. Professor Wallace-Hadrill says that as Kings and church pioneers began to collaborate "the sword was the greatest converter of all"; after the sword came tithes, and after tithes "some glimmering of Christianity in Germanic guise and a hint of a new social morality."[2] Monastic leaders themselves were often bellicose figures and their biographers often incorporated gruesome tales as evidence of their special sanctity; biographies without a liberal sprinkling of the miraculous had a poor circulation and were not counted worth copying,[3] but Wallace-Hadrill says that Columbanus was so big a character that he could not be wholly buried under the weight of miracles attributed to him by his biographer, Jonas of Bobio.[4]

Monasteries were prone to deterioration; indeed,

"no part of the Church was more liable to go astray without supervision than were the monasteries" [5] but the ideal was never abandoned and constant attempts were made to organise more uniform and closely-knit monastic systems which would prevent decay. Such a reform was well under way at the beginning of the ninth century under Charlemagne, the Frankish king whose family had eclipsed the Merovingian dynasty and who himself sought to bring all monasteries in his kingdom under the full Benedictine Rule. Even now, Irishmen were to be found in the Frankish Church and Wallace-Hadrill and Bieler both emphasize the Irish contribution to the rebuilding of Europe and the expansion of the Church and both emphasize the contribution of John Scotus Erigena.[6]

John lived from about 810 to 877; at that time Scotus meant Irish and John emphasized his Irishness by signing himself Erigena, a scion of Ireland. Wallace-Hadrill thinks he must have been trained in an Irish monastery, but Bieler contents himself with saying little is known of his origins.[7] The vigorous world of biblical, theological and philosophical studies which had been flourishing in Europe since the days when Alcuin of York was Charlemagne's minister of education was a magnet which still drew Irishmen. Moreover, life in Ireland was being seriously disrupted by the increasing tide of Norse invasions and this was an incentive to scholarly priests to look to other fields. John Scotus went to Europe about 850 and made his way to the Palace School at the court of Charles the Bald, a grandson of Charlemagne. Another Irishman, Martin, was master of the school; he was devoted to the canonical life and was interested in the liberal arts and in grammar, especially Greek, and he may have assisted John's entry into the school. He may have had some contact with the cathedral school at Laon but scholars now think he did not settle at that school; indeed, he may have visited several schools, but he was astute enough to keep close to Charles whom he tried to encourage to see himself as a philosopher-king.[8]

John Scotus's scholarly ability brought him to the notice of Archbishop Hincmar of Reims by whom he was asked to refute a work by Gottschalk, a turbulent monk, who had set forth an unqualified doctrine of double predestination to eternal life or to damnation. John, in his De Praedestinatione, dealt trenchantly with Gottschalk, calling him a heretic, a madman and a blasphemer, and certainly refuting his arguments, but he did so by methods which led many, including Hincmar, to suspect John's own orthodoxy. He held that since God existed in eternity and not in time there could be neither before nor after in God's calculations and therefore there was neither single nor double predestination.[9] This unexpected line of argument may have disturbed his readers but he could not be ignored. His knowledge of Greek was shown in his new translation into Latin of Celestial Hierarchy by pseudo-Dionysius, a treatise which had been sent as a gift from the Emperor in the East to the Emperor in the West in 827, and by his translation of Ad Thalassium by Maximus the Confessor.[10] His greatest work was Periphyseon, "a perfectly original theological synthesis"[11] which made him rank as "the greatest thinker of the early middle ages."[12] This work begins from a study of the early verses in the Book of Genesis and purports to be an exposition of Scripture but spreads out into a massive treatment of the doctrines of God, creation, and human redemption and destiny.[13]

The renown of this work has overshadowed his two briefer and more theological writings which suffered such long neglect that there has been much debate as to whether or not they are properly attributed to John. The first is a mutilated exposition of the Gospel of John which is in the cathedral library at Laon; this covers parts of chapters 1, 3, 4 and 6 and has been described by Wallace Hadrill as "the jewel of Latin rhetoric and philosophy of the early middle ages."[14] The second is a Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of John which is in the civic library at Laon but which does not bear its author's name. The editor of the most recent edition, Edouard Jeauneau, has shown that attributions to Origen, to Gregory Nazianzus and to Chrysostom cannot be upheld, and he has given convincing evidence from its style, vocabulary and content

to prove that it is by John Scotus.[15] The Commentary and the Prologue can be taken together to give a coherent account of his theological teaching. In expounding the Gospel of John he makes references to many other parts of the Bible but he is also indebted to Church Fathers, Augustine being the most frequently quoted, and there are echoes of the allegorical methods of Origen and the more literal approach of Jerome.

