

**HISTORY OF THEOLOGY**

**II**

**The Middle Ages**



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Giulio D'Onofrio

*Translated by*  
Matthew J. O'Connell



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# Contents

Preface	xiii
Introduction: The Principles of Medieval Theology	1
1. The True Philosophy: A Synthesis of Faith and Reason	1
2. Sound Doctrine: The Gold of the Egyptians and the Coinage of the King	4
3. Sacred Utterances: The Word of God and Human Language	9
4. The Divine Ordering: The Order of Creation—Essences, Ideas, Numbers, Intelligences	12
5. Christian Instruction: The Two Libraries: Human Literature and Divine Literature	15
6. The Ages of the World: The Temporal Boundaries of the Theological Middle Ages: Problems of Periodization and Methodology	21
Chapter One: From the Roman World to the Christian World: The Collapse and Rebirth of the Christian Empire of the West	25
I. The Theology of the “Founders”	25
1. Boethius and Wisdom	29
2. Truth and the Reorganization of Knowledge: Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville	35
3. Gregory the Great	38
4. A “Monastic” Civilization	42
a. Benedict of Nursia and Benedictine Monasticism	42
b. English Monasticism and Bede the Venerable	43
c. Virgilius Grammaticus and Ethicus Ister	44
d. Beatus of Liébana and Ambrose Autpert	47
5. The Greek East from Justinian to the Second Council of Nicaea	49
a. The Sixth Century and John Philoponus	49
b. The Seventh Century and Maximus the Confessor	50
c. The Eighth Century: The Question of Images and John Damascene	52

II. Carolingian Unanimity	54
1. Institutional Reform and Cultural and Religious Rebirth	55
2. The Theological Wisdom of Charlemagne's Liegemen	58
a. Tradition and Method in Alcuin's Theological Writings	58
b. Fridugisus of Tours and Alcuin's "Circle"	61
c. Theological Method in the <i>Libri carolini</i>	64
3. Systematization and Speculative Advances in the Age of Louis the Pious	65
a. Agobard of Lyons and the Early Theological Debates within the Carolingian World	66
b. Rhabanus Maurus and the Organization of Knowledge	69
4. Theological Debate in Carolingian Europe after Verdun	72
5. John Scotus Eriugena	82
a. Nature and Its Divisions	84
b. The Knowableness of God and the Possibility of Making Predications about Him	88
c. The Knowableness of Creatures: The Substantial Triad	90
d. Creation and Procession: Eriugena's Hexaemeron	92
e. Original Sin and the Interruption of the Creative Process	93
f. Redemption from Sin and the Return	95
g. Beyond Theology	96
6. Theological Learning and Thought in the Greek East of the Ninth Century and in the Late Carolingian West	98
a. Theological Thought in Byzantium from the New Controversy on Images to the Photian Schism	98
b. In the West: The Late Carolingian School	102
 Chapter Two: The Contradictions of the Transitional Period: The Ancients versus the Moderns	 106
I. Theological Platonism and Ecclesiastical Reform in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries	106
1. The Renewal of Studies in the Ottonian Age	106
a. The Reform of Monastic Life and the Cluniac Movement	106
b. The Theological Competence and Practical Wisdom of the Bishops: Atto of Vercelli and Ratherius of Verona	108
c. The Pride of Gunzo and the Humility of Hrosvit	110
d. The Wise Abbot and the Learned Pope: Abbo of Fleury and Gerbert of Aurillac	112
2. Cosmic Optimism and the Criticism of Reason after the Year One Thousand	116
a. Order of Thought and Cosmic Order: Heriger of Lobbes, Adalbold of Utrecht, and Fulbert of Chartres	117
b. The Boundary between the Liberal Arts and Theology: Anselm of Besate and Adalbero of Laon	119
c. The Limits of Theological Reason according to Gerard of Czanád	121

3.	Humanistic Classicism and Religious Spiritualism at Byzantium in the Century of the Schism	122
a.	Erudite Scholarship and Mystic Spiritualism in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries	122
b.	Michael Cerularius and the Schism	124
c.	Michael Psellus	125
d.	John the Italian and the Exhaustion of Speculative Theology in Byzantium	127
4.	The “Modern” Theologians	129
a.	Manegold of Lautenbach	130
b.	The Dispute over the Eucharist: Berengarius of Tours and Lanfranc of Pavia	132
c.	Peter Damian	135
d.	Otloh of St. Emmeran and the Anonymous of Regensburg	138
e.	Moderns vs Ancients: Roscellinus of Compiègne	140
II.	Anselm of Aosta	144
1.	Theological Truth as the Rectitude or Right Ordering of the Intellect to Faith	145
2.	The <i>Monologion</i> , Model of Meditation on the Truth of God	147
3.	The <i>Proslogion</i> : From Faith to Understanding of the Truth of God	151
4.	The Theological System of Christian Truth	157
5.	The <i>Cur Deus homo</i> : From Faith to Understanding of the Mystery of Christ	160
6.	Truth, Necessity, and Prayer: Faith as a Cognitive Experience	162
	Chapter Three: The Century of the Schools	164
I.	New Movements and New Study Centers in France	164
1.	Anselm’s Heritage	164
2.	Peter Abelard	170
a.	The Universals and the Truth of Knowing	172
b.	True Logicians and True Philosophers	175
c.	The Logic of the Trinity	178
3.	The Schools of Paris	181
a.	Abelard’s Heritage and the Schools of Logic	181
b.	The School of Saint Victor	182
c.	Reading of the Bible and Reading of the Fathers	188
4.	Gilbert of Poitiers	191
a.	A Dialectical Commentary on the Theology of Boethius	191
b.	A Theological Method: The Shifting of Meaning	194
c.	Ontological Composition and the Reality of the Singular	196
d.	The Trinitarian “Distinction”	198
e.	The Gilbertan or Porretan Theologians	199
5.	The School of Chartres	201
a.	Bernard of Chartres and the “Innate Forms”	203
b.	William of Conches and the Philosophy of the World	205

c. Theodoric of Chartres and the Physics of Creation	208
d. Herman of Carinthia and Bernard Silvestris: Nature and the Theologico-Poetic Veil	212
e. Clarembald of Arras and the Limits of Theoretical Theology	214
II. The Monastic Schools	216
1. Reading of the Bible, Theology of History, and Visionaries in the German Area	216
2. Peter the Venerable and Cluniac Theology	223
3. Bernard of Clairvaux: Cistercian Theology and Spirituality	224
4. William of Saint-Thierry	227
5. Spiritual Friendship and the Psychology of the Mystical Ascent	229
III. The English Schools and John of Salisbury	231
 Chapter Four: Between Two Worlds	 240
I. The Maturation of Theological Method in the Age of Philip Augustus	240
1. Alan of Lille	241
2. Organization of Knowledge and Definition of Theological Knowledge	247
3. Joachim of Fiore	248
4. Amalric of Bène	252
II. The Encounter with Greco-Arabic and Jewish Philosophical and Theological Thought	255
1. Islamic Theology or <i>kalam</i>	257
2. Arabic Philosophy	262
a. The Formation of <i>Falsafa</i> from al-Kindi to al-Farabi	262
b. Metaphysics and Theology: Avicenna (Ibn Sina)	266
c. The Agreement of Philosophy with Religion: Averroes (Ibn Rushd)	269
3. Jewish Theological and Philosophical Thought	274
4. The Introduction of Greek and Arabic-Jewish Thought into the West: The Latin Translations	279
III. The Civilization of the University	281
1. The Birth of the Universities	281
2. Philosophers and Theologians	284
3. The New Psychology and the Shift in Cognitive Parameters	287
 Chapter Five: The Golden Age of University Theology	 291
I. Genesis and Formation of University Theological Thought: The Work of the First Masters of Theology	291
1. The Standard-Bearers of University Theology: Secular Masters and Masters from the Mendicant Orders	291
2. The First Secular Masters	293
a. William of Auxerre	295
b. The Theory of the Transcendentals	296
c. Philip the Chancellor	297
d. William of Auvergne	298

3. The Franciscan Masters of Paris:	
Alexander of Hales and John of La Rochelle	301
4. The Franciscan Masters of Oxford: Robert Grosseteste	306
5. The First Dominican Masters	309
II. Birth and Systematization of Theology as a Science:	
Odo Rigaldi and Albert the Great	312
1. Odo Rigaldi and the Theory of Theology as a Science	313
2. Albert the Great (or: of Cologne)	317
a. Aristotelean Philosophy and Christian Theology	317
b. The Philosophical System of Reality	319
c. Anthropology and the Cognitive Ascent	321
d. The System of Theological Truth	323
III. Bonaventure of Bagnoreggio	326
1. Theological Science as the Unification of All Truth, and Its Scriptural Basis	328
2. Theology as a “Solution That Leads Elsewhere”	330
3. From Science to Wisdom	332
4. Speculative Theology	336
5. The Theological Reduction of Philosophy and the Itinerary of Theology	338
IV. Thomas Aquinas	342
1. Master of the Sacred Page	343
2. Saints and Philosophers	346
3. The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: Existence and Essence	348
4. Philosophy and Theology: From the Commentaries on Boethius to the <i>Summa against Unbelievers</i>	351
5. Rome and Paris: Aristoteleanism versus Averroism; Angelology and Anthropology	357
6. The <i>Summa of Theology</i> and the “Theology of the Exodus”	361
7. Theology as a Science	366
 Chapter Six: The Theological Workshop of the Late Middle Ages	 372
I. Multiple Truths: Debates and Currents of Thought Bridging Two Centuries	372
1. Henry of Ghent and the Secular Masters	374
a. Theological Foundations of the Thought of Henry of Ghent	375
b. The “Intentional” Composition of Being	376
c. Teaching on Knowledge and the Special Illumination	378
d. Theological Science and the New Christian Epistemology	378
e. Geoffrey of Fontaines and Peter of Alvernia	379
2. Giles of Rome, Augustinian Master	381
3. The Aristoteleanism of the Arts Faculty and the Condemnation of 1277	385
a. The Controversy and the Condemnations	385
b. The Thought System of the Aristotelean Artists	389

c. “Double Truth” and the Epistemological Distinctions of the Arts Faculty	391
4. The Debate between the Franciscans and the Dominicans	394
5. The Controversy over the Absolute Poverty of the Spirituals and Peter John Olivi	402
6. The Peace of Theology according to Dante Alighieri	407
II. Reformers, Innovators, and Dissenters:	
New Paths in the Systematization of Theology	415
1. Roger Bacon	415
2. Raymond Lull	423
3. The School of Cologne and Theodoric of Freiberg	429
4. John Duns Scotus	435
a. Theology in Itself and Theology in Us	436
b. Theology and Philosophy	437
c. The Scientific Status of Theology	438
d. Metaphysics and Ontology: The Univocity of Being	441
e. God as Infinite Being	443
f. Divine Voluntarism and Its Consequences: The Reality and Knowability of Finite Being	445
g. The Formal Distinction and Its Theological Consequences: The Eternal Predestination of Christ	447
h. The Human Will and Its Freedom	448
5. The Beginnings of the “Scotist Way”	449
 Chapter Seven: The Autumn of Medieval Theology	 453
I. Theological Debate in the Age of John XXII	453
1. Durandus of Saint-Pourçain	454
2. Meister Eckhart	456
3. Peter Aureoli	464
4. William of Ockham	470
a. The “Venerable Inceptor”	471
b. The Theory of Truth: Intuitive Knowledge and Abstract Knowledge, Simple Term and Complex Proposition	472
c. The Doctrine of Supposition and Nominalism	474
d. The Primacy of the Individual and “Ockham’s Razors”	477
e. The New Conception of Science	478
f. Theology as Wisdom	479
g. The Freedom of Faith	482
II. The Consolation of Theology	483
1. The Remedies of Theology in Francesco Petrarca	483
2. Between East and West: Barlaam of Calabria and Theological Probabilism	493
3. The Influence of Ockhamism and University Trends in the Middle Decades of the Fourteenth Century	498
a. Adam Wodham and John of Rodington	499

b. Robert Holkot	501
c. Thomas Bradwardine	502
d. Gregory of Rimini	504
e. John of Mirecourt and Nicholas of Autrecourt	506
f. John Buridan	511
g. Walter Burley and John Wycliffe	514
4. Mysticism and Religious Individualism in the Rhenish and Flemish Areas	516
5. Toward a Rebirth of Theology	520
Biblical Index	527
Index of Names and Terms	529



# Preface

The fall of 1996 saw the publication of three volumes of a *History of Theology in the Middle Ages* (titled respectively I. *Principles*, II. *The Great Flowering*, and III. *The Theology of the Schools*), which I edited for Edizioni Piemme. That work had its origin in the setting of a planned *History of Theology* that was to comprise several volumes. The idea for this *History* came from His Excellency Msgr. Luciano Pacomio, at that time Rector of the Collegio Capranica in Rome and now bishop of Mondovi. Volume II of the series was to cover the medieval period, but the length of the many contributions requested of specialists in the various phases and problem areas of medieval theology suggested it would be better to publish the resulting three volumes separately from the planned *History* and as an independent project. That three-volume history represented the first time that the study of medieval theological thought was presented in a form both analytical and exhaustive, and accompanied by an up-to-date and comprehensive bibliography of the entire historical development in all its parts. The unforeseen length of the work was justified by the need to adequately fill a very large scholarly gap in our modern intellectual panorama.

Now, again at the request of Msgr. Pacomio, to whom I am grateful for having several times involved me, to my delight, in his earlier project, I have been asked to contribute to the completion of the *History of Theology* by writing the second volume, *The Middle Ages*.

In producing a synthetic presentation of the history of Christian theology in the Middle Ages, I have chosen to give the work a popular form; that is, one without learned notes, bibliographies, and chronological tables. My intention in choosing this kind of presentation is to make possible an unbroken and organized reading of the history of medieval theological thought even by those readers who stand outside the restricted circle of experts and frequenters of specialized libraries.

