Neoplatonism and Christianity in the West

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Dermot Moran

Christianity began as a breakaway sect within Judaism. As such, it was one of a number of reform movements in Judea. Initially, it was a religious millenarian movement, possibly with some political ambition, but without a developed philosophical outlook. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 CE) reported the existence of Christians in the empire in the time of Nero. He wrote that "Christus, from whom the name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilatus" (*Annals* 15.44, trans. Bettenson) and goes on to describe the persecution of the Christians (see Bettenson 1975: 2). The immediate followers of Jesus do not appear to have had any great degree of literacy or sophisticated training in theology. Gradually, however, early Christianity evolved in the context of the vibrant local cultures within the Roman Empire. As Christianity spread, Greek and Roman temples were taken over and adapted, often involving rebuilding, for Christian worship, and existing images and symbols were adapted and absorbed into the new religion. The Roman calendar and ceremonial dress, for instance, was taken over by Christianity. Nevertheless, Christianity left its distinctive mark and completely transformed the inherited Classical tradition.

A similar oscillation between the old and the new took place at the intellectual level as the Christians developed an intellectual language to articulate their beliefs and to convert pagans. The first significant event in this long process of acculturation was the translation of texts of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek – the so-called "translation of the seventy interpreters" (*Septuagint*) ordered by the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy II and carried out in Alexandria in the second century BCE (see Pietersma & Wright 2007). This translation allowed traditional Jewish wisdom to circulate in the Roman Empire, and indeed the Greek texts of the Septuagint were drawn on by Jesus' own Apostles and by the Early Church Fathers. Clearly, the Jewish insistence on the one God was a direct challenge to pagan polytheism, as were the ideas of a holy text, a covenant between the divine and humans, and the idea of a sacral history. The early Christians were able to point to many features in Platonism that seemed to anticipate their own conception of

the divine, as, for instance, "father and maker of all the universe" (*Ti.* 28C) who desires to create out of goodness.

Already in the immediate pre-Christian era, religious scholars in the Greek-speaking city of Alexandria explored the meaning of the Jewish sacred writings using the grammatical and philosophical techniques of the Greek philosophers, drawing parallels between the creation accounts in Genesis (see Runia 2001) and the cosmology of Plato's *Timaeus* (See Runia 1986; Dillon 1988). Philo Judaeus (*c.*15 BCE–50 CE), a Hellenized Alexandrian Jew, who had apparently no influence on the Jewish tradition, read the *Septuagint* and applied Platonic and Stoic ideas to articulate his notion of the unchangeability, eternity and transcendence of God, and of the changeable nature of human beings (see Goodenough 1963; Chadwick 1967; Williamson 1989; Troiani 2003). God is true being and "He Who Is" (Exodus 3:4). Humans are made in the image and likeness of God and aim to achieve "assimilation" (*homoiōsis*) with God. Moreover, God operates through the *logos* or the rational principle. God first created an intelligible world akin to the Platonic forms and thereafter the sensible world. One can hear the echoes of the Platonic tradition, especially in Philo's discussion of the nature of the human soul (see Dillon 2009). I am here relying on my 2003 article.

The earliest Christian writers, notably the Roman citizen of Jewish origin St Paul (5–67 CE), who had a dramatic conversion to Christianity, show a marked hostility towards philosophy, which they interpreted as pagan wisdom. Thus Paul contrasted Greek philosophy as arrogant foolishness with the wisdom and truth of Jesus. Nevertheless, he absorbed philosophical conceptions current in his time and his epistles contain allusions to Platonic and Stoic philosophical ideas, such as the concept of the "inner man" (*esō anthrōpos*) found in the Second Letter to the Corinthians 4:16 (which echoes Plato's *Republic* 9.589a–b), the concept of natural law in the Second Letter to the Romans, the discussion of immortality in the Second Letter to the Corinthians 3–5, the concept of the "pneumatic body" (*sōma pneumatikon*; see Van Kooten 2009; also Heckel 1993) in the First Letter to the Corinthians 15, or the claim that existence of God may be proved by natural reason from the examination of natural things (Romans 1:20), a text much cited by medieval Christian philosophers. Indeed, St Paul refers to Christ as wisdom using the Greek word for wisdom (*sophia*) in I Corinthians 1:24.[1]

The early Christians were struggling to define their own new insights in terms of the philosophical systems and ideas available at that time. They initially proselytized in the Greek language, the lingua franca of the early Roman Empire, and inevitably the Greek intellectual world began to shine through in their writings, most famously in the Prologue to the Gospel of John whose opening sentence "In the Beginning was the Word" (*en archē ēn ho logos*) is undoubtedly a phrase heavily resonant with the philosophical ideas of "*archē*" (source, principle, origin) and "*logos*" (word, reason, rationale) as well as echoing the opening of Genesis. John's conception of the *logos* which became flesh and who is a person and the messiah is radically different from the impersonal *logos* of Philo, although the *logos* does play the same functional role in both writers.

Later, the so-called Christian Apologists – for instance, Justin Martyr (100–*c.*165 CE) (see Parvis & Foster 2007) – were quick to invoke the *logos* of Greek philosophy as a vehicle for spreading the Good News of the Gospels. Justin Martyr recounts that he initially sought wisdom from the Stoics, Peripatetics and Platonists, before being won over to the God of Scripture and to the person of Jesus Christ (see van Winden 1971; Barnard 1997). For

Justin Martyr the *logos* which runs through all things is to be identified with Jesus, the Son of God. This marks a radical departure from all late Hellenic pagan thought.

The absorption of Greek culture into Christianity did not go ahead without some opposition. Tertullian (*c*.160–*c*.225 CE), who was born in Carthage and was one of the first Christian apologists to write in Latin (he is often called "the father of Latin Christianity"), questioned the uncritical use of Greek philosophy in Christian texts (see Osborn 1997; Sider 2001). He famously posed the question in his *On Prescription against Heretics*, ch. 7: what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, what has philosophy to do with faith? He wrote:

> What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon", who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart". Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief.
>
> (Tertullian, *de Praescriptione haereticorum* 7)

For Tertullian, it was sufficient for the Christian to have *faith* (*pistis*, *fides*) – the believer had no need of pagan eloquence and philosophy. Yet, Tertullian himself was not immune to philosophy.[2] Thus, for instance, in *Against Praxeas* (*adversus Praxean*) he conceived of God as a kind of vaporous material spirit (Greek: *pneuma*) in the manner of the Stoics, and in his *de Anima* he conceived of the soul as a kind of material substance (following the Stoics) opposing the Platonic conception of the soul as completely immaterial and as "unborn". Tertullian criticizes Plato's denigration of the senses and rejects the idea that "memory loss" occurs (as Plato claimed) with the entrance of the soul into the body. For Tertullian, body and soul are created together and death is the separation of soul from the body.