His framework of thought is orthodox Trinitarianism with special stress upon the unique revelation of God in Christ, perfect man and perfect God who became incarnate for the salvation of mankind. Scotus sees John as a mystic eagle who soars to the realities which are beyond full understanding (intellectum); he has been privileged to penetrate the mysteries of the sovereign God.[16] Peter was a man of faith and action who went to the tomb of Jesus and ventured in in faith and who confessed that Jesus was the Christ; John was a man of contemplation who moved beyond faith to understanding and rose to the higher knowledge that "in the beginning was the Word". Paul was lifted up to the third heaven, but John has been lifted above every heaven to the cause of all things, to the Word by which all things were made.[17] God, whom no person has seen, has been revealed. Scotus says that in the Old Testament there are frequent occasions when people were said to have seen God and, if this is so, how then can it be said that no one has seen God? Scotus refuses to take refuge in the explanation that while God the Father has not been seen the Son and the Holy Spirit have been seen; God, the Holy Trinity, is one God and is beyond the grasp of human understanding, and therefore to be seen, as the Gospel says he has been seen, he must have assumed a form capable of being recognized. The Holy Spirit took the form of a Dove, but when Christ came he wore no disguise; he took flesh and became man.[18] The Word was not spoken by an angel to angels or to men, but by a man to both angels and men, by a man, not in phantom form but in the true humanity which he assumed.[19]

The cause of this incarnation was God's love for mankind, but why should God love mankind? Scotus holds that God created all things and has left his imprint upon his creation and ultimately all things will be taken back into God from whom they came. Human beings as they now are are not fit to be in the presence of God but God has not abandoned them; it was for their restoration that Christ came. However, if they have been created by God, how have they come to be in their present condition? There is a harmony and variety in the created order and this can be a pointer to the harmony and variety in the person and purposes of God, but people have lost the power to see this harmony and variety, though Scotus never quite abandons the belief that man even as he is has not completely lost all light to trace the creator's hand in his works.[20]

Scotus is much troubled about the meaning of the Fall of man. He cannot avoid the thought that no person before Christ has ever lived perfectly on this earth and so he suggests that human beings were created in a heavenly paradise where they disobeyed God and were then sent to this earth as a punishment and as a discipline. Scotus sees Adam as a general name for every person and all are now in darkness, having lost the light of paradise; Isaiah and Paul are also cited as witnesses to this darkness. It is in the words of Scripture that we can be pointed to an understanding to recognise the Word, but even a study of the forms and beauties of the sensible world will point to the same Word, 'to him who made all things because he is all things.' Indeed, every human being is capable of participating in the light of heavenly wisdom since God has not abandoned him. Nevertheless, there is no minimizing the human plight; this is seen in every facet of life. Even the division into male and female was not part of God's plan for people but was part of the penalty of being demoted into this world and would disappear in the final restoration when there would be neither marriage nor giving in marriage.[21]

Scotus asks what light can come to human beings who are born to die and to fall into turmoil and misery and what can it mean to say that the true light was lighting

"every man that comes into the world" when so many never seem to see the true light. He takes the phrase "every man that cometh into the world" to mean those who by the grace of baptism and by rebirth into the light of wisdom and life have chosen to turn from being children of men to be children of God. He also takes "every man" to mean the whole man (homo omnis), the man who lives in both worlds of flesh and spirit; such men are in light. The world into which such men come is neither the perfect world of pure spirits nor the world of visible and corporal things but the world where the two worlds of body and soul come together, where human decision and divine grace come together.[22] Those in this world are those who receive the Word and believe it; the Arians received him as a person but they did not go on to believe on his name as the only-begotten son of God, consubstantial with the Father.[23]