In accepting this propitious opportunity to provide a tool aimed rather at a synthesis for the ordinary reader, I conceived the present volume not as a compendium of the three large volumes, but as a new and original exposition of the

history of medieval theology. The exposition is based, as far as possible, on a direct study of the sources: it is an *editio minor* (or an *ars brevis*, to use the language of the Scholastics) of an introductory kind. It can, I hope, be used also as a means of studying and making basic preparation (by individuals or in a university setting) for acquiring a knowledge of the broad realm of medieval theological studies. The reader who wants more advanced studies of the subjects or desires bibliographical information, either on the works of the authors with whom I deal or on the secondary literature, can go to the three volumes of the *History of Theology in the Middle Ages*. The present volume is not intended as a substitute for these, but rather as a preparation for them.

Giulio d'Onofrio  
Rome, June 30, 2003

# Introduction

## The Principles of Medieval Theology

### *1. The True Philosophy: A Synthesis of Faith and Reason*

Peter is offered to us as a model of action and faith. John the Theologian, on the other hand, is a symbol of contemplation and knowledge. . . . Both, however, run to the tomb. The tomb of Christ is divine Scripture, in which the mysteries of his divinity and his humanity are covered over by the weight of the letter as by a stone over a tomb. But John runs more quickly than Peter and arrives before him. In fact, the power of contemplation, which is already purified, is able to penetrate the inner secrets of the words written by God and to do so with greater acuteness and rapidity than action can, which still needs purification. Yet Peter was the first to enter the tomb; only then did John follow him. Thus both ran and both entered. They entered in that order because Peter symbolizes faith and John understanding. Therefore, since it is written: "Unless you first believe, you cannot understand" (Isa 7:9), faith must enter first into the monument of Scripture; then, following it, the intellect may likewise enter, its access being made possible precisely by faith.

This charming allegorical reading of the race of the two apostles to the tomb of Christ after the announcement of the resurrection was introduced by a Carolingian, John Scotus Eriugena, into his *Homily* on the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. It illustrates in an especially effective way the relationship Christians ought to be able to establish for themselves between faith and understanding. John the Evangelist, who rested his head on the breast of Christ at the Last Supper, is a symbol of the human ability to draw near to the truth solely by natural inquiry. Peter, who sometimes wavers in the face of the mystery, is a symbol of faith, which ensures a complete possession of truth, but one based on the acceptance of what claims, without other confirmation or arguments, to come from God himself.

Both apostles run toward the fundamental mystery of faith, which the words of Scripture enclose as would a sacred funeral monument. That is, faith and reason run together toward the sacred page with the purpose of penetrating its

## 2 Introduction

literal meaning and drawing near to the union of the divine and the human in Christ. Theoretical knowledge reaches its completion through the exercise of reason, which immunizes it against the deceitful obscurities of corporeal reality. It also runs more quickly as it moves with assurance toward what is intelligible. However, it is compelled to halt on the threshold of the truth, which remains incomprehensible to it because the age-old inquiries of the philosophers, as they look for answers to their questions on the origin and meaning of life, are destined to reach only incomplete results that cannot be verified unless the intellect is willing to advance with the slower but surer footsteps of faith.

“Unless you believe, you will not understand.” This variant, which Augustine preferred, came from the (Greek) Septuagint and differed from both the Hebrew and the Vulgate (which have “Unless you believe you will not be strengthened”). Here the text of Isaiah becomes a prophecy putting the seal of approval on the synthesis of Christian faith and philosophical reason by which the whole of medieval theological thought is linked to the speculative quest of the Fathers of the church. The well-chosen allegory of John Scotus sums up the teaching of the *Letter to Consentius*, which Augustine wrote in 410, the year in which the brutal sack of Rome by the Visigoths symbolized the irreversible decline of the imperial civilization of antiquity. According to the *Letter*, natural reason must be brought into play by the believer both before the act of faith, in order to justify it, and after it, in order better to establish its contents. It is for this reason that, again according to Augustine, a Christian cannot but love understanding: “Have a great love of understanding!”

The linking of “believe” and “understand” is thus taken to be a *habitus* or “state of being,” a natural connection of the two sources from which human beings can derive truth. Faith risks remaining inauthentic unless it is accompanied by an understanding of the words of revelation and, consequently, trusts the intervention of a moderate rationality, which is capable of putting itself in the service of revelation. It does so in order to provide clarity about what faith believes, but without claiming to pass any judgment on the truthfulness of that belief.

At the same time, a limited complementarity of faith and understanding was regarded by many, beginning in the very first centuries of Christianity, as an essential condition for the survival of philosophy itself. In fact, pagan intellectuals had for some time already noted with concern the chronic weakness of their philosophical researches. Seeing the contradictions among all the philosophical schools, which were a sign of the insufficiency and falsity of their teachings, Cicero himself, the common teacher of Latin-language thinkers, had realized the necessity of adopting the probabilist or moderately skeptical position of the Academics. According to the latter, who were the final heirs of the Platonic school, truth will remain forever beyond the reach of humanity, and the wise will renounce the claim to know it; they will, instead, limit themselves to accepting as probable the best teachings of the practitioners of philosophy and will devote

themselves simply to devising pragmatic norms for finding their places in nature and society.

But a philosophy reduced to a simple methodological support for practical activity betrays the very longings for objective truth that philosophy was intended to satisfy. For Augustine, therefore, “the true philosophy” or “the correct teaching” can only be that of the Christians, who have realized from whom the truth must first be sought, without fear of being deceived, in order then to study it, confirm it, and penetrate it more fully with the rational tools discovered by the sages of old.

Once again it was John Scotus, in his first piece of writing, the little book *Predestination*, who was inspired this time by a remark of Augustine in the pages of his *The True Religion* to coin a formula that summed up in a sentence the medieval program of theological research based on the rational understanding of the faith. Once we realize, Scotus says, that God is truth, there can be no contradiction between the truth of religion and the truth of philosophy; therefore, “the true philosophy is the true religion and, conversely, the true religion is the true philosophy.” With the same clarity of vision, Anselm of Aosta addresses God in his *Monologion* as the one who “gives understanding of the faith.” Then, at the beginning of the twelfth century and in response to the accusation of logical rationalism, Peter Abelard declares in his *Logic* that true knowledge, which brings human beings close to the truth, can never, when correctly used, contradict the true faith. For “truth is never opposed to truth,” and two correct acquisitions of truth cannot contradict one another, even if they differ in their origin and manner of application.

The true philosophy and true religion of medieval Christians sprang from the conquest of doubt, not with the help of external, logical, or experimental evidence, but through acknowledging the authenticity of truth that is communicated by an authority beyond dispute, that of God himself. The true philosophy and the true religion give rise in the believing subject to an “idea”: that is, a sure knowledge that is more reliable than any scientific construct and, at the same time, more credible than any other religious creed whatsoever. In the all-inclusive overturning of the ordinary processes of human speculation that results from this turning to God, the act that founds medieval Christian theology in its entirety comes down to the antecedent decision to give the mind’s assent to a “word” whose reliability can be proved solely on the basis of what that word itself claims, and then to move on to a search for further possible ways of knowing. Like a traveler who knows her destination but not the roads she must travel to reach it, or like a student who is told in advance the solution of a mathematical problem but must then figure out on his own the right procedure for reaching it, so the medieval theological mind knew in advance its own goal, which was identical with revelation and with the early interpretations of it given by the Fathers, but then had the task of seeking to demonstrate it, to go more deeply into its meaning and bring out its possible consequences.

#### 4 Introduction

### 2. Sound Doctrine: The Gold of the Egyptians and the Coinage of the King

Luke tells us (Acts 17:16-34) that when Paul met on the Areopagus with representatives of the ancient philosophical schools he followed the rules of rhetoric and took as the starting point of his discourse the possible convergences between the new thesis he intended to present and the positions already held by his hearers. According to his line of argument, the subject of Christian preaching was the “unknown god” whose existence the human mind had managed to intuit, along with this god’s fundamental attributes: oneness, efficacious causality, and providence. On the basis of this initial agreement the apostle exhorts the philosophers to accept the teaching of Christ, in whose life, death, and resurrection they can contemplate the fulfillment of all human hopes.

When Paul’s invitation was thus spelled out it elicited mirth in the majority of the hearers, who went away with the mocking remark, “We shall listen to you on this matter at another time.” And yet Luke ends by saying that some of those present were converted, one of them worth mentioning: the philosopher Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus. Thus, despite Paul’s apparent failure, Scripture records that thanks to his words in the place that was the heart of Hellenistic-Roman philosophical civilization, revelation was for the first time grafted onto the unsuccessful quest of human knowledge.

The philosophical reasoning of antiquity had shown its inability to understand a truth it had only been able to glimpse over the centuries. Yet converts to Christianity, who believed that they possessed this truth through God’s unmerited gift, regarded themselves as allowed to see in the best, even if limited, scientific conquests of the philosophers of the past a useful, though unnecessary, help in organizing their understanding of the revealed data into a structured discipline. Paul himself confirms this outlook when he urges the unification of the faith in the form of “sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9), a solid intellectual organization of doctrine that is able to stand up to the doubts of unbelievers and the deceptions of heretics.

The people of the Middle Ages started with the presupposition that the Fathers of the church (Augustine chief among them) had already completed that task and had made them the heirs of “sound doctrine,” the truth of which was guaranteed by two proofs: its revealed origin and the permanence given to it by reason. They even saw the first fruit of this Christian appropriation of the classical philosophical patrimony in the celebration of the *logos* that opens the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. Here a concept of philosophical origin, but raised to a higher level by prophetic inspiration, becomes a key factor in explaining to believers that both the work of the world’s creation and the work of redemption were due to a causality exercised by the second divine Person.

This core concept was then refined by the preachers of the early centuries, who had made the language of philosophy their own in order to enter into dialogue with the representatives of the pagan schools and to rebut their accusations of ignorance and superstition. The same refinement was carried further, from

the third to the fifth centuries, by the leaders in the speculative stage of patristic thought and by the first ecumenical councils. These men rectified every heretical attempt at an excessive rationalization of the mysteries while showing the logical coherence of the divine attributes attested in the Scriptures and thereby establishing the foundational elements of subsequent trinitarian and christological dogmatic terminology.

But the need to keep theological reason alert to heresies did not cease with the early centuries. In fact, the critical period into which the Roman empire entered only intensified the need to make a common understanding of dogma the basis of the unity of the Christian civilization that was being born out of the successive conversions of the barbarian peoples who were being incorporated into the old political system. As a result, the insistent plea of the Fathers remained relevant: to draw upon the ancient schools, selecting their best teachings and the tools most useful in ensuring a clear formulation of the faith. At the same time, Christians had to follow the criteria set down by the faith itself in accepting, as occasion suggested, the most trustworthy results of pagan thought, but without feeling an obligation to accept that thought in its entirety. In this way they would be successful in avoiding the contradictions that had weakened that thought.

The need, then, was to take from among the teachings of Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle those most in harmony with the foundations of the Christian religion. Similarly, it was necessary to accept, but only to a limited extent, the ethics of the Stoics and the physics of the Peripatetics and to be persuaded that Seneca had carried on a correspondence with St. Paul and that Virgil had been able to sense the coming of Christ, although without understanding it.

A lengthy tradition in theological studies would justify this instrumental use of pagan knowledge by means of some effective allegories, drawn for the most part from the writings of the Fathers, in order to show the correct approach to the relationship between reason and religion. Thus, for example, wise Christians can look to the part played by Hagar, the handmaiden who became wife to Abraham the patriarch but nonetheless remained always subject to her mistress, Sarah, mother of Isaac (Gen 16:1-16). From this they will see that they must not set an excessive value on the secular sciences, but rather make use of them in order to ascend to true theological wisdom, which is founded on the word of God and is both the mistress of these sciences and the ultimate goal of their true precepts.

There was also the Mosaic principle that required the sons of Israel to shave the heads, pare the nails, and destroy the garments of female slaves taken in war before uniting with them and making them their wives (Deut 21:10-13). This mandate demanded that those desirous of using human knowledge to strengthen their own belief must remove from that knowledge anything that is superfluous and cannot be ordered to the service of the faith; only then can they take over that knowledge in order to make it fruitful for themselves.

## 6 Introduction

Again, the gold of which Israelites robbed the Egyptians before leaving for the Promised Land (Exod 12:35-36) becomes a reference to the right of Christ's followers to take possession of the pagan arts. Thus those using these riches to satisfy the illicit cognitive aspirations of the rational mind will only make for themselves an idolatrous image of a golden calf. In contrast, those who purify that knowledge and make it part of true wisdom for the understanding of revelation are obeying the divine law and can use the melted-down gold of the ancients to adorn the ark of the covenant in which the tablets of the Law are kept.

Thus, throughout the medieval centuries, respect for the relationship God has established between revealed truth and the results of the philosophers' natural skills guaranteed the consistency and correctness of theological research. In contrast, the reversal of that order by yielding to the temptation to give human questions priority over total assent to the mystery of faith could only beget false teachings.

The principal motive for esteeming the new teaching that resulted from this measured, syncretistic approach to the best fruits of human science was the renewed opportunity for the mind to gain access once again to a systematic wisdom that had seemed beyond reach. The very organization of contents that can be seen in the first dogmatic formulations (from the Apostolic Creed to the canons of the major ecumenical councils) is evidence of the felt need of translating into the language of complete explanation the systematic tension inherent in the historical character of the divine plan revealed in Scripture and running from creation to the end of time. This idea of systematization had been brought to maturity in the speculative area by some of the major theological works of the Fathers from Origen to Augustine. It now became the common mark of Christian thought: "doctrine" that is "sound" is such insofar as it is absolutely one and unquestionable; in turn, and because of its divine origin, this oneness is due to its being complete in all the parts that make it up, without any gaps or imperfections. Thus the fact that "sound doctrine" differs from the incompleteness of human teachings is a sign showing the superiority, even intellectual, of the divine message when the latter is correctly spelled out by the argumentative method of the theologians.