Various versions of late Platonism (a loose progression of ideas often including Stoic and Hermetic elements is to be found in both Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism) continued to provide the intellectual backdrop for early Christian scholars in the Roman Empire.[3] Thus the hugely influential Christian philosopher and theologian Origen (*c*.184–*c*.254 CE), working in Alexandria, is deeply Platonist in outlook and even Porphyry acknowledges his familiarity with Greek philosophy. Origen was attempting to articulate and define the tenets of Christianity over and against the writings and preaching of the Gnostics. He was regarded as the great theologian of the age (see Crouzel 1989), and his *On First Principles* (Greek: *Peri Archōn*; translated by Rufinus as *de Principiis*; see Butterworth 1973) had widespread influence. Origen's homilies and scriptural commentaries circulated widely in the Middle Ages. However, Origen was condemned – specifically, for his views on *apocatastasis*, the universal restoration of all souls to the divine by the Fifth Ecumenical Council – and the medieval Latin West tended to treat him with some suspicion although his influence is everywhere. To illustrate Origen's way of interpreting scriptural teaching in relation to Platonism, one could refer to his discussion of the kinds of bodies that humans will have after the resurrection of the dead (*de Principiis* 2.10.1–4.38). Basing his comments on St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:44), Origen argues that most people do not have a sophisticated understanding of the meaning of the spiritual domain or of the nature of the resurrected body. For Origen it seems absurd that this body will be

of actual flesh and blood; rather it will be changed and transformed, something that later Christian Platonists will also emphasize. Elsewhere he distinguishes between the material body and the spiritual body and claims that there is progress from one body into the other. In *de Principiis* Origen offers the image of a seed which when sown must die and be transformed in order that the new life emerge. Origen maintains that the body possesses a certain inborn "principle" (*insita ratio*, *de Principiis* 2.10.3) or "seminal reason" (*logos spermatikos*, *ratio seminalis*) which is not corrupted and which survives in the new state. In general, Origen refers to the body as the garment of the soul, a Platonic metaphor that also occurs in Plotinus' *Enneads* I.6[1].7, and sees this as changeable depending on the location of the soul: the soul needs a garment suitable to it.

The early Christian Fathers were concerned to express the unity, eternity and transcendence of God, the creation of the universe and – against the Platonists – the *creation* of the human soul rather than its unborn eternity. The doctrine of the Trinity also began to be defended by Tertullian and others at this time, and the articulation of this doctrine became an important theological task through to St Augustine (who makes liberal use of Neoplatonic triads to illustrate the workings of the Trinity). Furthermore, the Christian apologists began to produce arguments against any doctrine of the transmigration of souls such as might be found in the Platonists following the Pythagoreans. Thus Tertullian's *de Anima* offers rigorous arguments for the rejection of transmigration of souls into other humans – or indeed, as found in Empedocles (and indeed, entertained playfully in Plato's *Phaedo*), into animals.

The Christian Fathers were generally struggling against various pagan doctrines associated loosely with Stoics, Aristotelians and Platonists. But a new intellectual movement arose in the third century which, while pagan, had a striking appeal for Christians. "Neoplatonism", as it came to be called, is normally associated with the philosopher Plotinus (*c*.204–70 CE) (see Rist 1967; Gerson 1994, 1996; Remes 2007), his student Porphyry (*c*.234–*c*.305 CE) and with a line of pagan philosophers extending to Proclus (*c*.412–85 CE), the last head of the Platonic School at Athens. In fact, it is clear that a strong pagan tradition informed by Neoplatonism ran parallel to and contended with Christianity for several centuries, and the pagan Neoplatonists were regarded as sages and ascetic holy men (see Edwards 2000). Neoplatonism offered a kind of template that was adopted in one form or another by all Christian philosophers in the period from St Augustine to Anselm (i.e. prior to the revival of Aristotle in the Latin West). A distinctly Christian version of Neoplatonism evolved in the Greek Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus), St Ambrose of Milan and the African-born Roman senator Marius Victorinus, as well as the Christian texts of Boethius which included his *On the Trinity*. Boethius outlines a typical Neoplatonic hierarchy of principles in his *On the Consolation of Philosophy*.

Both Neoplatonism and Christianity were essentially spiritual philosophies that opposed what they understood to be the materialism of the Stoics. They maintained the transcendent nature of the One as the source and origin of the visible universe. They further defended the divine origin of the soul and its desire to return to the One from which it came. The body and the world of the senses are regarded as distractions and impediments to achieving this unity with the One. Both Neoplatonism and Christianity advocated spiritual practices to purify the soul, leading ultimately to deification.

Various attempts were made to re-establish paganism, most notably by the emperor Julian "the Apostate" (Dodds 1965), and the progressive Christianization of Europe was

not without its regressions and interruptions. However, Neoplatonism was seen as in many ways being very acceptable to Christians. Plotinus (*c*.204–70 CE) in particular was regarded as sympathetic to Christianity and was translated into Latin by the Roman senator and convert to Christianity Marius Victorinus. Porphyry (234–*c*.305 CE), on the other hand, had explicitly written works, for example, *Against the Christians* (*adversus Christianos*, which survives only in fragmentary form), criticizing Christians and their biblical interpretations (see Berchman 2005). We now know of this work only from the references to it in works attacking it, by Christian writers such as Arnobius, Lactantius, Eusebius, Jerome, Augustine and others. Even his adversaries acknowledged that Porphyry was well versed in the Bible, but he criticizes it for historical inconsistencies, and even moral improprieties. There were also some fierce clashes between pagan Neoplatonists and Christian zealots, the most notorious of which was the murder of the female Neoplatonist philosopher Hypatia (*c*.350–415 CE) (Dzielska 1996), head of the academy in Alexandria, by followers of the Christian St Cyril, bishop of Alexandria. Later it seems that Proclus had Christian students (Steel 2010; Chlup 2012), and it is likely that the Christian writer who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius Areopagite was a student of Proclus. He certainly transmitted Proclus' ideas in a new Christian garb. Proclus' writings tended to offer support to various theological interpretations drawn on by the Christians (see Dodds 1963; Morrow & Dillon 1987). The Christians tended to regard Neoplatonism as a somewhat composite doctrine that provided an intellectual architecture for articulating theological insights into the nature of the infinite God, the nature of the procession of the Word, the meaning of the Trinity, the nature of creation, and the relation between the soul and the divine. There are several key features of any Neoplatonic account that have to be taken into consideration by Christian interpreters. Primarily there is the doctrine of the One (*to hen*) as the unique unknowable and unspeakable transcendent source of all things. This "One", drawing on an amalgam of arguments originally found in Plato's *Parmenides*, is itself the principle of unity in all other things, while remaining in itself, above everything. The One is transcendent and unknowable: unknown even to itself, as Eriugena puts it, following Plotinus. For the pagan Middle Platonists it was unclear whether this One had self-consciousness or whether it was even above this distinction between thinker and thought. From Plotinus onward, for instance, in Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus and Damascius, some form of consciousness is admitted in the One (Bussanich 1988).

