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Jesus Christ

God and Man

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES ERIUGENA'S UNDERSTANDING of the metaphysical underpinnings of the Incarnation (*incarnatio* or *inhumanatio*) of the Word. It begins by considering the limited scope of the term "Incarnation," as compared to other forms of divine condescension.¹ Next, it summarizes his appropriation of the riches of the Christian theological tradition and concludes with an overview of Eriugena's teachings regarding the two natures of Christ and the hypostatic union.

The Term "Incarnation"

Incarnation and "Quasi-Incarnation"

Generally Eriugena limits the term "Incarnation" to Jesus: the Incarnation is the descent of the Word into fallen creation, that is, into the effects fragmented by man's sin and ignorance. The Word humbles himself by being born of the Virgin and assuming the limitations of the flesh.

1. *Condescensio* or *συγκατάβασις* are traditional terms for the Incarnation, indicating God's descent to be "with" fallen humanity and creation.

Yet adapting a teaching from Maximus the Confessor,² Eriugena describes three modes in which the Word condescends and ascends in creation:

Indeed, the garment of the Word is visible creation, which preaches him openly and manifests his beauty to us. The Holy Scriptures have also been made his garment, which contain the mysteries. . . . There are the two feet of the Word, one of which is the natural reason of visible creation and the second of which is the spiritual understanding of the Sacred Scriptures. The sensible forms of the sensible world cover the former, while the surface of the divine letters, that is, of the Scriptures, cover the latter. Thus the instructors of the divine law teach the Incarnation of the Divine Word in two modes (*duobus modis*). One of them teaches his Incarnation from the Virgin, by which he joined human nature to himself in a unity of substance (*substantia*) (1). The other teaches that the Word is quasi-incarnate (*quasi incarnatum*), that is, rendered thick (*incrassatum*) by the letters (2), as well as by the forms and orders of visible things (3).³

One can, in fact, distinguish three modes of divine condescension in this passage: condescension in the Scriptures, in creation, and in the birth from the Virgin. Eriugena does not, however, understand the modes to be equal and he clearly qualifies Maximus's teaching. He admits that the Word becomes "visible," "intelligible," and even "corporeal" through creation (mode 3) and the Scriptures (mode 2), which are accessible to the senses, reason, and spiritual intelligence.⁴ These two modes, however, are qualified when compared with the Incarnation from the Virgin (mode 1): the Word is "quasi-incarnate" in creation and the Scriptures, and therefore *truly* incarnate only as Jesus Christ. The term "Incarnation" applies primarily to

2. See Eriugena, *Ambigua* XXXIII (29), 166–67, 1–24; Maximus, *Ambigua* XXXIII, 1285C–D. For the source of this commentary see Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* XXXVIII, ii, 106, 16–21. Thomas Böhm also highlights Eriugena's appropriation of the Maximian theme of mediation through the incarnate Word. See Böhm, "Adnotationes," 51–53. As we shall see, however, Eriugena embraces, in part, the Maximian teaching that the Incarnation extends beyond the historical person of Jesus into all of deified creation: the multivalence of God "rendered thick."

3. *Comm.* I, xxix, 154–56, 52–68. Also see *Peri.* V, 203, 6578–81; *Hom.* XI, 254, 11–18.

4. On this theme see Duclow, "Dialectic," 109.

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the descent of the Word into the effects, secondarily to the Scriptures and “visible things.”⁵

Theosis, or deification, is the truest theophany of the Word in creation (mode three for Eriugena). Like Maximus, Eriugena believes that deification represents a form of Incarnation, though he avoids applying the term *incarnatio* to this elevation of man to divinity. The *Nutritor*, in Book One of the *Periphyseon*, summarizes Maximus’s doctrine:⁶