A careful diagnosis of this situation came down to the Middle Ages in a model passage of the *corpus dionysianum* or *areopagiticum*, a collection of extremely dense theological texts. Under the false paternity of the Dionysius mentioned earlier, who had become a convert after Paul's address on the Areopagus, this collection introduced into the Christian world subtle but structurally solid elements of Neoplatonic theology that were taken from the teaching of the pagan philosopher Proclus of Constantinople (d. 485). At the beginning of his seventh Letter the Areopagite says that he has never engaged in barren controversies with the Greek philosophers since they, too, are sincerely seeking the truth just as Christians do. On the other hand, the philosophers must not presume

to impose their own theses, which are always imperfect, as though something completely true and irrefutable were embodied in each thesis. Otherwise it will be utterly useless even to discuss any matter with them. "Each says that his own bit of money is the real thing when in fact what he has may be a counterfeit copy of some part of the truth."<sup>1</sup>

A short time after the Pseudo-Dionysian writings were composed, a similar image was proposed in the Latin world by Severinus Boethius. The latter, however, though a Christian and the author of short works on theological subjects, took the important step of linking his image to the legitimacy of developing a true philosophy that is purely rational and independent of religion. After being condemned to death by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, Boethius tells us in the introduction to his well-known *Consolation of Philosophy* that while in prison he met Philosophy personified as a noble, imposing woman whose head touched the heavens, while the hem of her spotless robe bore the mark of violent tearing. She explained that those responsible for the tears were petty, untrustworthy pagan philosophers. These had tried in vain to win her over to them; then, having managed to tear away a few little pieces of her robe, they went about the world displaying these as though they had mastered the entire truth.

In the ensuing pages of the *Consolation* Boethius makes no reference to the promises of redemption that the religion of Christ had introduced into human history. The explanation of his search for a purely philosophical reply to his own fundamental questions about human life and the uses of suffering is probably to be found in the idea that, in addition to accepting the decisive proclamation of redemption brought by the Gospel, human beings ought also to seek a rational justification of what seemingly eludes their understanding. Boethius claims to find this justification in the speculative content of the same teaching that, now viewed by him within a Christian hermeneutic of the faith, also nourished the thinking of the author of the *corpus dionysianum*, namely, the Neoplatonism of late antiquity.

The Neoplatonic school came into existence precisely in order to resist the new and successful Christian religious outlook. Beginning with the *Enneads* of Plotinus (d. 270 C.E.), the school sought to ensure the recovery of the autonomy and stability of natural thought, basing that recovery on a forcibly harmonized, or concordist, synthesis of the best teachings developed by the major philosophical currents of the past. The core of the synthesis was the metaphysical teaching of Plato and, in particular, the Platonic principle of the intelligibility and immutability of what is true. In Platonic speculation, then, human reason attempted to produce a stringently formulated, unified philosophical system that could surmount the contradictions of the schools and render an account of both the visible and the invisible, the material world and the intelligible world.

The attainment of this goal relied, above all in Proclus, on the introduction of a novel gnoseological approach that was closely connected with the thought of Plato. According to this analysis, many forms representing one and the same

object are produced in the human soul; these are seemingly contradictory but can all be acknowledged as true, provided they are not presumed to have any validity outside the effective scope of the corresponding cognitive organ. According to the best-attested interpretation of them, these various forms of knowledge are related to at least three faculties: the senses, which translate data from the external world into notions; dialectical reason, which works out intelligible concepts through a series of mediations and distinctions; and the intellect, which is able to grasp the truth in a direct and complete intuition.

This teaching made possible a simple, consoling justification of philosophy, liberating it from its seeming fate of producing only doctrinal disagreement. The opinions of the philosophers had been contradictory because, although these opinions were due to the incompleteness of each one's dianoetic thought, they had claimed validity as though they were conveying a perfect vision of reality, a vision possible only to the noetic intellect for which no contradiction is possible. In order to correct this error, reason must submit to the unifying teaching of noetic intuition, while recognizing that knowledge can be objective only if the limits of the faculty producing it are acknowledged and looking to a higher order of truth for a new harmonization.

When faced with this approach to the unification and consolidation of knowledge under the guidance of a higher intelligence, the "new" Christian philosophers expressed doubts about the possibility that human beings could sufficiently grasp noetic truth in itself, uncontaminated by the partial and mediated processes of discursive reason. On the other hand, they accepted and made their own the Platonic hierarchy of the forms of knowledge. In their turn, however, they proposed that by a free yet radical choice the human quest for knowledge should be subordinated to the divine Intellect itself, which is utterly true and always the same and has made itself accessible to all by embodying itself in the words of scriptural revelation.

In dealing with the Neoplatonists, Christians had valid arguments justifying this choice. To begin with, once dianoetic reason has accepted the invitation to let itself be guided by revealed truth it will no longer be oriented toward a longing for a superior intuition that is by its nature not expressible or conceptualizable, nor will it be exposed any longer to the danger of contaminating this intuition by tailoring it to reason's possibilities of expression. Rather, thanks to the words of Scripture, reason will share in a complete and utterly gratuitous manifestation of truth, which it can then readily explain in definable and communicable ways.

Second, while Neoplatonism explained the ascent of the wise man as a purely mental and intuitive encounter with God, Christianity guarantees every believer the possibility of sharing in the historical event of a real encounter between the human and the divine, an encounter that, according to the faith, took place in time in the incarnation of Christ and is promised for the end of time in the universal resurrection (again as a matter of faith). This linking of the creator

with creatures allows Christians, in a way far exceeding what the pagan philosophers could hope for, to see the entire history of creation as directed toward the certainty of the eschatological return of all particular truths to the Truth in itself from which they sprang, of all imperfect goods to the supreme Good that produced them, and of all forms of evanescent, mutable temporal things to the stability of the Eternal.

Christian “sound doctrine” thus claims to be a summary revaluation of all reality, both corporeal and intelligible. It also derives from the unqualified and all-embracing truthfulness of revelation the same systematic character which the Neoplatonic sages could achieve only at the cost of an irreparable devaluation of the sensible world, the multiple, and the accidental. Moreover, Christian philosophy brings with it the possibility of retrieving the whole of reality in a global justification of being, both visible and invisible, that is based on the words of him who truly is, and is the being of everything (Exod 3:14: “I am who am”). As a result, this philosophy can successfully aspire to offer itself as a completely systematic teaching that comprehends the entire truth of the reality flowing from God’s creative act, from the beginning of time to its end.

### *3. Sacred Utterances: The Word of God and Human Language*

In the course of the first centuries, in order to provide a solid resistance to the interpretive deviations of heretics and to strengthen believers in their acceptance of the faith, the ecclesiastical magisterium established a norm for the recognition of theological truth. This norm was the principle of tradition, which said that all interpretations and further explanations of the scriptural basis of the Christian religion were trustworthy provided they were in agreement with the entire intellectual patrimony developed by teachers universally recognized as authoritative and set down in formulas approved by conciliar assemblies. In the first half of the fifth century this principle was summed up by Vincent of Lérins in his *Notebooks* in a strikingly apt formula that was destined to pervade the entire history of medieval theology. The formula: “Everything, and nothing else, that has been believed everywhere, at all times, and by all” is true and must be acknowledged as such, without unjustified changes or additions. Only such teaching as possesses these characteristics can have a universal value, that is, be “catholic.”

The understanding of this commonly accepted truth can certainly be the subject of further intellectual investigation, both in its form and in its content, but always while respecting the uniformity of the patrimony of tradition. This is to say that in order for any theological progress to be accepted it must be shown to be in harmony with the unanimous teaching of all the Fathers (the principle of the “unanimous consensus of the Fathers”) and with the teaching of the universal ecclesiastical tradition (the principle of the “teaching/teaching office of the church”).

The unanimity of the Christian world must be based, then, on Scripture and on tradition. Medieval theology had its origin in a prolonged response to the need for strengthening this spiritual unity on the basis of revelation, to which were added commentaries and deeper understandings derived from the works of the Fathers. For this reason it is characteristic of medieval literature that it is marked throughout not only by very frequent and recurring verses of Scripture but also by a remarkable harvest of citations—some short, but more often real extracts on the subject—from the works of the Latin and Greek Christian writers of the early centuries. The writings of the Fathers and the texts of conciliar canons (the latter regarded as being in their entirety documents that transmit the “authentic,” that is, authoritative teaching of the Christian theological magisterium) are at times used by medieval authors as confirmations, but more often as the argumentative basis on which their own doctrinal positions are developed. The wisdom of the Fathers is thus accepted, in practice, as a prolongation of revelation and as offering, with the help of a sound use of reason, the first trustworthy explanatory clarification of that revelation.

In order to ensure an appropriate acknowledgment of the authority of the Fathers, there emerged rather quickly the need to establish a patristic canon. This explains the success of the document known as the decree on *Books to be Accepted or Not to be Accepted*, which was attributed to Pope Gelasius I (492–96) but was in fact drawn up some decades later by an anonymous cleric in southern Gaul. It offers an authoritative list of the patristic texts believers should accept as the material supporting the understanding of revelation.

This expansion of the number of fundamental texts that can be used in interpreting religious truth had, however, a further effect. It brought home the urgent need for theologians to formulate a careful judgment on the expressive power of the human words used in revelation itself and by its interpreters in communicating the faith to believers. Even if we prescind from the superimposition of the different linguistic webs brought into play by translations, first Greek and then Latin, of the Bible, there is the natural imperfection of the human language in which the word of God is expressed; this imperfection places limitations on the inexhaustible expressive power of a perfect truth the world cannot contain. The profound meaning of the human discourse God uses in revealing himself, and therefore of every human discourse about God, belongs to a higher order as compared with all the tools used in natural knowledge. This fact intensifies the power of the call to replace theological discourse with a meaningful silence, even though this seems to be a rejection of the human access to revelation that is sought in theological study.

The great medieval success of the body of writings wrongly attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite was promoted first and foremost by the urgent and powerful exhortation that is found on every page of his writings, but especially in his treatise on *The Divine Names*, namely, always to combine the positive language of doctrine with the deep riches of a theology of silence. The latter

looks beyond the particular meaning of the words in which the faith is expressed to a limitless semantic potentiality that is peculiar to revelation.

Throughout the whole of medieval Latin civilization, the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius gave direction to all human desires to speak of God and to speak with God by confronting them with the distinction and yet complementarity between a *positive* or *kataphatic* theology that applies to the divine all the terms that can be derived from biblical language and from tradition, and a *negative* or *apophatic* theology that immediately denies the possibility of such an application and brings any attempt at an understanding of the faith up against the ultimate impenetrability of that which is truth in itself. The dynamics of the two theologies, which constantly refute one another to the point of making nonunderstanding the most effective possible representation of the being of God, lead therefore, in the short but closely argued treatise on *The Mystical Theology*, to the final introduction of the believer into the blinding light of the supreme and most authentic manifestation of the divine. Here only a mystical abandonment allows the soul to lose itself in the best possible acquisition of the truth.

It is important to observe that this combination of positive and negative discourses in the movement to establish a mystical theology reintroduces, in religious terms, the Proclian multiplication of levels of knowledge. From several points of view, then, medieval "sound doctrine" is nourished mainly by an ascensional tension that raises the various powers of the theologian's soul toward the ineffable sublimity of knowledge of the true. The soul can then turn back from these heights, enriched now with information and truth, descend to the dianoetic level of meaningful and descriptive rationality, and achieve organization in expressive forms that are governed by the laws of thought. By means of these forms the theologian can then communicate with the community of believers and teach them what he has learned at a higher and more perfect level.

This theological communication is the foundation on which the construction of Christendom was based. In 827, during the Carolingian period, after political unification had recently laid the foundations for the civic and religious renewal of medieval Christian civilization, Michael II, the Byzantine ruler, sent the gift of a sumptuous codex containing the works of Dionysius to Louis the Pious, the Frankish emperor; the Latins regarded this gift as an act of special sacral value. Hilduin, a monk and abbot of St. Denis, was charged with the first Latin translation; it was now that he invented the legendary identification of the Areopagite convert with "Dionysius," bishop of Paris (d. during the persecution of Decius around the middle of the third century), who gave his name to Hilduin's monastery, in whose library the precious codex was kept.

In this invention, which combined in one individual the philosophical wisdom of the Areopagite intellectual, the theological authority of the body of writings attributed to him, and the merit of having spread Christianity in the several Gauls, we may think we are seeing the first manifestation of the historical self-consciousness of a Christian people who had recently risen out of the destruction

caused by the barbarian invasions. As Virgil had celebrated the divine status of Augustus by singing of his descent from Aeneas, so Hilduin's legend established for the following centuries the bond between the new Carolingian Christendom and the apostolic roots of the universal religion. In so doing it ensured the authenticity and salvific mission of this new Christianity and authorized the work of the intellectuals within it who undertook, in their theological studies, to explain and go more deeply into the contents of revealed truth.

#### *4. The Divine Ordering: The Order of Creation—Essences, Ideas, Numbers, Intelligences*

Two other works in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, influenced the theological outlook of the entire Middle Ages by describing the created universe as an orderly, descending distribution by the Creator of degrees of being. Nine hosts of angels transmit to humanity the inexhaustible truths of the divine secrets; these are received first of all by the bishops, the heads of the earthly hierarchy, and then spread by them, but with an ever increasing scatteredness, to the lower rungs of the priestly ladder. Three "hierarchical operations," entrusted to each intelligence (angelic and then human) in the thus reconstructed cosmic order, control the twofold process of the distribution and then the sacred restoration of being to its divine source. The three are: *purification* (deliverance from polluting contacts with the materiality of the multiple), *illumination* (the activity of cognitive attraction that leads lower degrees toward the beauty of the higher degrees and their greater resemblance to the divine), and *perfection* (the actualization of all creaturely potentialities in the direction of a universal assimilation to and union with God).