All other things are what they are because of the One. They too are unities (*henades*) and they move because they want to be "one with the one". The pagan Neoplatonists postulated all kinds of unities and intermediary principles in the succession from the One, and the Christians reinterpreted these often as angelic intelligences but not gods. Moreover, this infinite One must be understood as creator of all things, "father of all". That which follows from the One is engendered by the One. The One overflows because of its own infinite, superabundant goodness and generosity. In this sense, it is identified with the Platonic form of the Good (*to agathon*) as found in Plato's *Republic*. The Christians would interpret this superabundance as equivalent to boundless love.

The One – as the Good – is "beyond being" (*epekeina tēs ousias*: Plato, *R.* 509b). Its first manifestation is Intellect or Mind (*nous*), which is identified by Christians with the *logos* and with Jesus Christ. Pagan Platonism has a further emanation of Intellect into "Soul" (*psychē*) which itself generates the body of the world and thereafter all material things. By the twelfth century Neoplatonic Christians were unhappy to posit the idea of a "World

Soul" (*anima mundi*) but Eriugena has no difficulty in accepting that the finite created cosmos emanates from intellect and soul (understood often as to be identified with the Holy Spirit as the third person or "hypostasis" of the Trinity).

The aim of all things and the explicit aim of Neoplatonic meditation or contemplation (*theōria*) is becoming one (*henōsis*). There is an "outgoing" (*proodos*, *exitus*) of all things from the One and a corresponding "return" (*epistrophē*, *reditus*) of all things to the One. There is no separate principle opposed to the One. Matter is at best an emanation from soul. There is therefore no reality to evil and matter also cannot be an ultimate principle. Christian Neoplatonists never think of this outgoing as a necessary emanation (it is of course the case that Plotinus did not think of the descent from the One as a necessary emanation either, but the Christians like to emphasize divine freedom and love in creation); rather it is because of the boundless freedom, generosity and grace of the One that it seeks to mirror itself in all the levels that follow from it. Thus the universe carries a certain image or trace of the divine. Indeed, for Christian Neoplatonists – and in relation to his theory of creation we might include Thomas Aquinas as a Platonist here – the term *emanatio* is frequently used as a synonym for *creatio*, and the kind of necessary relation which holds between creation and Creator is one-sided: necessary from the point of view of the dependent created being; neither necessary for, nor even known by, the Creator whose Oneness transcends all relation to anything outside itself. Other things come into being by participating in the One. The divine will is a kind of open invitation for things to come into being in order to emulate it.

Both Neoplatonism and Christianity were strongly committed to the divine origin of the soul, its immateriality and its immortality, but disagreed on the issue of its uncreated nature. In this regard, both Christian and Neoplatonist opposed the Gnostics and the Manichees with their dualist cosmological vision of a world governed by both light and dark forces. Both also were ascetic movements – Plotinus did not want his portrait painted (image of an image) – and there was also a certain disdain for, or at least devaluation of, the physical world. Salvation (*theōsis* for the Greek Christians; *deificatio* for the Latins – literally becoming divine, divinization) was conceived as unity with God (Russell 2004). For Eriugena, following the Greek Christian tradition, this deification is rare: most beings return to God but only a few (St Paul, John the Evangelist, Moses) are "rapt up in the third heaven" and actually become one with God.

Of course, the most prominent figure in the articulation of intellectual Christianity in the Latin West was St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), and his writings, especially the *Confessions*, *On Christian Doctrine*, *The City of God*, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* and *On the Trinity* had a major impact in the Latin West for the following thousand years. He was familiar with the writings of Marius Victorinus (*floruit* 350 CE) (see S. A. Cooper 2005: 16–40; also M. T. Clark 1981), a Roman senator from Africa and another convert to Christianity, as well as with the views of his teacher, bishop Ambrose of Milan. Marius Victorinus had translated Plotinus' *Enneads* into Latin and maintained a Neoplatonic outlook in his defence of the Trinity and of the nature of the divine as "above being". According to his *Confessions* (*Confessiones* 7.9.13 and 7.20.26),[4] St Augustine's conversion to Christianity was influenced by his reading of what he terms the "books of the Platonists" (*libri platonicorum*, *Confessiones* 7.9) – most likely Marius Victorinus' translations of Plotinus and Porphyry, although Augustine does not tell us whose texts they were – texts which convinced Augustine that truth was incorporeal, and that God was

eternal, unchanging, the cause of all things – in his mind paralleling truths revealed in St Paul's epistles (on the nature of the *libri platonicorum*, see Cary 2000: 33–8). One of the great lessons that Augustine learns from these Neoplatonists (and this theme is distinctively Plotinian) is the inner connection between the soul and the divine and that the journey inwards is also the journey upwards to the divine. Late nineteenth-century scholars originally saw Augustine as a thinker who converted first to Neoplatonism and then somewhat later to Christianity, but the modern consensus is that Augustine was through and through a Christian Platonist although he began to clarify for himself – especially in his *Retractions* (*Retractationes, c.*426 CE), which are essentially restatements rather than withdrawals – those doctrines of Christianity which directly conflicted with classical Platonism.