Christ has become the first citizen of this world; his divine nature has assumed human nature as it was in paradise before the Fall. This thought fits in with Scotus's Realist philosophy that the perfect template which is the pattern of individual human beings exists in the mind of God and it was this which Christ assumed thus joining himself to the solidarity of the human race and providing the bridge by which men can be brought back to their true sonship. Indeed, Scotus speaks of men becoming gods, being deified: this also is in line with strands of his teaching which indicate that God is the only reality and that all things capable of returning to him will eventually return to him. His philosophical system has little or no place for an eternal world of the Devil and damned souls and this was one of the reasons for the suspicions which surrounded him in his own day when the fear of damnation was a major feature of preaching and art.[24]

Life in Christ and growth in obedience are central themes in Scotus's teaching. The process of restoration is being carried on by Christ who dies

daily in his faithful people and is crucified by them until they destroy their evil thoughts, even their imperfect spiritual thoughts and raise themselves towards true knowledge. The completion is as yet a hope, not a reality. Jesus has returned to the Father and he takes with him those whom he saves, taking them now by faith but in hope of the vision face to face. The journey from faith to perfect vision is a process of healing. Christ was raised, as was Moses's serpent, to deliver from their sins those who are perishing through the poisoned stings of evil serpents. In baptism the penalty due to sin is removed but the flaw of original sin remains: "it is one thing to remove the arrow from the wound, it is another thing to heal the wound."[25] In baptism water washes the flesh, but this must be followed by the invisible gift of faith which comes on the wind of the Spirit; no one knows the degree of perfection to which it will lead, but Christ knows.[26]

This change is a new birth. Scotus brings forward the teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus that there are four births: the birth of the human race in paradise, the birth into this world as the consequence of sin, the new birth due to grace which marks the beginning of the return to true humanity, and the birth into eternal life at death. The new birth due to grace is an essential step into the Kingdom of God. Scotus enumerates four possible senses of this Kingdom: the Church of the faithful, the company of the celestial spirits, the kingship of the Son of God, and the vision of truth; this vision is the sense which Scotus prefers.[27]

Within this framework of thought Scotus deals with particular aspects of the Gospel story: the ministry of John the Baptist, the encounters with Nicodemus and with the woman of Samaria and the feeding of the five thousand.

Scotus says that when John the eagle turns to John the Baptist there is a descent from the peaks of theology to the valley of history but even there there

are historical, moral, scientific and theological meanings to be discerned. John was a shining light indeed but what light he had was a wavering light compared with the light which came in Christ; he was a man while Christ was at the same time God and man.[28] The Baptist said Jesus was before him; Scotus says this could not mean that he was before him in time since John was born before him; he takes it to mean that Jesus came before men, face to face, and in his presence John knew that he was not worthy to be in his presence, and unworthy to undo the lace of his shoes. The shoe could be the flesh of Jesus in which the Word was bound, or it could signify the Holy Scripture in which the imprint of Jesus's feet are seen. Since there are two feet, one can be taken to mean the natural reason discernible in the created word, the other the spiritual knowledge wrapped up in the Scripture.[29] John the Baptist saluted Jesus as the Lamb of God; Scotus says a lamb produces wool, milk and meat and so Christ clothes the believers with virtues, nourishes them with the truth and sustains them through divine contemplation. John had baptised at Bethany beyond Jordan and this sets Scotus off on an allegorical detour. He says there is another Bethany near Jerusalem where Jesus often stayed in the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The first Bethany prefigures the unfallen human nature which Jesus assumed; the second signifies a nearness to paradise, symbolised by Jerusalem and to which the believer hopes to come. Again, the first prefigures the sacrament of Baptism, the second the Lord's Supper, Jerusalem the hope of glory. Or, the progression can be seen as the illumination of faith, education by hope and approach to the divine vision through charity.[30]

The fertility of Scotus's allegorical outlook often centres around Jerusalem. When he is expounding the encounter with the woman of Samaria he gives Jerusalem a much less favourable significance; it is the place where Jesus drew a few of those who live by the letter of the Law; Jesus then went to Samaria

where there are Gentiles who live by natural law and moved on to Galilee which stands for those who grasp the spiritual sense.