Here again the success of the theological thought of Pseudo-Dionysius introduced into the world of Christian thought another Neoplatonic theme: the theory of the hierarchical descent of the multiple from the One, who is the source of the harmonious perfection of the entire created universe. But here, too, Christianity added a new element, borrowed from the faith, to the Neoplatonic conception: the idea of a *creation from nothing*, which was inconceivable to pagan philosophers because of their logical principle that nothing can spring from nothing. This new element opened up for the metaphysics of Christians an unexpected and extremely rich speculative realm that had decisive results for the entire conception of finite reality and its history. In fact, the idea of creation from nothing became for intellectual believers an effective theoretical completion of the derivation of all things from the One, inasmuch as it ensured the unchangeable perfection of the Source in the process of giving rise to the multiple; it did so because the creative act was conceived of as freely posited in a nontemporal instant.

The dependence of the created world on a free divine choice also implied that its derivative existence is neither eternal nor necessary, and allowed thinkers

to regard it as always possible that at a determined moment of history the derivation of effects from the Source could change into a universal return. Christian eschatology thus reinterpreted and brought to perfection the Neoplatonic dialectic of the two phases of descent and conversion as phases of a universal process; that is, not only as phases in the ethico-cognitive order and reserved to the wise, but as really applicable to all the effects of the First Cause. Finally, all this made it possible to surmount dualist temptations and explain the presence of evil in creation as something not really subsisting but rather as a diminution of the divine perfection down through all the levels of derivative being. In other words, everything created from nothing by a good God is really something good, even if imperfectly so.

This optimistic view of the cosmos, which is set forth by Dionysius in the fourth chapter of his *The Divine Names* (where he is drawing on Proclus' *The Existence of Evils*), thus reached the West together with its Plotinian presuppositions, which were disseminated in the work of Augustine. The result was that this same optimism directed the entire history of medieval religious thought.

Thanks, then, to a harmonious convergence of the thought of Augustine and the Areopagite, the relationship between God and his creation yielded a complete *metaphysics of order* that was directly linked to the theological image of the *logos* introduced by the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. In this metaphysics the existence of all creatures is made to depend first on an atemporal act of knowledge in which the Word, the source of creative intelligence, shows them forth eternally in his ideas, which are the eternal models of everything that has been, is, or shall be, and, second, on the act of voluntary love with which the Holy Spirit effectively makes them exist. It is to the formal perfection of this work, which vaguely resembles that of human mathematical knowledge, that reference is made in the words often cited by the medieval theologians and spoken by divine Wisdom, that is, the Word, about himself: "You have ordered all things with measure and number and weight" (Wis 11:21).

On the basis of God's twofold revelation through the prophetic communication of his word (Scripture) and the sapiential ordering of creation (nature), medieval theology would include not only reflection on the sacred texts but also descriptions of the divine ordering of the universe in which the Platonic-intellectualist conception of order and of the eternal ideal exemplars is combined with motifs typical of the eastern religious outlook, such as justice, predestination, providence, divine law, and divine government. The Christian doctrine of *exemplarism* would thus become one of the cornerstones of the western theological thought that would be passed on from the Fathers to the Middle Ages, while gathering contributions down the years from many philosophical and sapiential sources and from the most diverse quarters: from late pagan Platonism to the Byzantine world and to Islamic and Hebrew thought.

In Seneca's fifty-eighth letter to Lucilius the author presents the Platonic doctrine of the ideas to the Latin cultural world; he describes their hierarchical

descent from the most universal substance, through an organized succession of genera and species (that is, extensions of reality that are immutable but also increasingly circumscribed and limited), to the production of multiple individuals that are subject to chance and change. Porphyry of Tyre, a direct disciple of Plotinus, then schematized the doctrine in a slender little work of introduction of Aristotelean logic, appropriately titled *Isagoge* (“Introduction”). This work, which was spread far and wide in the Middle Ages as a preface to the *Organon*, outlined the formal structure of this metaphysical descent of the real, describing its ramification into genera and species not only in the area of substance but in each of the ten categories. Modern authors describe this pattern as “Porphyry’s tree”; it helped to impress on the western theological mind the idea of a double ladder, ascending and descending, to be seen in the derivation of being from God.

In the fourth century Chalcidius, a Spanish philosopher and probably a convert to Christianity, translated the first part of the *Timaeus* into Latin and commented on it, following the Porphyrian outline. Thanks to his commentary this dialogue of Plato, the only one widely known in a Latin translation in the Middle Ages, ensured the Christian world the possession of a complete cosmological vision that could serve as a suitable support for the metaphysical doctrine of order. The three Platonic principles—the demiurge, the exemplars, and matter—became the three familiar foundations of Christian metaphysics: God the Father, the *logos*, and creatures. The divine government ensured by Plato’s universal lifegiving soul became the universal lifegiving presence of the Holy Spirit.

From the divine ideas spring the lower forms (species or innate forms), which combine with matter to give rise to individuals. The mechanism of the four primordial elements (water, air, earth, and fire) and of the combinations of their respective qualities (hot, cold, humid, dry), which in Plato explain the organization of visible changes, is inserted into the tissue of creation as woven by divine providence. The natural knowableness of the cosmic order invites intelligent beings to traverse the pyramidal structure of reality in the reverse direction, to the point of recovering through true knowledge (which rises above the lower forms) a direct understanding of the divine ideas.

A few years later Macrobius, a pagan scholar, composed his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, another work destined to become widely known in the Middle Ages as a vehicle of the theological idea of order. This was a commentary on the concluding section of Cicero’s *On the State*, which reported a metaphysical dream of the young Scipio on universal metempsychosis. Macrobius saw the course of this dream as a paradigm of the lot of the individual soul, which loses an original perfection of knowledge and then rises to the contemplation of the universal source of the cosmos and its laws, this through an asceticism that purifies the intellect as it knows and studies the organization of nature.

At a later date Arabic Neoplatonism (and, in particular, the cosmological-metaphysical teaching of Avicenna) and the Jewish Platonism of Avicbron

helped to enrich in various ways this complex, systematic description of the cosmic order. Within the shared Christian theology of history they strengthened the synthesis of those doctrines that have been described, in an especially penetrating phrase, as the “connected Platonisms” of medieval thought. Thus on the common foundation of the doctrine of the divine ordering all the successive proposals for constructing a Christian ontology, physics, metaphysics, psychology, and gnoseology developed the various forms of a single synthesis of Revelation and knowledge. In this synthesis the story of the six days of creation (the *Hexaemeron*) was reconciled and fused with the organization of reality as told in the *Timaeus*.

##### 5. *Christian Instruction: The Two Libraries: Human Literature and Divine Literature*

The new philosophico-theological program that marked Christian wisdom from the post-Constantinian period onward was based, then, on the parallel development of understanding of the revealed data, on the one hand, and of the study of natural phenomena, on the other. Both activities were aimed at human knowledge of God: in the first instance on the basis of the self-revelation of the mystery and, in the second, through understanding of the order imposed on the universe by divine Providence. These two lines of study, which correspond to the concepts of Scripture and nature, obviously had to be supported down the centuries by an appropriate set of cognitive tools that were adapted to the differing specific needs of each study but were also not exempt from reciprocal interactions.

The understanding of the content of Scripture was subordinated, before all else, to the canon of biblical books accepted as inspired, and then to the interpretations of the Fathers that were authorized by the ecclesiastical magisterium. In contrast, the reading of nature depended on the exercise of scientific skills which over time human reason had organized into a series of principles, respect for which made it possible, in the various fields, to reconstruct the creaturely order established by the divine intelligence. But the complementarity of reason and faith also established necessary interconnections between these two types of study; that is, a correct biblical exegesis could not but observe the rules of the sciences of nature, while the natural disciplines could not but subordinate the results of their researches to a final control by faith, the ultimate rule or standard of their truthfulness.

According to a charming image used by Virgilius Grammaticus, Christian intellectuals should therefore assign the documentation for their wisdom to two libraries, consisting of the texts of the masters of ancient science and philosophy and those of the “Christian philosophers” (that is, the Bible and the Fathers). They will then have available a complete set of the documents needed for their study of the truth. (“Virgilius Grammaticus” was an anonymous scholar who

lived in a Romano-barbarian region in the seventh-eighth centuries and was falsely identified with the author of the *Aeneid*.) Cassiodorus was obeying the same ideal principle when at the beginning of the sixth century he organized his *Institutes*, a handbook explaining the essentials of Christian wisdom, into two parallel series of short systematic treatises, devoted respectively to the science of revelation (*Institutes of Divine Literature*) and the science of nature (*Institutes of Human or Secular Literature*).

Relying on the solid support of these two libraries, medieval theological study would have the character of a structured investigation into the specific realm of knowledge provided by the Scriptures, but an investigation supported by the recognized authorities in the various fields of research and rendered orderly by respect for the procedural standards carefully defined in the works of those authorities. This made it possible to compile the knowledge gained in the form of an *institutio* or “established practice” (a term derived from late Latin juridical language); this was done first, even before Cassiodorus, by Lactantius (author of a collection of *Divine Institutes*). What was meant was a summary *handbook* or *manual* (*promptuarium*) of theological wisdom that had a formal organization and was complete in its contents as a result of combining the reading of Scripture with the results of investigation carried on over the centuries by scientific and philosophical reason.

The curriculum of secular studies generally followed in the late imperial period and inherited by the Christian Middle Ages had long since been divided, for ease in teaching and to ensure the completeness of the educational program, into a set number of arts or disciplines. The first systematization of this program probably went back to the lost *Books on the Disciplines* of Varro. Augustine, who planned a never-completed set of manuals of his own, is the first witness to the future agreement on seven different areas of study: the seven arts known as *liberal* (reserved to persons “free” of material necessities). These were arranged in an ascending order that made it possible to move from the understanding of visible realities to an understanding of invisible realities; at the summit, therefore, was the definitive acquisition of philosophy.

The seven were soon divided into two general areas of knowledge: the first, consisting of three disciplines, had for its purpose the regulating of human language and its ability to express the truth; the second, consisting of four disciplines, was aimed at a strictly quantitative (more exactly, qualitative) description of the inner structure of the visible world. Both sectors, the linguistic and the mathematical, ensured so accurate an identification of formal principles that they could be accepted by the human mind as a satisfactory explanation of the divine law that sustains the universal orderly arrangement of creatures. Beginning in the early Middle Ages and on the basis of a suggestion by Boethius it became customary to give the name *quadrivium* to the educational process conducted by the four mathematical disciplines; only later was the name *trivium* given to the first three disciplines.

The first of the “arts of speaking” was *grammar*, which not only described the principles of Latin morphology but also brought out the linguistic bases that assured the completeness of meaningful utterances. To *logic* or *dialectic* (to use the term widely employed in late antiquity and accepted by the Middle Ages) was reserved a fundamental role in the scientific formation of the wise person: as a true “wellspring of knowledge,” this discipline made it possible to distinguish the true from the false, to describe all the conceptual contents of the mind, and to make thought flow from idea through argumentation. Logic merited being called the “art governing all the arts” (*ars artium*) and the “discipline governing all the disciplines” because its rightful task was to set down the rules that had to be respected by any science claiming to be true. The task of *rhetoric*, finally, was to teach how to induce a hearer (or reader) to accept or reject the contents of a teaching; it did so through the study of the formal elements that make human utterances more persuasive and therefore capable also of influencing people’s ethical choices and the practice of virtue.

As sciences of quantities and of the numbers that describe them, the arts of the *quadrivium* acquired in the Middle Ages the function that physics had in ancient wisdom, namely, to describe the elements of the cosmic order and their harmony as actuations of the divine model from which they derived. *Arithmetic* studied numbers as such, with their possible combinations; *geometry* studied number as extended in space and also went on to the measurement of the terrestrial sphere and to geography; *music*, understood as a theoretical study of the successive relationships among sounds, studied number in relation to time; finally, *astronomy* considered numbers as arranged in space and time, that is, in motion, but with reference exclusively to the only moved reality that is eternally identical with itself and therefore scientifically exact, namely, the perfectly circular movement of the heavenly bodies.

The explanation of the contents proper to each liberal discipline was based on the teaching of one or two classical authors who were the first students of the discipline or even its founders. These were Donatus and Priscian for grammar, Aristotle for dialectic, Cicero for rhetoric, Euclid for geometry, and so on. The need, however, to summarize their works in a form more useful for teaching brought about the insertion into liberal studies of many syntheses, sometimes devoted to a single discipline, sometimes conceived as a series of compendia that brought all the essential principles together in a complete encyclopedia.

This second category included the succinct explanations of the liberal arts by Cassiodorus in his *Institutes* and later, in imitation of Cassiodorus, by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* and by Alcuin in his handbooks. Especially, however, it was this approach that ensured the success of Martianus Capella (a not further identifiable African writer of the fifth century) and his work *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. Without exaggeration, this can be called one of the ancient texts most widely circulated and read by every educated person in the early medieval centuries. It is a complete manual in nine books, modeled on

Varro, that summarizes in full the scope of each of the seven disciplines; the latter are personified here and invited, one at a time, to be present at a meeting of the Olympian gods as bridesmaids at the marriage of the god Mercury and a human virgin, Philology.

This introductory setting, described in the first two books of the work, has a complex symbolism alluding to the union between the divine Intellect, which is responsible for the order of the cosmos, and the human mind, which studies this order. This fact allowed Christian writers to accept the external pagan guise, especially because the assumption of Philology among the deities (at the end of the explanation of the seven disciplines, books three to nine) reflected perfectly the Christian conception of the propaedeutic function of the human arts in relation to theological wisdom.

