



## A Celtic Christology: The Incarnation according to John Scottus Eriugena

John F. Gavin

James Clarke & Co, 178pp

As the Roman Empire declined, much of Western Europe fell into the so-called Dark Ages. However, there was nothing dark about the Celtic world in the twilight centuries of the first millennium. The light of learning, a monastic light, had burned continuously throughout the decline of Rome on the Atlantic fringe. From here, between about the fifth and the ninth centuries, scholars spread out to the royal courts of Europe.

Adomnán's seventh century *Life of Saint Columba* leaves us glimpses of the Celtic Church's missionary imperative. An angel showed Columba's expectant mother that she would lose her son to the white martyrdom of exile. However, like a mantle made of every colour of the meadow flowers his influence would spread across the world. Saint Brendan likewise visioned that the abbot of Iona was 'predestined to lead the nations unto life.'

Such was the outward-looking culture from which John Scottus Eriugena set foot in the ninth century. By this time, Viking raids were breaking up monastic life around the Scots and Irish coasts. Like Syria today, where the faithful were not subjected to the sword's red martyrdom they were often forced to scatter. The Carolingian courts of continental Europe were eager for fresh streams of learning. Eriugena found a warm reception at the Palace Academy of Charlemagne's grandson, Charles the Bald, in what is now the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

The Jesuit, John F. Gavin's study, is a brilliantly lucid exploration of Eriugena's theology and its relevance to our times — especially in its treatment of the incarnation, participative Christology (i.e. theosis or deification), and in setting out a thrilling environmental theology that reveals Christ at Creation's heart. Those who treasure Buddhism for positing a metaphysics 'beyond being' will delight in Eriugena's position on how God (we might say) birthed God from a mystery that 'transcends all definition or intelligible notions.'

It is not known if the Irishman was a monk, a priest or a lay scholar. Gavin's book opens with a foreword by the Orthodox scholar-priest, John Panteleimon Manoussakis, explaining that while he leaned on Augustine, he was distinguished by his intricate knowledge of Greek and therefore, his familiarity with such Christian Neoplatonists as Gregory of Nyssa, the pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor.

The Revd Dr George Macleod who founded the Iona Community always felt that the Celtic Church was substantially Orthodox — especially in its celebration of the Creation. Eriugena lived two centuries before the Great Schism between the western and the eastern ('Orthodox') Christian traditions of 1054. His relaxed bridging of the Latin and Greek fathers will alert the astute reader to a body of evidence — not just wishful thinking — that supports the view that eastern Christianity touched the far-western Celtic Church. Here we see anchorage to the underlying undivided Church.

Gavin unfolds his thesis in five chapters. The first is the least technical. Called Being Human, Being Flesh, it sets

out the Irishman's cosmology. God made the world so that we might know divine loveliness. In Eriugena's words: 'All things were created out of nothing in order that the breadth and bounty of divine goodness might be manifested and praised through the things which he made.'

'God is said to love, because he is the cause of all love and he is diffused through all things, and he gathers all things into one and it turns back to him in an ineffable return.' Thus Eriugena adopts Maximus in surmising: 'God moves and is moved, as one thirsting to be thirsted for, loving to be loved, and desiring to be desired.'

That, for this reviewer, is Eriugena's mystical crux. Little of it is wholly original. What theology can be? Like most Celtic thinkers, he draws mainly from the gospels — John in particular and the prologue, especially. Gavin's second chapter is on Jesus Christ: God and Man, followed by *Cur Deus Homo* ('why God became man'). The latter is not in Anselm's later blood atonement sense of feudal soteriology. For Eriugena, God is wholly love and not obsessed with the need to "satisfy" feudal vanity.

Chapter four, on The Foundations of Participatory Christology, explores the Irishman's vibrant sense of participation in the divine nature — again, a very eastern Christian concern. Lastly, in *The Mystical Appropriation of the Life of Jesus* Gavin explores Bible stories and traditions. For example, Gavin considers that for Eriugena the descent into Hell, 'paints ... a portrait of hope. Christ does not trample upon Satan in an act of perverse vengeance, but rather he transforms hell ...'

Many of the richest insights come through the Irishman's poetry. Gavin notes that 'poetry has a greater power to inspire reflection than a theological treatise.' His own treatise reveals poetic skill in weaving a weft of many colours of the meadow flowers to the long and deep warp. This book's proto-scholastic systematic theology often stretched this unsystematic Quaker well beyond his theological pay grade, but at times it also shook me.

As one raised on the Outer Hebrides, with forebears prominent in the Highland church, I have been troubled by a strand of 1990s scholarship that argued, 'there's no such thing, properly speaking, as a Celtic Christianity.' In particular, there's supposed to be nothing that opens doors on any sort of a gender-inclusive, mystical, ecotheology.

Such a sweeping critique falls short of my experience. That, as found in some old folks still living in both the Catholic and Presbyterian traditions. Also, as reflected in folklore collections, such as Alexander Carmichael's magisterial *Carmina Gadelica*.

What does Eriugena bequeath to today's hunger for a green theology? Adding to such stalwarts as Adomnán, Columbanus and Duns Scotus, he reveals that 'Celtic Christology' rests solidly on load-bearing bedrock. Here, through western eyes, we view the eastern sense of Christ Pantocrator — akin to what Carmichael translated from the Gaelic as 'the God of the Elements'. Here, too, is a theology of Christ twice incarnated: first, in the Creation, and then to redress the Fall.

Eriugena saw that the Body of Christ — the Word made flesh — is the body of the created universe. One can glimpse that such is the bread that we partake, 'in *anamnesis* of me.' The Cosmic Christ redeems the fallen world through him in us and us in him. His humanisation becomes our divinisation as partakers in the divine nature.

Here, then, we see the *passion* of the Cross in both senses of that word. Passion, as at-one-ment with the suffering of a broken world. Passion, as unquenchable desire to love and to be loved. *O taste and see...* Alastair McIntosh

Alastair McIntosh is a visiting professor at Glasgow University and a fellow at Edinburgh's School of Divinity. He is author of *Soil and Soul* and *Island Spirituality*.



# ThirdWay

Christian comment on culture

‘I think there’s an awful lot to worry about in the world.’

Andrew Graystone talks to Jeremy Paxman



**Knitting and other revolutionary acts**

**Rainer Maria Rilke** Passionate authenticity

**Embrace the sublime** Alexander McQueen

**Harnessed to death** Animals in modern war