St Augustine was masterful in his manner of incorporating pagan thought into a thoroughly Christian outlook and carefully refining it througout his life, including offering various self-criticisms and reformulations (see Rist 1994; King 2005: 213–26). While it is not clear what Plotinus thought of the One as having mind or consciousness in some special elevated sense, it is certain that Christian Neoplatonism with its personal God and Trinitarian doctrine does allow that the One is *at least* Mind; and, to say that it is not Mind is really to say that it is more than Mind. This is clearly Augustine's position in *de Trinitate* book 15, where, following John 4:24, God is understood as "spirit" and credited with life and mental perception and understanding:

> But the life which God is senses and understands all things (*sentit atque intelligit omnia*), and senses with mind (*et sentit mente*) not with body, because God is spirit. God does not sense through a body like animals which have bodies, for he does not consist of body and soul. And thus this simple nature (*simplex illa natura*) senses as it understands, understands as it senses, and its sensing and understanding are identical. (*de Trinitate* 15.2.7, trans. Hill)

According to Augustine, for example, all created things bear the stamp of their maker and display traces (*vestigia*) of the divine Trinity. Creatures testify to their very dependency on the divine. As he puts it, each creature cries out: "God made me" (*Deus me fecit*). For Augustine, Christ is the very incarnation of eternal wisdom, and true philosophy meant the love of Christ. Augustine follows St Paul, who in I Corinthians 1.20 contrasted the worldly wisdom or "foolishness" of Greek pagan philosophy with Christian wisdom. St Paul claims that God would destroy the "wisdom of the wise". Augustine expands on this idea: true wisdom cannot merely be knowledge of earthly, temporal things but actually must be the desire for eternal things. For Augustine, the philosopher seeks to transcend the world and not solely to know it; otherwise his knowledge is vain and empty, mere *vana curiositas*. For Augustine, particularly in early works such as *Of True Religion* (*de Vera Religione*, trans. Burleigh), true religion and true philosophy were one and the same, and by philosophy here he meant Platonism. In the same work *(de Vera Religione* IV.7), Augustine claimed one need only change a few words to see how closely Plato resembled Christianity. In his *City of God* (*de Civitate Dei* [Dyson]) Plato is portrayed as the philosopher closest to Christianity (see also Wetzel 2012). For instance, Plato had defined philosophy as the love of God (*de Civitate Dei* 8.11). For Augustine, furthermore, the positive legacy of Plato and others should be integrated into Christian culture, just as the "spoils of the Egyptians"

were taken with them by the Israelites as they fled their captivity in Egypt. Augustine writes in *On Christian Doctrine*:

> If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use. Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use.
>
> (*de Doctrina Christiana* 2.40.60)[5]

Having initially adopted Neoplatonism in a somewhat uncritical manner, as a way of overcoming his earlier scepticism and Manichaeism, St Augustine gradually began to see the limitation of the Neoplatonic outlook especially in articulating central tenets of Christianity such as the incarnation of the Word and the resurrection of the body. As he details in his *Retractions* (trans. Brogan), Augustine came to realize that Neoplatonism, while enormously important as an antidote to materialism and dualism (e.g. the Manichees), could not countenance the concept of the Divine becoming human, in the sense of taking on a physical corruptible body. Neoplatonism also had a tendency to downplay the importance of the temporal order and Augustine, who realized that part of the message of Christianity was the idea of history as a progress towards the divine, recognized that a genuine Christian philosophy must see time and history as real and indeed as playing a crucial role in the divine plan for the salvation of humans (see, for instance, *de Civitate Dei* 22).

Another important source of Christian Platonism especially into the Middle Ages was the corpus of writings purporting to be authored by Dionysius, St Paul's convert at Athens as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. These texts were in reality pious forgeries produced by a sixth-century Christian follower of the Neoplatonist Proclus. They are now referred to as the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*floruit c*.500 CE) (Louth 1989). Because of their provenance – they are considered more or less as ancient and authentic as the Gospels themselves – they had extraordinary influence on Christian philosophers from the ninth-century John Scottus Eriugena to Thomas Aquinas and Robert Grosseteste (who both wrote commentaries on Dionysius), as well as on later medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa, whose outlook continued to be Neoplatonic in inspiration (see Dillon & Klitenic 2007). The Dionysian writings were eventually exposed as forgeries by the Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla.

The Dionysian corpus consists of four treatises and a number of letters (trans. Luibhéid; see Perl 2008). Dionysius' *The Divine Names* (*de Divinis Nominibus*) examines scriptural and philosophical appellations for the divine and argues that they all fail to fully express the nature of the highest being, who is nameless, beyond all names. Names are really processions from the divinity and do not reach the divinity itself. Negations, in fact, express the nature of the divine more accurately than affirmations. This theme is expressed even more radically in the *Mystical Theology*, which had enormous influence on the later medieval mystical tradition, transmitting to the Latin West the Platonism of the *Parmenides* in the form of negative theology. Dionysius maintains that God is unknowable and yet all

things in the world are somehow traces of their unknowable cause. God is the being of all things. Dionysius furthermore states in his *Celestial Hierarchy* that "the being of all things is the divinity above being" (*to gar einai pantōn estin hē hyper to einai theotēs*, *Patrologia Graeca* [*PG*] 3.177d), a phrase that will be repeated by Eriugena.

Dionysius had an enormous influence on Albert the Great, Aquinas, Bonaventure and Grosseteste among others, particularly his concept of the self-diffusion of the good (*bonum diffusivum sui*), his principle that all things have being through being one, and his notion that the being of all things is the "above being" (*super esse*; *hyper ousias*) of the divinity (*esse omnium est superesse divinitatis*, as Eriugena translates it).[6] Eriugena also takes from Dionysius the idea of the act of creation as akin to the sun spreading its rays equally in all directions. The comparison of the One to the sun is found in many Neoplatonists including, for instance, Iamblichus, *de Mysteriis* I.12 and in Proclus, *ET* 122, 140, 189.

Dionysius' main translator (until the thirteenth century) and important disciple was an Irish philosopher named John who also signed himself, in one manuscript, "Eriugena" (meaning "Irish-born"). This Johannes (*c*.790/800–*c*.877 CE) was identified in local correspondence as an "Irishman" (*scottus*) and so gradually he came to be known as "Johannes Scottus", the Irishman named John. He also became known by the name "Eriugena" and by the nineteenth century, historians of philosophy began to refer to him as Johannes Scottus Eriugena (or "Scotus Erigena"). Scottus Eriugena was the leading thinker of the Carolingian *renovatio*.[7] Born somewhere in Ireland, and with an extraordinary reputation for learning, he first emerged in the written historical record as a theological disputant, scholar and teacher (*magister*) at the largely itinerant court of Charles the Bald,[8] which moved around various monastic and royal centres in the Île de France region (see Contreni 1978). Eriugena is first mentioned as a liberal arts scholar, but was then engaged in 850 as a theological disputant in a debate over predestination. Following some difficulties with ecclesiastical authorities over his *On Predestination* (*de Praedestinatione*; see M. Brennan 1998), he re-emerged as a translator of Greek Christian texts, specifically the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. However, his most original and creative philosophical work is to be found in his extraordinary cosmological dialogue, *Periphyseon* (also known as *de Divisione Naturae*, *c*.862–*c*.867 [Floss]).[9] The *Periphyseon* (literally "on natures") is a "study of nature" (*physiologia*, *PP* IV.741c). The two participants in the dialogue – named simply as "teacher" (*Nutritor*) and "student" or "disciple" (*Alumnus*) – discourse on the "totality of all things" (*universitas rerum*); that is, everything gathered under the name "universal nature" (*universalis natura*, *PP* II.525b). In the course of the dialogue, the "philosopher" (*philosophus*) and "theologian" (*theologus*) is also presented as a "cosmologist" (*sapiens mundi*) or "physicist" (*fisicus*) conducting an "inquiry into natures" (*inquisitio naturarum*, *PP* II.608c), guided by "nature, the teacher herself" (*natura ipsa magistra*, *PP* II.608d). As part of this enquiry, a *Hexaemeron* or account of the six days of creation is included, which is based in a large part on St Augustine's *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*de Genesi ad Litteram*), written between 401 and 415, which offers a detailed discussion of creation.

