



Reviews



John F. Gavin, *A Celtic Christology: The Incarnation According to John Scottus Eriugena*. (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2014), pp. 178, ISBN: 978-1625644640. £16.00

The ninth-century Irishman John Scottus Eriugena remains one of the most interesting and enigmatic of the Latin theologians from the early Middle Ages. Possessing a knowledge of Greek and Byzantine theology increasingly rare in the Carolingian world, Eriugena produced a theological synthesis which blended Greek theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximos the Confessor with Augustine. This book by John Gavin serves as a useful introduction to this great Irish teacher, for in treating Eriugena's Christology and views of the Incarnation, Gavin also provides a lucid and nuanced discussion of many other aspects of Eriugena's integrated and imaginative theological system. While analysis focuses on Eriugena's great work *Periphyseon*, all of the Irishman's works are utilized in this thorough study. Gavin engages previous scholarship, and attempts to defend Eriugena from criticisms brought against him in the past, such as charges of pantheism, Docetism, a naïve and ultimately un-Christian and overly dualistic Neo-Platonism, and in general a devaluation of the role of nature and the material creation in his cosmological vision.

John Panteleimon Manoussakis provides a fine foreword, putting Eriugena and his considerable accomplishment in historical perspective. Gavin's introduction serves to situate the reader in Eriugena's world with a biographical overview. Each of the five chapters that follow are clearly written, and Gavin helpfully provides an overview and summation of the main points in each chapter in turn. In introducing the subject of Christology and the Incarnation, Chapter One discusses what Eriugena meant by 'flesh' and human nature, both in prelapsarian and postlapsarian conditions. This includes God's reasons for creating the universe and humanity's role in this process. The problem of the goodness of matter is treated as well as what is called 'the status of the flesh'. Gavin discusses how Eriugena blends

Latin and Greek patristic thought to discuss man's composite nature, why a material body is good and necessary, and argues that Eriugena avoids the unhealthy dualism of which he is at times accused.

Chapter Two treats of Jesus Christ as God and Man, discussing Eriugena's views of the hypostatic union. Gavin addresses Eriugena's three modes of divine condescension, the fundamental uniqueness of the Incarnation, and how the Incarnation relates to the *theosis*/deification of the creature. Here Gavin makes it clear why he believes Eriugena is no pantheist, and also discusses his opposition to docetism, Arianism, Eunomianism, Nestorianism and monophysitism. Gavin points out that Eriugena seems at times to be inconsistent in his terminology, e.g. his use of *substantia*, which sometimes seems to mean essence, at other times person. In one of the real strengths of the book, Gavin utilizes Eriugena's *Carmina*, or poetry, in his discussion of the seeming paradox of the two natures of Christ. Chapter Three surveys Eriugena's views on six classic explanations for the reason for the Incarnation. Gavin shows his emphasis on renewed human nature as the unifier of all creation, and how human redemption continues ultimately through a redemption of the entire cosmos. Gavin argues that Eriugena has a rich theology of the various types of theophanies available to man, and that the Triune God must make himself known for our deification. The means to this is discussed in Chapter Four, namely what Gavin calls Eriugena's 'participatory Christology', man's restoration and deification through participation in the incarnate Christ. Gavin argues, against some critics, that for Eriugena this does involve, among other things, a performative ethical dimension, not just achievement of levels of knowledge. Our author acknowledges that while Eriugena has been accused of failure to provide for an authentic *askesis*, he attempts to defend him from this charge, again making use of the *Carmina*, and stressing how Eriugena combines Maximus, Evagrius and Dionysius in his treatment of the stages of the spiritual life. He discusses Eriugena's teachings on *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologia*, quoting some beautiful descriptions of the latter as intimate experience of union with God, and arguing that for Eriugena embracing the pattern of the Incarnate Word is achieved through grace and ascetic effort.

Chapter Five concludes the argument by discussing Eriugena's thought on mystical appropriation of the life of Jesus. Again he takes exception with some scholars, primarily Colish, about Eriugena's supposed lack of engagement with the historical Jesus. Gavin proceeds to treat Eriugena's discussion of 'the four births of Jesus' and what they mean for humanity. There then follows analysis about Christ's preaching, miracles, and transfiguration, including some samples of Eriugena's exegesis of certain parables. Gavin concludes with a summary of Eriugena's teaching on the individual's ascent from action to *theologia* or contemplation, following the example of Jesus.

In his Conclusion, Gavin points out the potential importance of Eriugena for contemporary theology. One disappointment here is Gavin's treatment of the issue of gender distinctions. He earlier had pointed out how Eriugena ultimately felt gender was accidental to humans, a result of the Fall, and something which would not be part of our resurrected state. Gavin essentially undoes much of what he had said earlier by himself labelling Eriugena's teaching as 'docetic'. There is actually much room to point out relevance for contemporary debates on gender here that he lets slip away.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the book in its title claims to be about a 'Celtic Christology'. Surprisingly then, there is no definition, reference or connection to 'Celtic Christianity' made whatsoever by the author, besides a footnote referring to the orb of a Celtic cross. Presumably the adjective 'Celtic' in the title refers to the fact that Eriugena is an Irishman, and the words 'environmental' are used, or theophany through nature is discussed. But since none of these connections are explicitly made, the title is very problematic and misleading, and readers should be aware of this. Apart from this issue, Gavin's study can serve as a very good introduction to Eriugena with clear analysis, excellent bibliography, and extensive quotations of primary sources.

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