Maximus said that theophany takes place in no other way except through God, truly from the condescension of the divine Word, that is, from the only-begotten Son, who is the Wisdom of the Father. He came down to human nature that had been created and cleansed by himself and then raised it up to the previously mentioned Word through divine love. I am not speaking of the condescension that already took place through the Incarnation, but that condescension which takes place through *theosis* (that is, through deification) of the creature. Theophany, therefore, takes place through the condescension itself of the Wisdom of God to human nature through grace and through the exaltation of the same nature to Wisdom itself through love. In this sense, the holy father Augustine seems to agree when explaining the Apostle’s teaching: “Who was made Justice and Wisdom for us” (1 Cor

5. The various “incarnations” of the Word may be understood under the categories of divine omnipresence and theophany: “Thus it [theophany] can apply equally to the descent of Christ into the primordial causes at the creation of the world, to his condescension upon the souls of the blessed during their earthly life when they experience ‘ecstasy’ (*excessus mentis*), to Christ’s actual coming in the flesh and his historical life on earth, and to his descent into the minds of the faithful at the Last Judgment. . . . From God’s viewpoint, the various theophanies are one and the same—there is only one *Logos*—but from man’s point of view, which is necessarily encumbered by the spatio-temporality of the created world, they are different—the *Logos* is multiplied into a number of *logoi* by the creature.” Gersh, “Omnipresence,” 68–69.

6. Jeaneau suggests that Eriugena is drawing upon three of the *Ambigua* here: 1) Eriugena, *Ambigua* VII (18), 31, 305–9; Maximus, *Ambigua* VII, 1084B–C. Here, Maximus discusses the deification of man through the conformity to the preexistent *logoi* in the *Logos* and through grace. The result is a form of divine Incarnation: “God becomes man, because of the divinization of man, and man becomes God, because of the humanization of God. In fact the *Logos* of God and God desire that mystery of his Incarnation take place always and in all.” 2) Eriugena, *Ambigua* X (6), 48–49, 140–45; Maximus, *Ambigua* X, 1113A–B. Here, Maximus uses his famous expression that God and man are “paradigms of one another”: God becomes man and man becomes God through man’s conformity to the *logoi* and grace. 3) Eriugena, *Ambigua* LX (56), 237, 22–31; Maximus, *Ambigua* LX, 1385B–C. Maximus discusses the union of man with God in relation to the Incarnation and ascension of the *Logos*.

1:30). He explains as follows: “The Wisdom of the Father, in which and through which all things were made, which is not created, but creates, is made in our souls by a certain ineffable condescension of his mercy and he joins our intellect to himself in order that, in an ineffable way, a certain quasi-composite wisdom comes about from his very condescension to us and his living in us, and from our intellect that he assumes to himself through love and forms in himself.”⁷

The passage above distinguishes two modes of the Word’s condescension and ascension—two modes that are so close that Eriugena must pause to delineate them for his reader. The first is the Incarnation that “had already taken place,” that is, the birth of Jesus, God-made-man, and his return to the Father (mode 1). This condescension and ascension bring about, as we shall see, the restoration and elevation of man (the nature “created and cleansed by himself”). This is the Incarnation in its truest sense.

The other mode of the Word’s condescension and ascension, however, takes place through the synergy between human and divine natures by action (ascetical practice) and grace (divine gift): *theosis*, or deification (mode 3), in which man becomes one with God. Eriugena states that the Word “came down to human nature that had been created and cleansed by himself and then raised it up to the previously mentioned Word through divine love.” In other words, *after* the Incarnation that is the birth from the Virgin—the condescension and ascension that cleansed human nature—there takes place a second condescension and ascension through the elevation of man to the divine. This movement of *theosis* is so close to that of the Incarnation that Eriugena stops to distinguish them clearly: “I say that this condescension is *not* that which already took place through the Incarnation, but that which takes place through *theosis* (that is, through deification) of the creature.”