In this grand theological and cosmological *system*, Eriugena offers a novel definition of nature as the "general name for all things that are and all things that are not" (*est igitur natura generale nomen, ut diximus, omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt*, *PP* I.441a). Nature in this sense explicitly *includes* "both God and the creature" (*deus et creatura*, *PP* II.524d), and this has led to accusations of pantheism; indeed, the *Periphyseon* was condemned along with other works in the thirteenth century.[10] But Eriugena thinks of created nature

as a manifestation of the hidden divine Nature. God and nature are thought as ultimately one (the hidden and revealed sides of the same divine power) and are not to be considered as separated (*a seipsis distantia*, *PP* III.678c). Thus Eriugena says: "For when you say that it [the divine nature] creates itself the true meaning is nothing else but that it is establishing the natures of things. For the creation of itself, that is, the manifestation of itself in something, is surely that by which all things subsist" (*PP* I.455a–b). Indeed, nature is the manifestation of the divine, more or less the incarnation of the divine. Accordingly, nature also encapsulates the transcendence, unknowability and darkness of the divine. Eriugena then sets out to explain how nature includes "all that is and all that is not" (*ea quae sunt et ea quae non sunt*), both being and non-being, both God and creation. Eriugena even thinks, following Dionysius, that God can be called "nothing" (*nihilum*) and He is called so because He is "nothing through excellence" (*nihil per excellentiam*) rather than "through privation" (*per privationem*). The claim that God is a transcendent nothingness links Eriugena to Meister Eckhart in the later Middle Ages.

In the course of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena gives an account of the nature of the divine One, its cosmic outgoing into created nature and its return into its own hidden depth in strongly Neoplatonic terms, drawing on Dionysius and also, especially, on the Greek Christian theologian Maximus Confessor, several of whose writings (e.g. *Ambigua ad Iohannem*) Eriugena knew and even translated. Maximus, especially, is Eriugena's source for much of his discussion of the stages of the return of all created things to the divine (see Petrov 2002). Moreover, and here he is following Gregory of Nyssa, according to the principle that human nature is made in the *imago et similitudo dei*, all created things are contained in human nature, which itself undergoes a process of outgoing and return to its source in the divine mind. Part of the power of Eriugena's cosmology lies in its radical anthropology (see Otten 1991; Stock 1967).

Eriugena's Platonism is so all-pervasive that it prompted more than one nineteenth-century scholar to conclude that he must have had direct knowledge of the writings of Plotinus or Proclus. In 1927, for instance, Téchert (1927) thought she had identified the direct influence of Plotinus in Eriugena based on a comparison of doctrines and technical expressions, but Eriugena's biographer Maïeul Cappuyns (1933) has shown that the expressions and doctrines can be found generally in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, especially in Basil and Gregory of Nyssa (see Rist 2000), with whom Eriugena was familiar. The French historian Barthélemy Hauréau (1812–96) called Eriugena "the Proclus of the West" (Hauréau 1872), and Stephen Gersh has explored the Proclean influence in Eriugena (which, of course, comes not directly but through the writings of Dionysius) (see Gersh 1978). Strictly speaking, Eriugena does not draw directly from Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry or Proclus, but rather from the Christian Platonist tradition of Marius Victorinus, Augustine, Boethius (among the Latin authors), and Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor, from the Greek Christian tradition.

Eriugena, even leaving aside his own speculative theological works, would be important as a transmitter of Platonism precisely because of his work as a translator. He translated the *Corpus Dionysii*, the revered manuscript of which had been presented to the King of Francia Louis the Pious by the Byzantine emperor Michael the Stammerer and which had earlier been given an unsatisfactory translation by Hilduin.[11] He subsequently rendered into Latin Gregory of Nyssa's short treatise *de Hominis Opificio* (which he called *de Imagine*), Maximus Confessor's *Ambigua ad Iohannem*, and *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*,

and possibly other works. Skilfully interweaving his text with these authorities, Eriugena still manages to develop his own highly original cosmology in his *Periphyseon* as an analysis of "nature" and of "those things that are and those that are not".

In the *Periphyseon* Eriugena confidently expounds an extraordinarily consistent system that is both Neoplatonic and Christian, and for him, the two never come into contrast or opposition. Thus in the *Homilia*, he is able to say in a Platonic manner that man receives his body from this world but his soul from another world. He never entertains Augustine's worries about the possibility of conflict between Neoplatonic doctrine and Christian teaching on such matters as the pre-existence of the soul, the nature of creation and salvation, or the meaning of nature and grace. Eriugena's main concern is in fact to integrate into a single coherent system the diverse Neoplatonisms he received from Greek and Latin anthorities (see e.g. *PP* IV.504c–505b) and to communicate this integrated system as the truth of Christianity and the meaning of nature itself. He frequently cites Augustine and Dionysius together, showing that they agree.

Eriugena's encounter with the writings of Dionysius and the Greek Eastern Christian tradition transformed his outlook and led him to interpret St Augustine in a more radically spiritual and immaterialist manner, especially in relation to the nature of the resurrected body, which for Eriugena will be purely spiritual. Eriugena now directed his philosophical study at constructing a vast synthesis of the learning of Greek East and Latin West, reconciling Augustine with Dionysius, Ambrose with Gregory of Nyssa. Eriugena saw no contradictions between these versions of Christian metaphysics: for him, there were merely differences of emphasis and differences of approach. After all, Scripture has as many meanings as there are colours in a peacock's tail and cosmological speculations may be entertained so long as they do not directly contradict Scripture.