These foundational texts served as the basis for the development of the gloss, which characterized the entire medieval period. A gloss was an annotated commentary that made the texts more accessible to the reader; it took the form either of more or less extensive marginal notes or of a continuous commentary guiding the reader. Text thus sprang from text, and commentary sometimes accompanied the work to which it referred; sometimes, however, it replaced the work as a means of teaching and became itself the subject of teaching and commentary. Thus the scientific methodology of the Middle Ages acquired an ever more fruitful ability to systematize a unified body of knowledge that brought the seven arts together using one and same methodology and that in the end came to be identified with philosophy as a whole. The arts thus supported and even produced philosophy, and, since philosophy was subordinated to theological knowledge, they nourished the true philosophy that was born of the synthesis of faith and reason.

The rules governing the arts were essential for theological knowledge because, first and foremost, they made it possible to understand the language of the biblical text, which is made up of human words, consists of logical and rhetorical discourses, and makes continual references to numbers and to the order of the visible world. In addition, these rules enabled the created intellect to ascend from the organization of the natural world to the world of changelessness and thus to the divine and to the primordial logical and numerical essences, that is, to the very forms and ideas in divine Wisdom that preside over creation. According to an idea found in the second book of Augustine's *Teaching Christianity* and often cited by medieval writers, the sages of the past who "invented" the arts did not base these on one or another convention and thus imprison them in the formal interlocking categories of the mind; rather, in keeping with the authentic meaning of *invenire*, that is, to "find" or "discover," those sages recognized the rules at work in nature, where they existed as traces of the higher, divine ordering mind.

There is a fine example of this integration of philosophy and faith in the fact that, beginning with Cassiodorus, countless medieval writers made an allegorical

identification of the arts with the seven pillars supporting Solomon's temple of Wisdom (Prov 9:1). In this perspective the human intellect anticipates and supports divine truth but must not presume that it can replace it. Augustine never tires of warning his readers that even when natural science disposes the human mind for the attainment of necessary items of knowledge, all of its certainties always spring from its participation in the divine Intellect, a participation that comes, either directly within the soul or in some mediated fashion, through contemplation of the perfection of the created world.

In Augustine's view, then, whenever the soul draws near to immutable truth, this is to be explained as a result of an *illumination*, which occurs every time the soul discovers within itself the perfection of the inherently intelligible, of that which is separated from everything sensible and is free of any accidental change whatsoever. This happy Augustinian metaphor of the divine light that shows itself in knowledge came to be combined with the Pseudo-Dionysian theory of illumination as a hierarchic operation. The result was to introduce into Christian speculation the Platonic doctrine of remembrance, even while rejecting the need to accept a preexistence of the soul before the body. Moreover, since alongside a supernatural illumination produced by a special intervention of grace there is always possible a natural illumination brought about by mental operations working with a correct development of empirical data, it is clear that this second form of true knowledge is precisely what is achieved through the study and application of the liberal arts.

Theological knowledge, then, based as it is on a synthesis of rational and revealed knowledge, springs from the convergence of intellectual light and the light of grace. This explains why the people of the Middle Ages thought it indispensable to submit even the textual inheritance that produced the knowledge of things divine (the patrimony, that is, of Scripture and the works of the Church Fathers) to the same kind of systematization and analysis that was applied to the classical and late antique writers who supplied the teachings contained in the liberal arts.

Furthermore, even the teaching of the Fathers, especially in their role as interpreters of revelation, came to be anthologized and then abridged in summarizing treatises. Here again the extensive production of annotated commentaries, both on Scripture and on its commentators, multiplied and made more complex the several levels of reading. Thus the analysis of the sacred text was always accompanied by a selective reworking of readings from the Fathers; the latter, in turn, were artificially linked among themselves to the point of producing a continuous reading of all the biblical books, from Genesis to Revelation.

In addition, over the centuries there developed alongside the liberal arts, though with a lesser degree of systematization, treatises on the "theological" arts (sacred rhetoric, symbolic arithmetic, and numerology), handbooks on exegetical methods, and lists of liturgical symbols. Finally, with the progressive development of medieval epistemology (that is, from the twelfth century on)

we see the emergence of a true methodology of the knowledge of faith; that is, a normative meditation on the methods and procedures of theological reflection. Only at this point, as it spread throughout the medieval schools, did this reflection acquire the name of *theology*.

Christian theological wisdom had come into being during the patristic period as a result of an initial grafting onto the trunk of philosophical rationality. Now, slowly but steadily advancing through the medieval centuries, this wisdom became a distinct reality and took on the forms proper to an autonomous area of study, one endowed not only with a specific subject matter ("subject" was the term the Scholastics would use) but also with its own scientific status and method.

This growth would follow diverse and sometimes opposite courses depending on the many levels on which meditation on sacred Scripture would develop: the logico-descriptive, argumentative level with its definitions and deductions; the level of interior affective and meditative spirituality that was supported by the individual's life of prayer, by the representational power of language, and by the almost litanic repetitions of the truths of the faith; the level of artistic and poetic, verbal, and visual expression that addressed the psychological self by means of technical virtuosités and by stirring the emotions; the symbolic level, at which the images emerging from the biblical text were studied, intensified, and enriched with further meanings that constantly referred to one another. These and other possible courses, and the various structures that developed within them, were not strictly distinct among themselves. They could coexist and be simultaneously present even in exponents of one and the same current of thought, in the works of one and the same author, and even within a single text. The reason: all the writers were aiming, even in different ways, at a common development of a complex cognitive system that, because of its higher origin, was inexhaustible and could not be rigidified into a single formal schema.

It seems, then, that the parallelism of the two libraries, viewed specifically from the theoretico-cultural point of view, is one of the many forms of recurring dualism (this, too, originally Platonic) that were typical of medieval Christianity. There were the dualisms of the spiritual and the physical, soul and body, being (immutable, formal, universal, and eternal) and matter, the city of God and the city of humanity. The orientation of Christianity to goals not of this world (an orientation that from the beginning had annoyed paganism, as can be seen from Celsus's critique addressed to Origen) did not exclude a productive confrontation with the political and intellectual past of the civilization that had accepted and allowed the spread of Christianity. But in this confrontation Christianity demanded that this past be retrieved and justified within a perspective directed to an eschatological future: in other words, a perspective that looked ahead, within history, both to the establishment of a better society based on participation in a supernatural truth and to the assertion of the superiority of theological truth over the scientific truth that supported theology, as well as of faith over

reason, the inwardness of the spirit over the outward garb of the letter, and the soul over the flesh.

6. *The Ages of the World: The Temporal Boundaries of the Theological Middle Ages: Problems of Periodization and Methodology*

The invented story of Pseudo-Dionysius as first a pagan philosopher and then a theologian, missionary, bishop, and martyr was only one of the many tesserae in a mosaic of narratives that runs through the history of the medieval world. The purpose of all these stories was to show the continuity between, on the one hand, the ancient roots that fed Christian civilization at its birth, along with the institutional structure that supported it, and, on the other, its animating intellectual life. The universality and uniformity marking the common acceptance of one and the same faith were in practice a distinguishing sign and identifying criterion of the society that arose in Europe from the ashes of the Roman empire. It is therefore legitimate to set specific temporal boundaries for the entire period in which those characteristics remained dominant in the area that saw the spread of Christianity.

Whether or not it is appropriate to continue giving this period the name “Middle Ages” is a purely secondary issue. It does not call into question either the substantial unity of a set of civic, social, economic, and cultural conditions or the suitability of summing these up, for easier study, as a single historiographical period and under a single name. On the other hand, it is obvious that (while prescind from the name given) the retention of this historical category, which implies a strong reference to the politico-religious unity of the western civilization that continued without important breaks for about ten centuries, is especially successful and fruitful from the specific perspective of the history of theological thought, this at the levels of both research and teaching.

After being formulated for the first time by a Christian, Melito of Sardis, in his *Apologia* to Marcus Aurelius, the ideal identification of religious unity and civil society runs through the whole of medieval civilization. Even after the lengthy crisis of the Avignon Captivity of the papacy and the Western Schism, the ideal lost its unifying power only with the eruption of the Protestant Reform and the irremediable loss of universal agreement. From Constantine to Charles V of Habsburg, from the Council of Nicaea to that of Trent, from the agreement (or edict) of Milan (313 C.E.), which paved the way for the Christian pacification of the ancient Roman empire by guaranteeing freedom of worship to Christians, to the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which marked the definitive end of religious harmony or agreement by granting confessional autonomy to the Protestant countries—throughout this entire period the whole of “medieval” theological thought was always subordinated to a single fundamental principle. That principle was the universal acceptance by the entire Christian body politic of the divine truth that exists (as St. Paul puts it) in the changeless reality of the “ages

of eternity” and manifests itself in the course of the temporal vicissitudes of the earthly city, or of the “ages of the world,” with their fortuitousness, their rises and falls, their uncertainties and dependence on conditions.

The history of medieval theological civilization lasted as long as the spiritual and intellectual activities that constituted it were directed by this mental paradigm. Consequently, the traditional, conventional dates accepted by historians for the beginning and end of the Middle Ages do not take sufficient account of the development described. Rather than in 476, the year in which Odoacer, the barbarian, returned the insignia of the western empire to Zeno, emperor of the East, the process creating Christian civilization began with the writing of Paul’s letters and of the Fourth Gospel and can be considered to have been completed at the beginning of Constantine’s Christian empire, that is, in the year of the Edict of Milan or else the year of the Council of Nicaea (325).

In like manner, it is not so much the discovery of the Americas in 1492 as it is the conciliar canons of Constance (1414–1418) and Basel (1431–1439), or even the convocation of the Council of Trent (1545) that should be taken as marking the coming of a new consciousness in the Christian world. In other words, the end of the Middle Ages came when account had to be taken of the irremediable politico-religious ruptures that caused the collapse of the very idea of an identification of human civilization and the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, it seems necessary to distinguish phases and periods within this single protracted unfolding of “medieval” theological history under the influence of a generally accepted and constantly used fundamental speculative paradigm. The distinction is required in particular when we consider the revolutionary results of the introduction of Greco-Arabic thought into the West in the final decades of the twelfth century and the first decades of the thirteenth. In medieval intellectual history this phenomenon can be regarded as the dividing point between the *early* and the *late Middle Ages*. In addition, however, within each of these two major phases it is possible to discern a sequence of periods corresponding to the various forms of growth and development.

In the early Middle Ages several periods may be distinguished. After the collapse of the western empire there is the period of slow cultural revival in the Romano-barbarian kingdoms from the sixth century to the halt of Islamic penetration into Europe at the battle of Poitiers (732). Then there is the intellectual flowering of the Carolingian world in the eighth and ninth centuries, followed by a new decline that reflected the crisis in the socio-political system in the tenth and eleventh centuries and continued down to the rise of the national kingdoms and the strengthening of the imperial system in the Germanic world. Finally, there is the age of ecclesiastical reform and the investiture struggle leading to the Concordat of Worms (1122), with that age’s revival of dedication to theological clarification and spiritual pacification, culminating in the great effort at restoring the Christian self-consciousness that lay behind the undertaking of the first Crusade (1096).

In the middle, between the early and the late Middle Ages, there is the so-called “renaissance of the twelfth century,” with its revival of urbanization and the emergence of the episcopal schools at the major cathedrals. There follows an intermediate phase (coextensive, more or less, with the reign of Philip II Augustus in France, 1165–1223), which saw an important development of theological methodology and the discovery of Greco-Arabic and Hebraic wisdom.

At this point there began the development of the “scholastic” Middle Ages in the strict sense: the rise of the universities (Paris in particular, with the approval of its first statutes in 1215) and the first stage in the teaching of the masters of theology and the systematization of their thought. This continued until the convocation of the second ecumenical Council of Lyons (1274). The latter event was marked by the disappearance from the scene of the two leading figures in the theological flowering of the Mendicant Orders: Thomas and Bonaventure. There followed a lively thirty-year period of settling down, marked by discussions, changes of opinion, and new systematic proposals; this period ran from the controversies over official censures passed on theological Aristoteleanism (1277) to the confirmation of the doctrine of the soul as form of the body in the canons of the ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311–1312).

Finally, there was the period of the Avignon papacy and the ensuing Western Schism, leading to the Councils of Constance and Basel. This period saw a slowly developing crisis in university methods, the first proposals for a reform of studies, and a deepening of individual religious experience. The leading figures in the implementation of this last would be the scholars active in the period of the humanistic rebirth of theology down to the Council of Trent.

This division of periods and historical settings, which takes into account parallel (but not always coextensive) periodizations used by historians of politics, society, and economics, is evidently a pragmatic one. With some historiographical objectivity, the division reflects the development of the typical cultural factors that had the strongest influence on intellectual life. In any case, the location of the birth and development of theological doctrines within a single frame of reference allows us to see the theoretical importance of this framework inasmuch as it places thought in a closer real relationship with the actual demands and competencies that direct the thinking of a given author.

A further factor of importance for the historiographical assessment of medieval thought is language. The common use of Latin in the schools of the West and the influence of the Vulgate version of the Bible on the language and thinking of all western authors evidently determined the shape of the philosophical and theological literature of these centuries. Failure to take account of this conditioning factor would bring the risk of adulterating and often even falsifying the authentic meaning of a text (or even simply of an argument or a formula).

The history of theology in the medieval centuries must therefore be pursued with constant attention to its context, that is, to its historico-cultural coordinates and the temporal conditions that guided the approach to and content of the various

speculative proposals set forth in theology. Throughout the development of this history it will thus be possible to see how different modes and worlds of thought spring from a shared speculative paradigm, namely, the constant correlation of reason and faith, which exercised a determining influence on all the speculation of the medieval centuries.

### **Endnote**

1. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987) 266.

## Chapter 1

# From the Roman World to the Christian World: The Collapse and Rebirth of the Christian Empire of the West

### I. The Theology of the “Founders”

In the second half of the fifth century, a few decades before the final dissolution of the western Roman empire, Salvian of Marseilles, a Spanish scholar and enthusiastic reader of Augustine, wrote a treatise on *The Government of God*. His purpose was to prove that, despite the dramatic signs of the crisis overwhelming human society, no one could deny that the whole of creation is subject to the immutable order decreed by Providence. Indeed, if the decay of social and political structures is a consequence of the immorality of the human beings who established them, this is in any case a confirmation of God’s government and justice. In addition, if the providential perfection of the cosmos were denied, what motivation would be left for the irrepressible human aspiration for happiness?