Eriugena’s adaptation of Maximus’s multivalent understanding of the Word’s descent and ascent in creation reveals the limited scope of the term “Incarnation.” On the one hand, Eriugena truly shares Maximus’s *Logos*-centric vision, in which all of creation comes from the Word and is deified by the Word. This allows him to accept various modes in which the Word “becomes thick” (*incrassatus*). Thus the descent and ascent of the Word in

7. *Peri*. I, 13, 296–317. It is not known where Eriugena obtained this quote from Augustine.

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deification is a form of “Incarnation,” since the Word becomes enfleshed in deified humanity—the Word is *quasi incarnatum*.

On the other hand, the term “Incarnation” applies primarily to the birth of the Word from the Virgin and his ascension to the Father. This unique event cannot be equated with any other theophany. Eriugena is no pantheist, for whom creation itself—even through the mediation of deified humanity—is equated with God. Though creation will be one with God through the Word, it can never truly *be* God, who remains without cause and within the inscrutable divine darkness. Even deified humanity cannot be called divine in the fullest sense. Jesus Christ alone is God-made-flesh.

Councils, Controversies, and Terminology

Goulven Madec notes that Eriugena does not concern himself with the development of doctrine during the formative centuries of early Christianity, but rather focuses upon the authority of the tradition in transmitting the essential truths.⁸ Yet the vocabulary and modes of thought within the tradition certainly contribute to his understanding of Jesus Christ. A brief consideration of his appropriation of the *theologorum traditio* demonstrates this influence.⁹

Versus Docetism

Eriugena demonstrates an awareness of previous christological and Trinitarian controversies and the significance of their hard-won doctrines. For example, he rejects any form of docetism that would render the Incarnation an illusion.¹⁰ The Incarnation must be a genuine enfleshment for the sake of all creation: “[The Word appeared] not through an angel to angels, nor through an angel to men, but through a man to both men and angels. He did not become manifest in a false appearance (*phantasia*), but in true humanity itself, which he assumed to himself in its entirety in a unity of substance [*substantia*, person]. In this way he made himself known to all

8. Madec, “Jean Scot,” 150.

9. Eriugena highlights that to which the tradition of the theologians adheres (*theologorum traditio universaliter consentit*), while acknowledging that the Fathers did disagree on some issues. *Peri*. V, 25, 715.

10. On the negative sense of *phantasia* in Eriugena see *Peri*. V, 118, 3797–3812. Also see Foussard, “Apparence et apparition,” 339.

intelligent beings.”¹¹ The hypostatic union—union “of substance” in Eriugena’s terms¹²—precludes any reduction of the Incarnation to a vision or dream. The Word became human, uniting two natures in his person.¹³

Versus Arianism

Eriugena also attacks the Arians for their demotion of the Divine Word to the level of a creature and for failing to teach the unity of essence in the Godhead with its substantial distinctions, that is, distinctions among the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit:

And lest someone think that the Word subsists “in the beginning” in a such a way that no difference of substances [persons] is to be understood, [John the Evangelist] then adds: “And the Word was with God” (John 1:1), that is, “And the Son subsists with the Father in a unity of essence and substantial distinction.”

And again, lest such a poisonous contagion should creep into someone that teaches that the Word is only in the Father and with God, but that the Word itself does not subsist substantially [that is, as a distinct person] and coessentially with the Father as God—for this error infected the perfidious Arians—he [the Evangelist] next adds: “And the Word was God (John 1:1).”¹⁴

In his refutation of the Arians, he once again affirms the traditional distinction between the unity of the divine essence (*essentia*) and the distinctions among persons (*substantia*). In Book Two of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena, in the voice of the *Alumnus*, expresses his great respect for the Fathers—especially Dionysius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Maximus—and their teachings regarding the Trinity.¹⁵ When speaking of the Trinity one says that “there is a difference between οὐσία, that is, essence (*essentia*), and ὑπόστασις, that is, substance (*substantia*). Indeed they [the Fathers] understand οὐσία to be the unique and simple nature of divine goodness,

11. *Hom.* III, x, 256–58, 31–36.