Eriugena's point of departure is novel. He sets out by defining his area of investigation as *nature*, which for him includes, as we have seen above, both God and creation.[12] Universal nature, as he calls it, includes not only being (material, spiritual) but also those things which escape the intellect because of their superiority to it (e.g. God transcends the mind). From this beginning he is able to sketch out the four possible logical options offered by considering nature in relation to creation. We can, he says, conceive of nature as uncreated and creating (i.e. God as creator), as created and creating (i.e. the Platonic ideas or "Primary Causes" (*causae primordiales*), as Eriugena calls them, upon which the created world is modelled and from which it is derived), as created and not creating (the visible spatio-temporal world, which is what we usually mean by the term *nature*), and as uncreated and uncreating (nature as unrelated to creation: i.e. either pure nothingness or else God considered apart from creation). These four divisions of nature express, for Eriugena, successive *moments* in the being of God and the world, related according to the Neoplatonic sequence of procession and return. Eriugena's God is above being. Eriugena, following Dionysius, thinks of the Good, which is prior to being, as responsible for the movement from non-being to being:

> Therefore if the creator through his goodness brought all things out of nothing so that they might be, the aspect of goodness-in-itself must necessarily precede the aspect of being through itself. For goodness does not come through essence but essence comes through goodness (*non enim per essentiam introducta est bonitas set per bonitatem introducta est essentia*). (*PP* III.627c–d)

God is "beyond being", "beyond essence", and can even be characterized, Eriugena insists, as "nothingness" (*nihilum*, *PP* III.685a) and the "negation of essence" (*negatio essentiae*, *PP* I.462b). Eriugena writes: "For when it is said: 'It is superessential', this can be understood by me as nothing other but a negation of essence (*nam cum dicitur: superessentialis est, nil aliud mihi datur intelligi quam negatio essentiae*)" (*PP* I.462b).

God, for Eriugena, is "not this nor that nor anything" (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*, *PP* I.510c); a formula that will be developed also by Meister Eckhart.

When God creates the world, He wills the Primary Causes into being and these causes are conceived of as contained in the Word or *verbum*, the utterance (*clamor*) of which gives rise to creation. The primary causes in their turn "flow forth" into their effects, which gives rise to the spatio-temporal world of creatures in all their particularity. These effects are themselves unproductive of anything lower and depend totally upon their causes to which they revert or return. According to the Neoplatonists, all effects depend on and return towards their causes. Proclus inspired Dionysius in this regard, and Eriugena follows the latter. The effect is nothing other than the manifestation of the cause. Thus in *Periphyseon* book III, Eriugena says that the creature conceived as cause is not other than the creature conceived as effect (see *PP* III.693a–b). In this regard, the effect is said to "remain in" the cause and to seek to return to it (see Gersh 1977, 1978). The highest form of return or reversion of an effect upon a cause is the manner in which the thoughts produced by the intellect return to contemplate their own nature and the nature of the intellect that produced them. This self-conscious dialectic is the best example of Neoplatonic causation and reversion. In fact, in his return of all things to the One, Eriugena will say that cause and effect are one and the same (*PP* III.693b) and that whatever may be predicated of the cause may also be predicated of the effect (*PP* III.646c). Below this region of created effects lies the realm of *non-being*.[13] Ultimately, however, when the cycle of procession of causes into effects has terminated and all the effects have returned to rest in their causes, then the cycle of creation is complete and the absolute non-being of the fourth level becomes indistinguishable from the manner of existence of the inaccessible One.

Although this brief description of the cycle of nature conveys the impression of a temporal sequence, Eriugena more properly conceives of the four "levels" or "divisions" of nature as four aspects or ways of viewing (he calls them *theōriai* or "contemplations", *contemplationes*) the absolute unity of the One. The four divisions of nature are ways in which the human rational mind orders the manifest appearances of this world in relation to the One which, above time and space, is their origin.[14]

Eriugena's metaphysics, then, is an attempt to elucidate the Christian understanding of the creation through the understanding of the dynamics of the One as developed by Neoplatonist philosophers.The Christian Neoplatonists generally exploited the parallels between the biblical myth of creation and the Platonic understanding of the dependence of this imperfect world upon the perfect realm of the forms (or causes) and ultimately on the One itself. The Christian Platonists, whom Eriugena read in the original Greek and many of whom he translated for the first time into Latin (e.g. Maximus), conceived of God more or less in the manner in which Plotinus conceives of the One (developed from the concepts of the One in the hypotheses of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*). Especially in the post-Plotinian tradition, for example, in Pseudo-Dionysius, this One is above being, beyond the good, beyond the realm of intellect or the intellectual light, dwelling in an inaccessible darkness, unknowable and unfathomable. This conception of God (as wholly

transcendent) satisfied the Greek demand that God should be unsullied by the world, even to the extent of not knowing about it. At the same time all other beings flow forth from the One and depend on it for their existence. All things achieve their identity by attempting to imitate the primal unity of the One at a lower level. Everything that exists is a unity of some kind, and the more integrated is the unity, the closer does the thing come to the One. Thus the lower-level unities imitate the higher and the whole chain or procession of being is linked together by a pattern of imitation and striving upwards by which each thing tries to become more self-integrated. The One, itself, of course, is unaffected by this striving. The result of this striving is that the world must be seen as possessing a triadic structure of unity–procession–return.

This Neoplatonic metaphysics struck the Christians as aptly expressive of the truth of Christian revelation in two ways. First, the triadic structure paralleled the paradise–fall–salvation sequence of Christian myth. All creatures were originally one with God in paradise, then they fell through the sin of Adam (which the Neoplatonists and Eriugena see as a disruption of the original unity in which man's total consciousness was centred on God, brought about by man turning his gaze upon himself, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of human self-consciousness). The aim to achieve salvation is understood as a process through which man will recover his primordial unity with God by purifying his self-conscious activity until it is once again God-centred. The second parallel with the Neoplatonic triad is expressed by the nature of the One itself, since for the Christians the One is also a Trinity. According to Eriugena, God is in Himself hidden and unknown, dwelling in inaccessible darkness; but when He utters the Word which gives rise to creation, He makes himself manifest at the same time in the Person of the Word, the second Person of the Trinity. This movement of self-manifestation from darkness to light is understood by Eriugena as a procession similar in kind to the procession of things from the One.[15] The second procession from the Son to the Holy Spirit is understood by Eriugena as overseeing the procession of the primary causes (contained in the Son as *verbum* and *sapientia*) into their spatio-temporal effects, and of course at the same time is responsible for the reversion of those effects upon their causes.[16]

From the Greeks, then, Eriugena inherited a very unusual theory of creation. Creation is to be understood as the self-manifestation of God, the process by which He makes His hidden nature manifest.[17] As such it is a timeless event, inseparable from the Trinitarian procession from Father to Son. The whole of the created universe is to be understood as unfolding within the Trinity; at no stage is creation to be seen as an alienation or separation of things from God. If the Fall had not taken place, it is implied, all things including man would have evolved in their own mysterious manner in the bosom of God Himself. Eriugena's God is not static but dynamic, manifesting, unfolding and explicating Himself in spirals of divine history. The Fall, however, disrupts this cycle. For Eriugena the Fall, like the creation of all things, is a timeless event that takes place within the godhead.