The beginnings of medieval theological reflection are marked by similar exhortations not to abandon the ultimate spiritual certainties in an uncertain world lit by apocalyptic lightnings. The settlement of the barbarian populations in lands that had once been flourishing provinces of the empire and the artificial rise of feeble kingdoms controlled by their mercenary leaders were the final outcome of the political decay that had for centuries been eating away at the institutional unity of Roman civilization. But even though the maximum degree of civilizational disintegration had been reached, due to the unifying impulses still springing from its cultural and religious roots this fragmented world was still traversed by a tenacious ideological aspiration to preserve social cohesion and spiritual unity. In fact, the new barbarian rulers themselves did not take over the ancient institutions in order to replace them; rather, they even asked that

they be given room to settle within the solid embrace of the existing order so that they too might be nourished by the life-giving sap that had for centuries sustained it.

When Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustus in 476 he did not have himself crowned emperor, but symbolically restored the trappings of the western empire to Zeno, the eastern emperor, whom even the barbarians, despite their remoteness, acknowledged as legitimate heir and continuer of the ancient tradition. In addition, although the conquerors were chiefly Arians, once the respective kingdoms had been firmly established their rulers slowly led the various ethnic groups toward conversion to Roman Christianity; this would confirm their acquired integration into the tradition of "Romanness," to which, decade after decade, all sought to gain entry.

King Clovis and the Salian Franks, who occupied northern Gaul, were converted as early as 496. The Christianization of the Visigoths, who ruled in Spain, would be slower but would be sanctioned by Recared at the third Council of Toledo in 589. Theodoric, who deposed Odoacer and settled the Arian Ostrogoths in Italy, was not himself converted but, as early as 493, did initiate a policy of rebuilding his own kingdom on the basis of a religious peace with the Latins and the eastern empire. He also fostered a mutual institutional acceptance among the new kingdoms by pursuing a policy of dynastic marriages. On the same lines, with the support of a submissive senatorial aristocracy, he began the cultural Romanization of the new world he had built; he made Ravenna a center of Romano-Greek culture and art, and at his court he fostered a flowering of literary and philosophical studies in Latin.

The Romano-barbarian world thus arose from a fusion, solid even if artificial, of religion, culture, and political power that laid the foundations of a new and at the same time ancient idea of civilization. The new reality possessed an internal power of growth and continuity that enabled it, two centuries later, to stand up to the advance of the new Islamic conquerors and win an unlikely victory at Poitiers in 732 under the Frankish leader, Charles Martel. Throughout this slow and laborious process of reconstruction an obvious unifying role was played both by the desire to become heirs of the juridical and cultural Roman tradition and by the sharing of a common religion. The rulers of the Romano-barbarian kingdoms tried in various ways to find legitimacy for their role by claiming fanciful historical roots and even descent from Greek or Trojan heroes. Meanwhile, the Latins continued to shoulder the task of supporting and unifying this new framework by a renewed literary, religious, and philosophical production.

There was indeed a succession of new wars connected with settlement, the most ferocious of which, the Greco-Gothic conflict following the death of Theodoric in 526, was neither the first nor the last. There were also new invasions, among which that of the Lombards into Italy beginning in 568 was marked by special cruelty. But during these same decades there was no lack of active think-

ers belonging to both the church and the Roman nobility; against that very turbulent background these men began and continued, by means of translations and manuals, the first concrete efforts to preserve or recover the ancient cultural and religious patrimony.

It has been suggested that all of those authors, or at least the most important among them, be given the collective title of “founders of the Middle Ages.” It is true, of course, that in addition to Boethius not only Cassiodorus, Isidore, and Gregory the Great but perhaps even other “lesser” writers might aspire to share with the author of the *Consolation* the title “last of the Romans and first of the Scholastics” (which a multitude of historians have agreed to reserve to Boethius) or other showy descriptions suitable for distinguishing them as leading figures at a decisive moment of passage between two eras. Nevertheless, the historical effectiveness of their work can be correctly understood only when that work is closely connected with the historical conditions in which the authors lived. Only this accurate perspective makes it possible to judge satisfactorily the degree to which they anticipated a not easily foreseeable future.

These leading figures who mediated the Latin cultural tradition from antiquity to the Middle Ages were all connected, directly or indirectly, with religious life or ecclesiastical institutions. They may have been priests or bishops who for catechetical or pastoral reasons planned an education of the Christian people. But they may also have been laypersons who, as in the case of Boethius, were closely involved in the political and theoretical strengthening of institutions, including religious ones. Or again, and with increasing frequency, they may have been monks who directed their use and preservation of documents of the past toward a deepened spirituality. In view of all this we should not be surprised by the predominantly religious character of the greater part of their original works; the aims, methods, and perspectives adopted were obviously influenced to a perceptible degree by the still-recent model of the Fathers of the church.

Initially, inspired by their devotion as followers, these writers often saw their task as one simply of compiling the opinions of the great teachers. This was true especially with reference to Augustine, as can be seen in the case of Prosper of Aquitaine, a layman (d. after 455), who collected in summary form a series of *Theses Gleaned from the Works of Augustine*.

Others, for their part, began attempts at a summary systematization of the thought of the Fathers. One such was John Cassian, a monk at Marseilles in the first half of the fifth century, whose *Conferences on the Fathers* presented moral examples and ethical teachings from the greatest masters of eastern and western monasticism. Likewise at Marseilles and in the still lively intellectual environment of southern Gaul there was Gennadius, a priest (d. between 492 and 505), who wrote a continuation of Jerome’s *Famous Men*, adding the names and works of fifth-century writers. He also composed a lengthy *Answer to All the Heresies* in eight books, but only the final section has survived, a succinct summary of dogmas.

In contrast to these writers, Claudian Mamertus of Vienne (d. 474) directed his attention to Christian anthropology and in his *Condition of the Soul* provided a synthesis of Platonic-Pythagorean psychology, but one Christianized in the light of Augustine. In the early centuries of the Middle Ages this work helped spread the idea of the soul as an invisible, individual substance that is joined to the body but is free of matter and not subject to accidental changes.

The Italian area saw the emergence of new summaries of patristic theology, inspired by catechetico-pastoral concerns, in the collected *Homilies* of Peter Chrysologus, archbishop of Ravenna (d. 450), and Maximus, bishop of Turin (d. after 465). The order of the sermons suggests that they were intended as a continuous commentary on the official list of principal liturgical feasts.

In the time of Theodoric, Magnus Felix Ennodius, bishop of Pavia (d. 521), compiled a manual titled *Exhortation to Instruction* as a guide for religious in their acquisition of the rhetorical and scientific knowledge needed by any highly educated person. In fact, during this period it was the bishops who were the most determined, through effective action in the religious sphere, to keep alive the sense of belonging to a common civilization, which, given their Christian hope, they refused to admit had disappeared. Evidence of this is the lofty inspiration (always dependent on patristic sources) to be found in the sermons and theological treatises of Caesarius of Arles (d. 542). Further evidence is the ability shown in the work of Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. ca. 533) to compress the catechetical tradition of the past into effective compendia (such as the *Rule of Faith*) in order to hold back the spread of Arianism in Vandal-controlled Africa.

Toward the end of the sixth century, in the *History of the Franks* of Gregory, bishop of Tours, there appears, perhaps for the first time, the idea that the hand-over of power from the Romans to the barbarians was legitimate because willed by divine Providence.

System and organic development marked these first attempts to find in the recovery of the patristic tradition the basis for the rebirth of historical consciousness in a people still united and called upon to build on earth a kingdom guided by principles of a higher order. These same characteristics increased considerably in the work of the few Latin writers of the sixth and seventh centuries and did so in inverse proportion to the worsening of social and political conditions in the Christian West. Moreover, it is properly to these isolated exceptional personalities who, because of their intellectual stature and their abilities as compilers, stood out in the desolate cultural landscape of the time, that the image of *founders* seems to apply best. And it is perhaps correct so to apply it, even if in fact, with the exception of Boethius, their task seems to have been primarily that of preparing for and foreshadowing future developments in medieval Christian religious thought and leading up to them. In an image drawn from classical archaeology and not unsuited to this landscape of excavations among the ruins, we might describe these men as “vestibules” whose isolated but already imposing majesty leads the visitor on to the monuments on the acropolis, monuments that were now beginning to be planned and built.

### 1. Boethius and Wisdom

The program of work that only a premature death (execution under Theodoric in ca. 524/25) prevented Roman nobleman Manlius Anicius Severinus Boethius from completing was certainly an ambitious one. His aim was to recover and organize the entire philosophical patrimony of antiquity and to set forth its contents in Latin in a systematic fashion, beginning with the principles of logic and arithmetic and moving on to the highest metaphysical and theological truths. In his second commentary on Aristotle's *Hermeneutics* he spoke of how he intended to implement this program: he would translate, and provide with an analytical commentary, all the works of Plato and Aristotle, in order to demonstrate by a correct interpretation of them that, contrary to what most people believed, the thought of these two founders of classical philosophy was marked by a basic and undeniable agreement.

It is a well-known fact that on the subject of reconciling Plato and Aristotle, Boethius had illustrious predecessors in Platonic circles in Alexandria and Rome (Cicero tells us this) and then, and especially, among the Neoplatonists and Christians influenced by Neoplatonism (down to and including Augustine). But we are given the impression that when Boethius took up the subject once again as both a pledge and, at the same time, a supporting framework of an entire plan for recovering and systematizing human philosophy, he was justifying the deeper meaning of this cultural undertaking. That is, he was ensuring that the ancient world, mortally stricken by historical circumstances, would be guaranteed the inalienable possession of a unified and certain body of knowledge that places human beings in a position of undeniable privilege in relation to all other created beings because it allows them to enter into dialogue with the divine Intelligence itself.

This wisdom is precisely what is incarnated in the feminine figure who, in the poetic story told in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, appeared to Boethius in a prison, perhaps not far from Pavia. There he was spending his final days as a victim of the bloody crackdown on the Roman senate that defiled the end of Theodoric's reign in Italy.

As Boethius approached death he was disappointed by the failure of all his plans, embittered by unjust accusations, and depressed by the realization of the unbroken victory of the wicked over the good; all human aspirations and desires now seemed unattainable and empty. A prisoner and ill in mind more than in body, he abandoned himself to the melancholic laments of the Muses, who were present with him, but these could not console him. For it was not the lifeless complaints of poetry but only the solid formation of a sufficient knowledge of truth that could enable the human mind to grasp the real meaning of the invisible order that supports and justifies every event.

For this reason, when Philosophy herself comes in turn into Boethius' cell, her first act is a vigorous dismissal of those false consolers. Then she sits down beside her former pupil and begins with him a lengthy dialogue whose sole

purpose is to help him regain an authentic understanding of truth. If this task was to be fulfilled it was necessary that the wisdom that approaches the seeker of truth in order to lead him to the goal of his quest should be not a philosophy among others, that of one master as opposed to that of others, but only the one *true* Philosophy. This was precisely the philosophy of Socrates and the sages before him, such as Parmenides and Anaxagoras, who prepared for his coming, and then of his disciples, Plato and Aristotle, who agreed among themselves.

The diversified written works that preceded the composition of the *Consolation* were mature works, laudable in their literary density, and following the classical model of the *prosimetrum* with its regular succession of poetry and prose. They document the author's lengthy journey as he pursued his plan of a complete and organized exposition of human knowledge. There were two youthful works on the disciplines of the quadrivium: *The Teaching of Arithmetic* and *The Teaching of Music*. These are in fact paraphrases of similar treatises by Nicomachus of Gerasa, a Neopythagorean (1st–2nd century C.E.). But, despite their evident lack of any great originality, they show how the attainment of truth must be first of all the result, in the various areas of knowledge, of diverse routes followed with methodological rigor by each scientific discipline worthy of the name.

More specifically, as is explicitly stated in the introduction to the work on arithmetic, true wisdom consists in the knowledge of immutable realities that alone deserve to be said to “exist” in the full sense of the word. The individual sciences or disciplines describe the various courses that enable the mind to draw near to these invisible truths by leading it from the world of accidental and corporeal change to the world of eternal forms or prime essences. In particular, the four disciplines of the quadrivium describe the ways in which those essences make themselves known in accordance with the various manifestations of quantity (discrete or continuous, regarded in itself or in something else).

But the same approach marks the works Boethius devoted to logic: the translation of the works in Aristotle's *Organon*, the commentaries on these (sometimes in two versions: a more literal and a more penetrating), and then some original monographs on the syllogism and on argumentation. At this point we should recall how these texts—even though they were the only completed part of Boethius' plan to mediate the whole of ancient Aristoteleanism and Platonism—were to have an incalculable influence in the history of logic and therefore in the history also of the philosophy and theology of the entire Middle Ages.

The importance, moreover, of Boethius' works on logic can be seen not only in their extent but also, on the strictly epistemological level, in the fact that they furnish a synthesis of teachings coming not only from the *Organon* but also from both Stoic and Neoplatonic logic. As a result, the entire systematic discipline Boethius passed on to subsequent centuries can be seen as a unified structure in which are interwoven and thoroughly harmonized all the formal

instruments developed by the various ancient schools and currents of thought for the purpose of enabling reason to organize and control the possible reflections of the prime essences in human discourse and thought.

The idea of true knowledge as an ascent from sensible appearances to immutable eternal principles also led Boethius to face the question of the reality of those forms or essences. He thereby also introduced into medieval culture basic philosophical ideas on the nature of what would later on, in the twelfth century, be called “universals.” When dealing with the universals in the writings on logic he did indeed take the Aristotelean doctrinal position (the universals are present in individual things, determining their mode of existing and their knowableness); in these works he was, after all, expounding the doctrine of logical predicables according to the teaching of Aristotle. But from Boethian texts on mathematics there emerges a much more essentialist and exemplarist view of the prime essences, one that is Platonic-Pythagorean in kind.