Jesus sat at the well and it was the sixth hour when the woman of Samaria came to draw water. This sixth hour is the sixth age of the world. The first was the period from the expulsion from paradise up to the time of Noah, the second up to the time of Abraham's readiness to offer Isaac, the third up to the time of David in Jerusalem, the fourth up to the rebuilding of the temple in the time of Zerubbabel, the fifth up to the baptism of Jesus by John or perhaps to death of Christ on the Cross, and the sixth the present age when the grace of Christ has been bestowed as a prelude to the seventh age which already exists for those in heaven and will reach its fulness in the general resurrection.[31] Then, after Jesus has talked to the woman he told her to go and fetch her husband. This provides Scotus with the opportunity for a typical medieval disparagement of woman. The woman is to go for her husband because without her husband she is not a complete person. She is one of those who want to fill their vessels with the enjoyment of temporal and corporal things, but at least she knows she has a need; she asks "give me". She has a reason focussed on created things but she needs the interior sense, the apprehension of God, and it is her husband who has the intellect to grasp this. There is a hierarchy from the wife up to the husband up to Christ up to God and Scotus cites Paul's verdict that the head of a woman is her husband. Turning to the five husbands, Scotus dismisses the view that these signify the five books ascribed to Moses; the Law was given to Jews and not to Samaritans. He then looks at the idea of Augustine that the five stand for five stages of life from childhood and all bound to the five senses and few get beyond this to the stage of true understanding; the woman's sixth husband is not even her true husband. Or, there is the teaching of Maximus the Confessor who saw the five husbands as five general laws given to mankind; the first was the command given in paradise not to eat the fruit of the tree; the second was the command to go and multiply after being expelled from paradise; the third was

the command to make the ark; the fourth was to divide the earth among the survivors of the flood; the fifth was the institution of the practice of circumcision. All these were preludes to the law of Moses but even this was not the true husband. Jesus brought the woman into the kingdom of grace and when she recognised him she left her pitcher and went to tell the news, and here she is a type of the Church and of human nature which when it recognises the presence of the Word made flesh leaves its carnal practices.[32]

In the story of the feeding of five thousand allegory takes over. Jesus lifted up his eyes to see the mutitude and this prefigures the whole world running to the faith of Christ, and also the lifting of our eyes above the worldly thoughts to the heights of contemplation there to receive divine sustenance. Philip said two hundred denarii were insufficient to buy enough to feed the multitude; two hundred might be thought ample for most purposes since ten is a perfect number; multiplied by ten it is even more perfect, and then multiplied by two more perfect still, but this height of rational calculation is not enough. Philip had not been nourished on the solid meat of faith and knowledge and had not reached perfect contemplation. The lad with the loaves was a type of Moses who had not been able to attain full maturity. The five loaves can signify the first five books of the Bible, but they can also mean the five bodily senses and Scotus says that anyone who is satisfied with what is apprehended by these five senses is on the level of a beast, but whoever is nourished with spiritual food becomes a rational being. The two loaves are the two Testaments, though some have taken them to signify the Prophets and the Psalms. The grass on which the people sit down is the spread of carnal thoughts but it is possible to move on from looking at the visible creation to the peaks of contemplation. The number of 5000 has a rich meaning for Scotus; it is the cube of the perfect number ten enhanced five times and thus stands for all those who now live according to the flesh but who, when instructed by the sacred history in Scripture and by the lessons of the visible creation rise to spiritual things,

or rather take hold of what Christ offers and are nourished by him. The remaining fragments can be seen as the subtle and difficult senses of the Scriptures with which the doctors of the Church have to wrestle. Or, the twelve baskets of fragments can be seen as the harvest of good works which follow the feeding. Scotus says others have seen the twelve as the ten commandments and the two laws of love to God and neighbour. If the fragments were not to be lost they would still have to be eaten; for some the fragments will be the tales of historic events which are sufficient sustenance for some; for others they will be the theological meaning of the tales and will lead to spiritual understanding.[33]