Eriugena maintains that, in its prelapsarian condition, human nature was originally one with God, indistinguishable from Him, omnipotent and omniscient like Him, because human nature was the perfect image of God, and, following Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena maintains that the image is in all respects likes its archetype "except in number". Eriugena has an account of the Fall that makes it take place at an epistemological level. Human nature became obsessed with its own self-image and self-consciousness and sought to impose human rather than divine meanings on things. Eriugena has no time for more

literal interpretations of the Bible that sought to blame the devil or Eve for original sin. All human beings are separate from God so long as their free wills are self-centred rather than directed towards the infinite, endless will of God. Eriugena elevates human nature to the highest position in the cosmos under God. In Greek, God's boundlessness is expressed by the term *anarchos*, which means without limit or without ruling principle:[18] "So the human replica of the Divine Essence is not bound by any fixed limit any more than the Divine Essence in Whose Image it is made" (*PP* IV.772a).

And again:

> For if human nature had not sinned but had adhered unchangeably to Him Who had created her, she would certainly have been omnipotent. For whatever in nature she wished to happen would necessarily happen, since she would wish for nothing else to happen save that which she understood that her Creator wished to happen. (*PP* IV.778b)

Eriugena took this doctrine of the potential omnipotence and omniscience of human nature from the Greek writers, notably Gregory of Nyssa. In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena quotes long passages from Gregory of Nyssa's tract *de Hominis Opificio* (*Peri kataskeuēs anthrōpou*, which Eriugena himself translated as *de Imagine*), amounting to almost 80 per cent of the whole text, a work which explained the concept of human nature as made in God's image in terms of the complete identity between image and archetype. For Gregory, as Eriugena constantly emphasizes, an image resembled its archetype or exemplar in *all* aspects; they differ only in being numerically distinct. Thus, in *Periphyseon* book IV Eriugena quotes at length from Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Image of Man* XVII.44.177d–185d [Laplace & Daniélou]. The following excerpt is significant. Eriugena writes in his rendering of Gregory:

> For if God is the plenitude of good things (*plenitude bonorum*), and man is an image of God, the image must resemble the Primal Exemplar in this respect also, that it is the plenitude of all good. … In this respect also it is the image, in that it is free from all necessity, and is subjected to no natural or material authority but possesses in itself a will which is capable of obtaining its desires. (*PP* IV.796a–b)

As the image of God, human nature mirrors God's perfect freedom and power. For Eriugena, the transcendence of God is mirrored by the transcendence of human nature above the rest of creation. God is always an unknown darkness above the world: it cannot be said *what* He is. But what about human nature? Can one understand the essence of human nature? If human will is really infinite and boundless then perhaps it is equally impossible to say what man is, and indeed that is Eriugena's conclusion. Human nature (exactly like divine nature) can know *that it is*, but not *what it is*.

A Neoplatonic outlook continued to dominate European thought from the sixth to twelfth centuries, until, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, new Aristotelian texts, often through Arabic intermediaries, became available and were studied in the newly founded universities at Paris, Bologna, Oxford and elsewhere. This new interest in Aristotle was such that, although Plato's *Timaeus* was widely lectured on during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, by 1255 it was no longer required reading at the University of

Paris. Medieval Neoplatonism continued to maintain a dualistic opposition of the divine and temporal worlds, with the sensible world patterned on unchanging immaterial forms, often expressed as numbers. It also affirms the soul's immortality and direct knowledge of intelligible truths, combined with a suspicion of the mortal body and a distrust of the evidence of the senses. Interest in Plato re-emerged in the Italian Renaissance with the availability of genuine works of Plato, Plotinus and Proclus. Nevertheless, through Pseudo-Dionysius in particular, Platonism reverberates in many thirteenth-century authors, especially in theology. Eriugena's consistent Neoplatonism was revived by Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This new form of Neoplatonism was strengthened by greater familiarity with Plato's dialogues as well as by the rediscovery of the works of Proclus. Cusanus regularly characterizes his own Platonism as stemming from Dionysius and before him from Plato. He also draws on Dionysius' commentators, including his Latin translators, especially Eriugena (who he calls "Johannes Scotigena"),[19] Albertus Magnus' *Commentary on the Divine Names*,[20] Robert Grosseteste (whose translations of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy* he owned in manuscript), Thomas Gallus and Meister Eckhart.

Cusanus reads Dionysius as a Christian practitioner of dialectic in the tradition stemming from Plato's *Parmenides*.[21] He also quotes Proclus' *Commentary on Parmenides*[22] to the effect that Plato denied that predications can be made of the first principle, just as Dionysius prefers negative to affirmative theology (*de Beryllo* 12). Cusanus writes: "The great Dionysius imitates Plato" (*de Beryllo* 27, trans. Hopkins 1998) and in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449): "The divine Dionysius imitated Plato to such an extent that he is quite frequently found to have cited Plato's words in series" (*Apologia* 10, see Hopkins 1984: esp. 97–118) (Moran 2007).

Thus Neoplatonism continued to have a significant role in Christian theology to the very dawn of modernity. Indeed, there is a new outbreak of Christian Neoplatonism with the so-called Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century (see Rogers *et al.* 1997; Hutton 2002).

NOTES

1. For a recent provocative discussion of St Paul and philosophy, see Caputo & Alcoff (2009). See also Maccoby (1986, 1991). Maccoby claims that St Paul more or less invented Christianity as a religion; this is a view that has been challenged but there is no doubt that St Paul shaped the manner Christianity developed in a decisive way.
2. For more evidence of this characteristic ambivalence towards Greek philosophy found among early Christian writers, see Beierwaltes (1998: esp. pp. 7–24).
3. For recent discussions of the term "Platonism" and "Neoplatonism", see Gersh (2006). See also Moran (1998: 431–9), Dillon (1996a), Remes (2008b).
4. Pine-Coffin (1961: 154). For a discussion, see J. J. O'Meara (1954) and O'Donnell (2006).
5. Trans. Robertson. This is an idea frequently found among ancient Christian writers, perhaps beginning with Origen's "Letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus".
6. For an excellent study of Eriugena's translation of Dionysius, *Versio Dionysii*, see Budde (2011). One of Budde's main points is that Eriugena finds a doctrine of creation which he can express in Dionysian terms, although Dionysius himself is almost silent on the concept of creation.
7. On Eriugena's life, see Moran (1989: 35–47). Johannes Scottus signs his epistolary dedication to his translation of the works of Dionysius with the pen-name "Eriugena". Eriugena corrected and extended the earlier translation of Dionsyius by Hilduin and challenges anyone who doubts his translation to check the Greek (see *Patrologia Latina* 122.1032c).