12. Eriugena preferred a literal translation of the term *hypostasis* as *substantia*. See *Peri.* V, 221–22, 7186–96; *Hom.*, 259, n. 2.

13. Eduard Jeuneau credits the influence of the Chalcedonean Christology of Maximus the Confessor for the “realism” of Eriugena’s Christology: “Ce réalisme fait contrepoids, en quelque sorte, aux tendances néoplatoniciennes, si fortes dans la pensée érigenne.” Jeuneau, “Jean l’Érigène,” 204.

14. *Hom.* VI, 228, 15–24.

15. See *Peri.* II, 120, 3025–27. Also see *Peri.* I, 23, 596–99.

but the *ὑπόστασις* is the property of the individual persons and individual substances. They say *μίαν οὐσίαν ἐν τρισὶν ὑποστάσεσιν*, that is, one essence in three substances.¹⁶ In the same passage he also demonstrates knowledge of the Greek term *πρόσωπον*, translating it as “person” (*persona*) and acknowledging its appropriateness for expressing the distinctions among Father, Son, and Spirit.¹⁷ He concludes by confessing the Trinity in the words of the church fathers: “Therefore the Father subsists through himself, the Son subsists [through himself], the Holy Spirit subsists [through himself]; and three substances subsist in one essence, since the Three are One.”¹⁸

Eriugena asserts that these Trinitarian distinctions are by relation, not by nature. In this way he accepts Gregory of Nazianzus’s refutation of Eunomius and obviates the charge of subordinationism.¹⁹ Gregory and the Fathers taught that “the relation (*habitus*) of the unbegotten substance [person] to the begotten substance is the Father; the relation of the begotten substance to the unbegotten substance is the Son; and the relation of the proceeding substance to the unbegotten and begotten substances is the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ Eriugena approves of this understanding of Trinitarian relations because it preserves both the distinctions of persons and the unity of essence.²¹

The substantial relations of the Trinity and the unity of essence come to the fore when Eriugena treats the question of whether the Son is born, and the Spirit proceeds, from the substance [person] of the Father alone,

16. *Peri.* II, 120–21, 3025–32. Also see *Hom.* VI, 228, 18–19: “Et filius subsistit cum patre in unitate essentiae et substantiali distinctione.”

17. See *Peri.* II, 121, 3039.

18. *Peri.* II, 121, 3050–52.

19. *Peri.* I, 24, 621–28. Also see Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Orationes* XXIX, xvi, 210–12.

20. *Peri.* I, 24, 606–10. For sources see Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Orationes* XXIX, xvi, 210–12; Maximus, *Ambigua* XXII, 1265C–1268B. Of course, Maximus has adapted the formulation of the Spirit’s role in order to accommodate the *filioque*. Elsewhere, Eriugena will express these relations as primary substantial cause or origin (Father) and secondary substantial causes (Son, Spirit): the relations are entirely logical, causal distinctions and do not imply divisions by nature. “In causa itaque omnium est causa praecedens et sunt causae sequentes. . . . Maior quippe pater est filio non secundum naturam sed secundum causam. Pater namque causa est filii, non autem filius causa est patris.” *Peri.* II, 102–3, 2481–82; 2488–91.

21. The Eunomians, in asserting that the names indicated essences or natures, taught subordination within the Trinity and denied the full divinity of the Son and Spirit. See *Peri.* I, 25, 632–34.

or from the divine essence. In his response, Eriugena, in the voice of the *Nutritor*, claims to maintain the “teaching of the Catholic Faith”:

If, therefore, the divine essence, because it is one and the same, is neither the Father nor the Son nor the Holy Spirit, but is the common nature of them all, it follows that the Son is not begotten of the essence, nor does the Holy Spirit proceed from it. For if the Son is begotten of the essence, he is not begotten of the Father, for the essence itself, as we said, is not the Father. In a similar way, if the Holy Spirit proceeds from the same essence, he does not proceed from the Father. If, however, the Catholic Faith very firmly and very wisely believes and teaches that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the same Father, does it not follow that we believe and understand that the Son is begotten of the substance [person] of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from him? Thus the Son is begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds, not from the essence, but from the substance [person] of the Father.²²