If Scotus wrote a commentary on the whole Gospel and if it had survived it would doubtless have contained further fascinating allegorical flights since most of his flights take place within the orbit of a fixed and mostly orthodox framework they usually are instructive and edifying, yet attempts to make similar flights today are not attempted by serious commentators, not even by devotional commentators like William Temple and Lesslie Newbigin. There are many reasons for this. First, the history of the formation of the text and the variations in manuscripts discourage any idea that the words of the Gospel are cryptic codes for esoteric meanings. Second, it does not seem likely that Jesus and those who handed on his message intended to wrap up its main content in codes subject to arbitrary interpretation. Third, it has so often happened that allegorical flights have gone far beyond the bounds of a defensible framework of faith and strayed into strange aberrations.

The outcome is, of course, that commentaries are nowadays much less exciting than were those of patristic and medieval writers; tedious expositions meander amid lush growths of textual apparatus and footnotes. All this is indeed necessary for students of the Bible who want to grasp how the Gospel was formed, what it meant to the writers and to the first readers, what it has meant to subsequent readers, and then to see what it can mean for our day. Would that this could be done with something of the verve, penetration, imagination, and practicality displayed by John Scotus Erigena.

Notes:

1. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, The Frankish Church (1983), ch.IV. See also L. Bieler, Ireland, Harbinger of the Middle Ages (1963) and T.O. Fiaich, Columbanus in his own words (1974)

2. Wallace-Hadrill, op.cit., p.379

3. Ibid, p.88
4. Ibid, p.10 and 78-79
5. Ibid, P.59
6. Ibid, p.369-377. See also Bieler, op.cit., but J. Marenbon thinks that Bieler's estimate is over enthusiastic: Early Medieval Philosophy 480-1150(1983), p.176.
7. Wallace-Hadrill, op.cit.,p.369. See also Bieler, op.cit.
8. Wallace-Hadrill, op.cit.,p.246. J. Marenbon, From the circle of Alcuin to the school of Auxerre (1981), pp.109-114.
9. Marenbon, Early Medieval Philosophy, pp.56-57. Hincmar pretended the work was a forgery.
10. Ibid, p.169 and 59.
11. John Scotus, Omelia Iohannis Scoti.ed. Edouard Jeauneau (1969), Intro. p.42
12. Margaret Deanesly, A History of the Medieval Church, p.168.

13. Marenbon, Early Medieval Philosophy, p.60ff. While acknowledging the greatness of this work, Marenbon points out certain confusions in its arguments.

14. Wallace-Hadrill, op.cit., p.372

15. John Scotus, op.cit., Intro.pp.51-60.

16. PL122 (all future references are from this volume) 283 D

17. 284 B - 285 C. "Pater loquitor: Verbum gignitur; omnia efficiuntur."
18. 290A. "Lux hominum est dominus noster Iesus Christus" 330A. "Christo autem, qui est caput ecclesiae, non ex mensura dat deus spiritum"

19. 289D

20. 321A."Dilectio itaque patris causa est humanae salutis"
289C. "Scripturae apices et creaturae Species"
290C. "Capax ac particeps lucis sapientiae"

21. References to the darkness in Isa. 9:2 and Eph.5:8
310C-D. "Nomine Adam omnem generaliter naturam humanum significari accipimus"

22. 293A-B. "Hoc enim in arbitrio hominis et cooperatione gratiae constitutum est"

23. 294B

24. 295C. "De hominibus facit deos qui de deo fecit hominem"
296B. "Accepimus gratiam deificationis pro gratia fidei qua in eum credimus, et actionis qua mandata eius custodimus"

25. 312B. 313D. "Aliud est enim sagittam auferre de vulnere, aliud postea vulneus sanare"

26. 315B -318C. "Ipse est enim sapie tia quae nec fallit nec fallitur"

27. 315A - 316A.

28. 291B-C. 292A. "praecursor itaque domini homo fuit, non deus; dominus autem, cuius praecursor est, homo simul fuit et deus"

29. 306B - 307B

30. 307C - 309D. For the treatment of the Lamb, see 310A-B.

31. 333B

32. 333C - 339D

33. 341B - 346B.