All this, however, amounts to saying that in the final analysis a true understanding of reality in itself is always, for Boethius, an eminently theological act of knowing. For insofar as the word “divine” means eternal and immutable, it describes the nature of the essences sought in all of human sapiential investigation and in all the areas of their manifestation to the human mind (areas that correspond to the division of the philosophical sciences). As a result, the problem inescapably arises here of assessing the relationship that exists, in Boethius’ view, between rationality and faith. For once it is granted that science always seeks the truth of the divine, it must at some point come to grips with the self-revelation of God (who is, in himself, that truth) as made known in the Sacred Scriptures and in the religious traditions Christians regard as true.

The doubts raised about Boethius’ assent to Christianity, in rare cases by some medieval readers but above all by many historians and interpreters of the recent past, arise mainly from the already mentioned absence of explicit references to the faith and the Bible in the *Consolation* and in the logical and scientific works. But Boethius also wrote five *Short Sacred Works*, brief theological treatises, four of which deal explicitly with the interpretation of Christian dogma; no one can any longer suggest reasonable doubts about their authenticity. In fact, there is no real reason for questioning that Boethius sincerely intended to be a mathematician when writing mathematical works, a logician when speaking of logic, and a philosopher when, facing death, he carries on a dialogue with Philosophy, the comforter. The issue here is not relativism but the understanding and coordination of the different degrees of the human approach to the truth. At the summit of these degrees can be placed both natural theology and, specifically distinct from it, theology as reflection on the dogmas of Christianity.

It is not by accident, then, that in the collection of *Short Sacred Works* there is one, the third, in which Boethius raises a problem of a theological kind and resolves it using only rational demonstration, without any reference to the faith. This short text takes as its starting point an initial reference to a fuller, now lost

treatise on parallel themes entitled *Weeks*; as a result, the little work would likewise be known throughout the Middle Ages as *On Weeks*.

The question taken up in this short text has to do with the way in which finite substances can be good, given the fact that they are not good in themselves, since then they would be God. The development of the treatise takes the form of a theological application of the axiomatic method, which is typical of geometry but not exclusive to it. That is, the writer lists a short series of self-evident principles (among them is the happy ontological distinction between being as a predicate, or *esse*, and being as the existence of a thing or an *id quod est*). Next there is a strictly deductive explication of what follows from these premises in relation to the problem to be solved. The conclusion can then be drawn (one that matches the content of the Christian faith, but is independent of it) that if all finite things are good, this is due not to an intrinsic goodness of their substance or to an extrinsic participation in the divine substance but to a determinative and necessitating act of the will of God, who is the productive cause that brings them into being.

Boethius then distinguishes, without opposing, natural theology, that is, the metaphysics of Aristotle, from the faith; the two are different levels, distinct but not contradictory, of the unified wisdom that leads human beings to the truth. The first of these two he calls “theology,” and he considers it to be a science, one of those into which philosophy is divided; it too, then, like the others that precede it, is a constitutive element of true wisdom. Like every science, theology has a special method that allows it to grasp in the most appropriate way the objects proper to it.

Thus in the first of the *Short Sacred Works*, titled *The Trinity*, in which Boethius intends to set forth the nature of the method specific to natural theological knowledge, he harks back to Neoplatonic teaching on the threefold hierarchic division, mentioned earlier, of the faculties or powers of human knowledge: the senses, discursive reason, and noetic and intuitive intelligence. He says that in theology the correct method corresponds to the third and highest faculty, and he therefore uses the adverb “intellectually” in referring to it. In order to grasp its divine object, which is incommensurably superior to its natural capacities, the human mind endeavors to raise itself to the supreme level attainable by its cognitive powers. It attempts, that is, to penetrate to being in itself by means of an intuitive and comprehensive vision that brings it closer to the way in which things are known to the divinity than to the way in which they appear in the world of finitude and particularity.

This, then, is the supreme goal of true philosophy, the goal pursued throughout their lives by the most trustworthy of its followers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, above all others. These men endeavored to raise their minds to the point of bringing into play the pure intuitiveness of the intellect and then to return to the level of discursive rationality and communicate the content of their intuition of the truth to human minds still immersed in time and space. It was

at those heights that Socrates and Plato contemplated the Supreme Good; it was there that Aristotle discovered that God is pure thought and that Pythagoras grasped the mathematical perfection of the ordering source of the cosmos.

In the main part of the *Consolation*, Philosophy herself teaches that between reason and intelligence there is a relationship like that between being and becoming, or the center of a circle and its circumference, or eternity and time. And she explains that since “every object of knowledge is known not according to the nature of the object but according to the nature of the knowing subject,” the elevation of the mind to the intuitive gaze of the intellect amounts to an attempt to assimilate itself, as far as possible, to the cognitive condition proper to God and therefore to the knowledge with which God knows things. It is precisely at that point that the process of cognitive improvement leads to and brings about the consolation promised to human beings by Philosophy (that is, by its highest natural form, theology, which moves toward its object “intellectually”).

In the second book of the *Consolation*, Boethius shows the unreliability and relative character of the blessings bestowed fortuitously by Fortune, and in the third book the unlimited goodness of the rule exercised throughout the cosmos by its divine source. In the fourth and fifth books Philosophy then applies its strongest curative powers in order to heal Boethius of his sufferings. She shows him that these sufferings spring from his own inability to rise to the heights of the gaze with which God himself looks upon and governs his works. As soon as Boethius succeeds in this effort and reaches by means of the intellect the vision of the harmonization of the many and the differentiated in the unity of truth he will see how the limited perspective of human beings as well as their individual destiny are not irreconcilable with the divine goodness and justice; how their freedom is not contradicted by the foreknowledge of God; and how the inevitable, mechanical succession of natural causes and effects is not opposed to that foreknowledge, but results from a view of truth that is different from the higher and more authentic view of it taken by divine Providence. All of these philosophical antinomies are in fact only consequences of the one original disharmony between conceptual-discursive knowledge on the one hand, and intuitive-immediate knowledge on the other. But the oneness of truth, which is one and the same in both perspectives, urges the follower of Philosophy to make the final, courageous effort whose reward is the attainment of the only true happiness, that which the divine mind in its simplicity enjoys eternally.

It is true, however, that God alone possesses truth fully, directly, and eternally, at a level beyond the reach of this final philosophical effort, which leads indeed to happiness in eternal life, but in this life remains always a movement that cannot reach its goal. It follows that wisdom can ascend to a still higher degree of cognitive perfection, which resides at the top of the ladder of the sciences: it does so by accepting by faith the contents of Christian revelation. Scripture indeed uses words belonging to the order of rational discourse in order to express and communicate to finite intelligences truths that are perfect and by

their nature known only to God. Nevertheless, without any merit on humanity's part, Scripture places reason in a position to acquire from the very source of truth elements of knowledge it would never be able to gain by its own powers alone and that in the realm of the true transcend even the highest intellectual intuitions.

The science of faith, therefore, consists in ensuring the assent of reason to divine mysteries that in themselves are unknowable, and it does so by means of tools and procedures borrowed from logic and natural philosophy. As Boethius writes at the end of *The Trinity*, this science thereby liberates reason from all "mental representations linked to the conditions of the sensible world" and, in contrast, brings it close to everything that "can most fitly be received as an object of understanding" among the things believed by faith.

In summary, in these short theological works Boethius is able to interpret the fundamental dogmas of the Christian faith by means of a convergence of intelligence and revelation in a procedure that leads, in a form guaranteed by the most reliable of all authorities, the divine, to the highest forms of understanding of truth that are possible for the human intellect. Thus in *The Trinity*, for the purpose of protecting believers from heretical errors, the understanding of the true meaning of the orthodox formula of the trinitarian faith is subordinated to a check on whether the terms corresponding to the divine attributes have a place in the semantic grid furnished by Aristotle's ten categories.

Boethius' analysis shows that while all the theological terms expressing a divine property seem to have their place in the categories of quantity (such as "great"), quality ("good," "just"), action ("creator"), time ("eternal"), and so on, they always and solely signify the divine substance. But this last is not a substance like others that are the subject of accidents, but is rather a "supersubstance," in the supernatural reality of which the other theological determinants likewise express a maximal substantial meaning. In particular, the category of relation, which theologians agree is the one to which the predication of the trinitarian names belongs ("father," "son," and "spirit" understood as "gift" of God), introduces into God predications that always and only refer to God's single and identically shared "supersubstantiality." Dianoetic reason is thus enabled to ascertain the fact, which it cannot understand, that trinitarian predications made of God signify relations, but relations that do not imply any multiplicity of substantial subjects.

Boethius' method is applied in the same manner to the mystery of the Incarnation in the fifth of the *Short Sacred Works*, known as *Answer to Eutyches and Nestorius*. The conjoining of the human and the divine in a single subject, something unintelligible and impossible to rational logic, is here illumined by a strict definition of the terms used in its formulation: "nature" and "person." Since nature is correctly understood in this context as "the difference that allows one reality to be distinguished from another that has a different specific form," all believers will agree (against the Monophysitism of Eutyches) that there are two different natures in Christ. And since philosophers understand person as

“an individual substance endowed with its own intellect and its own particular will,” the use of this term in the christological formula (aimed at Nestorius) will ensure the unity of the natures in the really existing single individual who is at once human and divine.

The fourth of the theological works is titled *Faith* (here again the last doubts about its authenticity seem vanquished today), and it differs from the others. It gives a paraphrase of the Nicene Creed in the form of a discursive but systematic explanation of the dogmatic foundations on which the entire truth of the Christian religion rests. It is as if, recalling the list of philosophical axioms that preside over the cosmic optimism of the third short work, Boethius wanted to formulate a parallel series of formal principles that are agreed upon by all believers based on the assent of faith. These can then stand as the foundations of the lines of argument proper to the theological science of revelation, such as those put into practice in the first and the fifth of the *Short Theological Works*.

## *2. Truth and the Reorganization of Knowledge: Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville*

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus, a Latin nobleman born between 488 and 490, survived the violent ending of the age of Theodoric and remained at the court of Ravenna as tutor and secretary of the young king, Atalaric, until the final catastrophe. This came when the Greeks invaded and laid waste to the Italian peninsula and deported the conquered to Constantinople. After difficult and painful years Cassiodorus returned to an Italy devastated by wars and ravaged by famine and shortages. Following the example of other thinkers of that period, he decided to withdraw to a place apart where, far from the uproar of an unsafe world, he devoted himself to the education of young monks and the preservation of the relics of the past.

Vivarium, the clearly symbolic name of the monastic center Cassiodorus established at an undetermined location in the South (in Campagna or Calabria), came into existence as a place of study and prayer. There the residents meditated on revelation and practiced the liberal disciplines, which were essential for understanding and interiorizing the truths of Scripture. Cassiodorus pulled together the main lines of this program of work in a slender handbook in which he gave a summary account of the knowledge he regarded as indispensable for his monks. He gave it the by-then-classic title of *Institutes* and, as mentioned earlier, divided it into two sections. The first was an introduction to sacred studies: *Institutes of Divine Literature*, a summary presentation of the succession of biblical books and of the principal commentators on them. The second was an introduction to secular studies, that is, the liberal arts: *Institutes of Human Literature*, the teachings of which he summarized in short compendia while also naming the more authoritative writers in each area.

This short “study guide” was indeed an original production, but it was also little more than a list, with brief notes, of the basic books a monastic library

ought to have and of their respective contents. Yet the short *Institutes* soon took on the role of a practical aid in teaching, rich in content although very sparing in its comments and illustrations; it also proved practical for use outside the walls of Vivarium. In periods when books were difficult to find and interest in deeper personal study was weak, an instructional aid of this kind easily became a tool that replaced the study of the original texts on which the author had drawn. Even in the following centuries the work enjoyed a certain popularity among all thinkers because it mediated the complete and organized remembrance of an intellectual, religious, and scientific-philosophical activity that could be revived, as soon as this became possible, on the basis of the bibliographical information and the programmatic ideas it contained.

If Cassiodorus thought possible the combination of parallel sacred and secular studies he produced in his handbook, it was because he was convinced by his Augustinian model that both kinds of study derived from a single source, divine Wisdom, which had inspired the prophets and given order to the universe. The stages in the two parallel courses of instruction supported the believing intellect as it mounted the rungs of a ladder of knowledge that rose from the sensible world to the pure intelligibility of the divine. Using the same approach, Cassiodorus also wrote a short treatise on *The Soul*, in which, following a path already marked out by Claudian Mamertus, he combined philosophical arguments and scriptural testimonies to prove the purely immaterial and spiritual nature of the human soul. But the best example of how his program of dynamically combining the rules of the arts and meditation on the faith took a concrete form is to be seen in his spacious and profound *Explanation of the Psalms*, which he intended as an effective model of such a program and as reading matter for his monks.

Of special interest is the explanation, in the preface to the work, of the idea of the circularity of truth, namely, that the explanation of the truth of the faith is supported by the truth of the arts, while at the same time the former grounds and validates the latter. Since the Scripture is truth, it was natural for the inspired writers to make ample use of the tools developed by the rational minds of the ancient philosophers in order to support and confirm the truth of their discourses. On the other hand, the faith reveals to us that if the rules of the arts are true, it is because in ordering the universe God applied the laws of his perfect wisdom, which the teachers of the past understood, codified, and explained in a unified doctrinal exposition. For this reason the Christian sage must likewise know the rules of the arts in order to draw near by means of them to the depths of the divine mind, whether by investigating nature or reading Scripture, in both of which these depths are present like the wine in the grapes and the harvests in the seeds of grain. Cassiodorus' monumental explanation of the Psalms, which unfolds on the basis of this preface, is completely built on an analytical application of these initial precepts.