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, inclusive of the *filioque*, serves as the touchstone for Eriugena’s Trinitarian doctrine and he draws from this tradition in the formulation of his Christology. The distinctions and unity of the persons, the preexistence of the Son, the affirmation of the Son’s birth in history—all these positions emerge from Eriugena’s affirmation of this Creed, which he places alongside the Scriptures as being “preserved from all heresy.”²³

Eriugena, therefore, demonstrates an awareness of the Greek terminology used in the Trinitarian controversies, the problems of translating these terms into Latin (e.g., *substantia* or *persona* for *hypostasis*),²⁴ and the

22. *Peri*. II, 122, 3065–76.

23. “In the ineffable and supernatural fecundity of divine Goodness, where from the heart (that is, from hidden interior) of God the Father, the Son is born and the Holy Spirit proceeds, the Catholic Faith requires us to confess that this same Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father through the Son. But in the Creed of neither language [Greek or Latin], nor in the Scriptures, did I find that the Son is born from the Father through the Spirit. And why is this so? Up until now I have not answered this question myself, nor have I read or found an answer from anyone. When, however, the Scriptures and the Creed that was handed on from the holy synod in Nicea, a city in Bithynia, and preserved from all heresies, are consulted regarding the inhumanization of the Son of God (that is, the Incarnation of the Word), it is clearly evident to us that it is taught without any ambiguity that the Word was conceived by the Holy Spirit.” *Peri*. II, 118, 2952–64.

24. See *Peri*. II, 57, 1302–12.

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issues regarding the *filioque* in the Western Creed. He understands his own speculations regarding the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son to be in accord with the Nicene-Costantinopolitan faith, since he affirms the unity of the Godhead and the distinct substances [persons] of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Versus Nestorianism and Monophysitism

Eriugena condemns Nestorianism, which he understands to be the heresy that renders Jesus two persons, a divine and a human. The position was untenable because it effectively taught two Lords, or two Sons. One must, according to the Catholic Faith, affirm only one substance [person] and two natures in Christ.²⁵

He also clearly rejects monophysitism, the reduction of Christ to one divine nature. The Creed of Chalcedon, with its strong diphysite language, shapes Eriugena's terminology and approach to the composition of Christ.²⁶ In his *Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem*, the essential doctrines of the Council regarding the two natures in one person and the *communicatio idiomatum*—the preservation of both the divine and human characteristics in the one person of Christ—contribute to a sound refutation of monophysitism:

It is clear that the Lord of the celestial powers and the King of Glory, in his humanity, which he accepted from us for our sake, was assumed into heaven, that is, that the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the powers and the King of Glory, was raised up after the resurrection into his divinity, which is called "heaven." The properties of each nature, divine and human, remained without change in the unity of substance [person]: just as

25. "Lord, Lord, open up to us' (Matt 25:11). This repetition of the name of the Lord, however, means either human nature's continuous desire to contemplate its Creator, when no cloud of ignorance obstructs it, as in the case of those who lived in this life unsupported by the aid of a good conduct; or it certainly signifies the sloth of the simple faithful—those who consider less the loftiness of the Catholic faith—who think that our Lord Jesus Christ was composed of two substances [persons], since he is one substance [person] in two natures. They seek things that are not appropriate for them." *Peri. V*, 221, 7175–85.