8. See M. Brennan (1986). Eriugena's name is absent from the *Annals of St Bertin*, which recorded life at the court of King Charles the Bald. The earliest references to him record certain medicinal recipes attributed to him. However, John "the Irishman" is referred to by Prudentius in his *de Praedestinatione* (851) as a follower of Pelagius (*Patrologia Latina* 115.1011b), who alone "Ireland sent to Gaul" (*Patrologia Latina* 115.1194a). He is mentioned by Bishop Pardulus (as quoted by Remigius) as "that Irishman, who is in the king's palace, named John" (*Scotum illum qui est in palatio regis, Joannem nomine*, *Patrologia Latina* 121.1052a).
9. There is a new edition by Jeauneau (1996–2003). The *Periphyseon* is cited according to the following editions: book 1: Sheldon-Williams (1968); book 2: Sheldon-Williams (1972); book 3, Sheldon-Williams (1981); book 4: Jeauneau (1995). The English translation is by I. P. Sheldon-Williams and J. J. O'Meara, published in Sheldon-Williams (1987). *Periphyseon* will be cited hereafter as "*PP*" followed by the book number (in Roman numerals) and the *Patrologia Latina* page number and paragraph letter in line with the traditional way of citing Eriugena's works.
10. Moran (1990). The thirteenth-century condemnations of Eriugena refer specifically to the doctrine that God is "the form of all things" (*forma omnium*), a doctrine associated in its most radical statement with Almericus of Bène (who died *c.*1206). Another associated doctrine, that God is the "matter of all things" (*materia omnium*), was supposedly defended by David of Dinant. Eriugena does call God *forma omnium* at *Periphyseon* I.499d, but follows immediately by saying that God is also without form and beyond form. In other words, in keeping with Eriugena's affirmative and negative theologies, the statement must be both affirmed and denied (*PP* I.500b). In fact, the phrases *forma omnium* and *forma formarum* are already found in Augustine, who uses them to describe the divine nature.
11. On Eriugena's translation of Dionysius, see Harrington (2004: 22–8). Harrington (*ibid.*: 24) points out that in translating Dionysius, Eriugena makes some changes, including expressing the merging of the mind with God as a *theoria* or *speculatio* rather than a non-cognitive "onrush" or interaction with the divine theophany or divine ray (see *PL* 122.1116c).
12. This abrupt introduction of the difficult concept of "non-being" or "nothing" is characteristic of Eriugena's style. Actually, non-being (*nihil*) is understood by him in two main ways: (a) non-being signifies total absence of any substance, and (b) non-being signifies those things which the intellect cannot comprehend within its own categories. Thus God, conceived of as transcending the mind, cannot be described by our category of substance or existence, and he thus may be said to be non-being. Eriugena complicates these two basic meanings in his dialogue by suggesting that those things which are merely potential (still immanent in the Primary Causes or seminal reasons) may be said to be non-being.
13. Strictly speaking of course, this realm of non-being does not *exist*, it is really a privation of being, and Eriugena terms it *nihil per privationem* to distinguish it from the non-being of God which he calls *nihil per excellentiam*. See Sheldon-Williams (1981: 5–10).
14. Time is understood by Eriugena, in the manner of the Platonists, as an illusory form of existence, scarcely fully real. Eriugena went much further than Augustine in his analysis of time, and makes it merely a category of the human mind in its fallen state. Once the return of man to a state of grace or deification has been achieved then time will have a new mystical significance, expressing the endless nature of the human circulation around the divine; see Moran (2002).
15. "Do you not see how the Creator of the whole universe takes the first place? … For in Him are all things immutably and essentially and He is the division and collection of the universal creature, and genus and species and whole and part. … For the monad also is the beginning of numbers and the leader of their progression, and from it the plurality of all numbers begins and in it is consummated the return and collection of the same" (*PP* III.621b–c). Eriugena does not clearly distinguish the creation of all things in their causes and the generation of the Word, and indeed the two are one for him, since the Word is the coming together in wisdom of the principles of all things: "For to the human intellect which Christ assumed all the intellectual essences adhere" (*PP* II.542a–b). The Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine would have taken exception to this claim which, for them, would have implied a subordinationism. Eriugena is, on the contrary, willing to proclaim boldly the identity between the One and what is subsequent to the One.
16. The Holy Spirit acts as a kind of individuating principle in Eriugena's scheme. Eriugena conceives of Him mythically as brooding over and hatching the cosmic egg: "For the Holy Spirit fermented … the primordial causes which the Father had made in the beginning, that is, in his Son, so that they might proceed into

those things of which they are the causes. For to this end are eggs fermented by birds, from whom this metaphor is drawn" (*PP* II.554b–c).

17. God's act of self-manifestation is at the same time the creation all things: "For the creation of itself, that is, the manifestation of itself in something, is surely that by which all things subsist" (*PP* I.455b).
18. Eriugena frequently stresses that God is "without beginning" (*anarchos*): "*Deus autem anarchos, hoc est sine principio*" (*PP* I.516a).
19. Besides Eriugena's translations of Dionysius, Cusanus, at the very least, was familiar with *Periphyseon* book I, which he owned in manuscript (British Museum Codex Additivus 11035) and annotated, as well as the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius Augustodunensis (Paris Bib. Nat. cod. lat. 6734), a compendium of Eriugenian excerpts, and the homily *Vox Spiritualis* (under the name of Origen).
20. Albertus Magnus also commented on Dionysius' *Divine Names* in his *Super Dionysium de Divinis Nominibus*, *Opera Omnia* vols 36 and 37 [Simon], which Cusanus cites in his *de Beryllo* 17.
21. Paradoxically, Cusanus anticipates the great Renaissance scholar Lorenzo Valla, who eventually unmasked the pseudonymous nature of the Dionysian corpus, with his independent recognition of the close doctrinal proximity between Proclus and Dionysius. For Cusanus, however, it was simply that Proclus and Dionysius were both sages who knew the truth.
22. See *in Prm.* VI.1075 (trans. Morrow & Dillon): "So then it is more proper to reveal the incomprehensible and indefinable cause which is the One through negations."