26. Eriugena's understanding of the council came especially through the lens of his mentor, Maximus the Confessor. On the significance of Maximus on this point see Jeuneau, "Pseudo-Dionysius," 147–48.

the Word was made flesh, so the flesh was made Word, fully God in the full natures.²⁷

Eriugena vehemently defends the hypostatic union, making this doctrine the framework for his discussions on the incarnate Word. “How many are there who divide our Lord Jesus Christ such that they believe or understand neither that his divinity is united with his humanity nor that his humanity is united with his divinity in a unity of substance or, as the Latins say, in a unity of person? For are not his humanity and divinity one and inseparably one, with the distinction of each nature itself preserved?”²⁸ In Jesus,

A double essence (*substantia*)²⁹ produces one person (*persona*): for the eternal God, assuming the principle (*ratio*) [of human nature] in time, after the body was joined, made himself fully man (*perfecerat ἀνδρα*).³⁰

When speaking about the hypostatic union, Eriugena does not stand out as an innovator. He does show a preference for a more literal translation of *hypostasis* as “substantia,” as opposed to the Latin “persona,” but in general he exhibits the principal desire to keep his teachings in continuity with the Fathers and councils.

The Question of Monothelitism

Eriugena does not evince knowledge of the monothelite controversy—the debate over whether Christ possessed both a divine will and a human will—that his mentor, Maximus the Confessor, confronted at the cost of

27. *Expo.* VII, iii, 108–9, 659–68. On this passage see Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 158–59.

28. *Peri.* V, 221–22, 7190–96. Regarding the integrity of the two natures of Christ after the resurrection see *Peri.* V, 186, 6069–73: “For he is entirely God, he is whole everywhere, he is wholly exalted over everything which is said and understood, entire in the Father and made one with the Father, full God in full humanity, while the principles of each nature remain themselves in Him.”

29. Again, Eriugena is not always consistent with his terms. Here he uses the term *substantia* in the sense of “essence.”

30. *Carm.* VIII, 88, 67–68. M. Herren translates *ratio* as “Word,” rendering the line, “For God eternal, when he assumed the Word in time.” This translation is problematic, since it is the humanity that God assumes in time, not the Word. In this instance, Eriugena is using *ratio* to designate the distinct set of properties of a full human nature. See *Peri.* V, 86, 2736–41; 221–22, 7190–96.

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his life.³¹ One does not even find, for instance, the Maximian distinction between the so-called deliberative will (*γνώμη*), which entails free choice and the possibility of error, and the natural will (*θέλημα*), which chooses the good for the fulfillment of a particular nature.

He does, however, take interest in the free will of humans and angels, making it the essential characteristic of rational and intellectual beings: “Take away the rational will, and there will be no man.”³² He then asks whether freedom belongs to man by nature, or whether it was a super-added divine gift. In fact, he concludes, God must have given man a free will right from the beginning in order that he might freely obey the divine command and, through grace, rise up to a greater union: “Therefore, it must be understood that the first will of man was created naturally free, so that something could be super-added to it later (that is, grace), if he should wish to preserve the Creator’s command.”³³ Even after the fall, the natural free will remains in man, though it was weakened through the act of disobedience.

The Word, in becoming man, restores the full freedom of the natural human will:

And human nature is not only will, but also free will. His freedom is not false, but true. Yet liberty itself after sin is so vitiated that it is impeded by its punishment and so does not want to live rightly or, if it should so desire, is not able to live rightly. It is freed from this misery, as the apostle says, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ (Rom 7:25). Its natural liberty remains, as shown by its appetite for happiness, which is implanted in it naturally.³⁴

In recognizing that Jesus heals the vitiated human will, Eriugena draws upon Augustine and the Scriptures, and does not make use of the rich anthropological developments that emerged during the monothelite controversy. As we shall see, this does not mean that his Christology fails to take into account human freedom, though Maximus’s contributions would most likely have enriched it.

31. For instance see Maximus, *Opuscula XVI*, 192B; *Opuscula VII*, 80A.

32. *Prae.* VIII, iii, 50, 45–47.

33. *Prae.* VIII, v, 51, 89–92.

34. *Prae.* V, iv, 37, 94–101.