Less clearly, perhaps, but no less effectively, the same principle is behind the composition of other impressive theologico-cultural syntheses written during

the difficult years when the Romano-barbarian kingdoms were prematurely aging. In particular, certainty about the reciprocal support and reinforcement given each other by natural knowledge and the truths of faith is at the basis of the *Etymologies* of Isidore, bishop of Seville in the kingdom of the Visigoths (d. 636). This wide-ranging encyclopedic collection, with its twenty books of learned facts of every kind, was widely known and used in the early Middle Ages because of its practicality and wealth of information. The title conveys the program of the work: to assemble and catalogue all useful ideas from very diverse sources, starting with an explanation of the origin and meaning of the terms involved: liberal arts, medicine, law, biblical exegesis, ecclesiastical tradition, the literatures and languages of antiquity, botany and zoology, mineralogy, counting and the sciences of measurement, naval and military skills, theatrical art, agriculture and gardening, building, utensils, clothing, culinary recipes and the consumption of food, and so on.

Like Cassiodorus' handbook, but dealing with a much broader and more subdivided range of contents, Isidore's collection sought to bring together in a unified and orderly educational plan all the areas of competence needed by civilized believers. This was so that they might be able to know and organize the world of visible things and then move beyond the limits of this world in a constant desire to lead the intellect from the scatteredness of multiplicity to the greatest possible likeness to the single gaze of God as he contemplates his creation.

The ultimate intention of the work is therefore not simply to tell stories and inform, as its external form, that of a dispassionate inventory of data, might suggest. Something more radical and deeper emerges from the work as a whole, from its complex, varied, and only seemingly disorganized nature. In fact, the intention of the *Etymologies* is to supply believers with a heritage of knowledge by which they might understand themselves and on which they could base their own membership in Roman and Christian civilization. For the survival of this civilization amid the juridical, social, and economic fragmentation that marked everyday life depended on preserving an awareness of unity and uniformity, which are the fundamental traits of truth itself.

Other texts flowing from the many-sided fruitfulness of Isidore the writer give evidence of the extent to which the desire for spiritual unity guided him in coping with his awareness of belonging to an impoverished world whose very memories were in danger of disappearing. Isidore's *Distinctions* offers another learned list of words that appear similar ("wisdom" and "science," "intellect" and "mind," and so on) but whose differentiations and definitions make it possible to advance both one's understanding of the order of nature and one's accompanying mastery of the language in which that order is expressed. The *Authoritative Statements*, in three books, are modeled on Prosper of Aquitaine: on the basis of an anthological stitching together of passages from the works of Augustine and from the *Morals* of Isidore's contemporary, Gregory the Great, the work offers a unified and annotated exposition of the principal themes and problems of the Christian faith.

Next, and even more interesting, is the attempt at a theological rhetoric, titled *Synonyms*. In this short treatise in two books an interior monologue between the soul and the rational mind (halfway between a solemn prayer and a confession of sins) is developed, broadened, and refined by means of a constant rapprochement of three, four, or even more words that have a very similar but never identical meaning (the writer is here reversing the method of the *Distinctions*). But the resultant paradoxical amplification of theological language is neither ostentation nor word play. Rather, as Isidore dilutes his discourse by an inexhaustible repetition of theological terms he seems to be making a tormented effort to intensify the expressive power of creaturely language in response to the difficulty of putting the highest and truest realities into words.

A few decades later, Isidore's *Synonyms* provided Ildefonsus, archbishop of Toledo (d. 667), with the linguistic methods he needed in composing his *Short Book on the Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary*, one of the first examples of medieval Mariology devoted to the defense of the perpetual virginity of the Mother of Christ (a teaching confirmed a few years later, in 693, by the sixteenth Council of Toledo).

It is especially interesting to see how, at the very moment when this author enfold the reader in the terminological labyrinth created by the rhetorical repetition of theological terms, he links Mariology and Christology. That is, he links the virginity of Mary and the divinity of Christ in a single rigorous line of argument in which each supports the other, as he makes explicit the logical connection of all the truths of faith. (If Mary is a virgin it is because she gives birth, contrary to the laws of nature, to one who is true man and true God, while if Christ is true God, he can only be born of a virgin.) In addition, the Isidoran method of multiplying synonyms also helps in unfolding the perfect circularity of theological truth (which we saw above in Cassiodorus), because the very repetition of the truth is enough to clarify it. As the Prologue says, truth alone demonstrates and confirms truth, because truth is God, and everything that is true comes from God:

Truth lasts eternally; whatever is true, lives; whatever springs from truth does not pass away. Truth is not subject to falsehood; deceit does not overcome truth; falsehoods do not change things that are true. Even if truth is hidden by the shadow of deceit, the truth, though hidden, will in the end reveal what is true. Indeed, what is false will not abide; what is true will never be lacking; what is alien to truth will be vain; what is distant from truth will prove to be empty. The reason: truth is God; whatever is of God is true; and whatever comes from God is truly real, in virtue of its truth alone.

### 3. *Gregory the Great*

Because of the wounds opened by the Byzantine wars of reconquest and the progressive decadence of the Romano-barbaric kingdoms, the representatives

of the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy were increasingly compelled to take over the task of maintaining or recovering the spiritual unity of what remained of the already transformed Latin civilization of the West. Even the gradually growing distance (which was ideological and cultural before being political) from the eastern empire and the Greek church helped push the church of Rome to undertake the increasingly more demanding task of spiritual consolidation of Christianity; this work was directed first to the religious aspect of life and was then extended to the cultural and social spheres.

These policies clearly characterized, in particular, the pontificate of Gregory, known as the Great (590–604), a Roman, the first of the popes who bore that name. He promoted the religious consolidation of the Christian world in two ways. The first was the establishment of a vast network of diplomatic agreements and a careful plan of ecclesiastical control in the territories of the Romano-Germanic kingdoms. The second was the dispatch of courageous missionary expeditions to the regions of northern Europe, which had remained outside or had been barely touched by Roman civilization; of special importance was the mission sent to the British Isles under the leadership of the monk Augustine, who later became the first archbishop of Canterbury.

Italy, meanwhile, had for several decades been invaded by new conquerors, the Lombards, who had profited by the weakness of the Byzantine governors to settle unopposed in the northern part of the peninsula and in the central duchies of Spoleto and Benevento. The peacemaking work of Gregory succeeded in moderating the harsh attitude of the occupiers, bringing about a gradual recovery of autonomy for property owners and for the administrative responsibilities of the clergy, and thereby promoting an admittedly unstable coexistence. This coexistence was later formally sealed by the baptism, celebrated by Gregory himself, of the son of the Lombard king Agilulf and Theodolinda, a Catholic.

Gregory devoted himself to consolidating the autonomy of ecclesiastical institutions against Lombard and Byzantine interferences and to pursuing an increasingly rigid policy of requiring the subordination of all the bishops to Roman authority. At the same time he took steps to improve their scientific and cultural education, urging them to an organized study of the ancient disciplines, a study that was evidently subordinated to, and had as its goal a better knowledge and understanding of the truths of the faith. For this reason both his very extensive correspondence and his *Pastoral Rule*, which was intended as a *vademecum* for the complete bishop, abounded in exhortations not to neglect the study of the liberal arts and the practice of the classical writers. The reason: knowledge is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is not possible for believers to have a suitable faith in the religious mysteries if their shepherd is not capable of teaching them, humbly but competently, to read revelation correctly.

It is true, on the other hand, that the secular arts are not to be studied for the sake of ostentation or vainglory or even simply for the pleasure to be derived from the contents of human literature. In a pastoral letter Gregory harshly

rebukes Bishop Decentius of Vienne, who studied grammar and read the poets solely out of a stubborn love of things classical as an end in themselves. In contrast, Gregory praises Bishop Anastasius of Antioch for his polished rhetoric that was devoutly placed at the service of Christian pastoral activity and Christian ethics.

Worldly knowledge, Gregory says, is not itself the truth, but is a useful tool for fostering a manifestation of truth to weak human minds. Separated from faith, the words of knowledge are only a shadow of the truth; for that reason the pagan sages of the past, who thought they could entrust their lives and happiness to philosophical teachings alone, were like blind men who wander in a darkness they mistake for reality. But those who believe in the word of Christ and accept him as their mediator between the shadows and the light, ignorance and truth, are able by his merits to free themselves from the prison of worldly wisdom and discover the true source of wisdom, the only source that can be regarded as truthful. Christian shepherds are therefore enjoined to bring this mission to completion by urging the faithful who still wander in the darkness of the world to let themselves be enlightened by the words of the Gospel.

In an interesting page of his *Dialogues* Gregory seems to provide a basis for this program by harking back, but as a theologian, to the Platonic myth of the cave (which he probably knew from Cicero). Gregory writes that a child born of a woman imprisoned in a dark jail who has never seen anything outside the prison has no other evidence than his mother's nostalgic stories for the existence of an outside world full of lights and wonders; so too human beings can only believe the loving witness of Christ and the voice of the successors of the apostles if they are to know the happiness and truth of the divine and aspire to reach these.

This fundamental idea pervades and supports the major works of Gregory the Great, all of them of an exegetical character: his collections of *Homilies* on the prophecies of Ezekiel and on the gospels, the allegorical commentaries on the first book of Kings and the Song of Songs, and above all the majestic meditation on ethico-existential religion that is set forth in a searching commentary on the story of Job (the *Morals* or *Moral Teachings Drawn from Job*).

This last work, with Boethius' *Consolation*, stands at the beginning of the Middle Ages as an exemplary model of lofty moral meditation and justification of human life. From the *Morals*, in particular, there emerges most fully the real focus of Gregory's theological thought, which springs from the contemplation (occasionally underscored by events of the time) of the tragic and inexplicable character of the human condition within the plan of universal history and the interweaving of particular events.

The ancient philosophers had engaged in their reflections on visible nature in order to develop satisfactory answers to the questions all human beings ask about their own origin and their own destined end. So too, faith in Christ claims to be the only true philosophy on which the soul can draw to satisfy its thirst for knowledge when confronted with the most inexplicable problems, those of

sickness, suffering, and death (these are the only natural certitudes, being based on direct experience). And while ancient wisdom saw in virtue and self-possession the key to overcoming suffering, Christians want something more radical and profound, conscious as they are that simply convincing oneself of the nonexistence of suffering cannot be a way of truly overcoming it. The interior dissatisfaction of Job as he asks whether it was right to accept everything God allowed to befall him is for Gregory a dissatisfaction proper to all human beings. It is only by believing in Christ that they can verify the truth that present suffering is a consequence of sin and can search out the right ways of remedying it and recovering the authentic creaturely dignity God has willed all to have.

Only meditation on Scripture, then, can help human beings to an understanding of how suffering is foreseen by God as an element in a universal harmony and given to them as a useful tool for drawing them away from love of the world and urging them to aspire to the acquisition of everlasting happiness. This discovery is not possible, however, unless, when answering the questions of philosophy and setting forth the solutions of faith, the human intellect voluntarily renounces its own arrogant claim to understand and justify. Humility, then, or the Christian attitude of readiness to be guided by Christ, who is the only one to have a complete experience of truth, is a further fundamental key giving the believer access to true wisdom. Humility is the principle that makes it possible to restrain oneself in the use of the liberal arts and to open oneself to the knowledge of revelation. It is also the primary virtue that makes known to each human being the irreplaceable and essential role that, during the short space of earthly life, he or she is called to play in relation to the universal order.

Humility, understood as an existential characteristic of human beings when confronted with truth, also underlies the formulation (in one of the *Homilies* on the gospels) of the well-known, seemingly paradoxical principle of “meritorious faith.” According to this principle “a faith is not truly meritorious that is supported by reason.” It is not possible to find or licit to seek reasons external to revelation itself that would justify believing in its truth. Thus Gregory subordinates even the inestimable value of the Christian faith to the ethical perfection of the voluntary free choice that leads to it. That is, the faith that saves is a disinterested faith that is accepted not in order to satisfy the theoretical or aesthetic aspirations of the mind but solely because of a passionate desire to welcome within oneself the voice of truth, which is the voice of God. And if this acceptance already brings happiness to the individual in the present life and even before the future life, this is only because faith, if authentic, is able to satisfy its own every desire and expectation without any merit on its part.

Just as truth proves truth, so faith is its own sole support. The trustworthiness of Scripture and of the interpretation given of it by the most authoritative witnesses to it, the correctness of the trinitarian and christological formulas, the Roman primacy of ecclesial jurisdiction, the authenticity of the decrees of the major ecumenical councils, the indissolubility of the sacraments: all these are

objects of faith. In many passages of his works and his correspondence Gregory the Great was anxious to ensure the unqualified openness of believers to these truths of faith, without basing this openness on external considerations not already implicit in the very statement of the truths.

This fact allows us to identify, between the lines of Gregory's writings, a gradual clarification of the idea of dogma as the unconditional object of a faith whose validity is based on the harmony of this object with all the other truths that are equally deserving of belief. Dogma is thus clearly distinguished from other doctrinal opinions or theses that are put forth by the interpreters of Scripture solely on the basis of their intellectual competence, and therefore as suggestions intended as practical complements to the understanding of the faith. Examples of such theses are the ideas that the angels were created at the same time as the visible world or that they are arranged in nine choirs or other such conceptual systematizations that are useful in catechesis, such as the list of the seven vices or the four virtues.

#### 4. A "Monastic" Civilization

##### A. BENEDICT OF NURSIA AND BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM

In Pope Gregory's work for the religious and cultural restoration of the church, as well as in his plan for the missionary spread of the Catholic faith, the Benedictine monks played an especially important part. The close connection between the pontiff and the most widespread monastic movement of his time is documented by Gregory himself in his *Dialogues*, in which, in conversation with Peter, a deacon, he narrates the lives of a great many Italian saints. The stories are rich in models of virtue and edifying episodes, all of them inspired by a passionately held ideal of sanctification to be attained through removal from the world and a life of asceticism and prayer. The *Dialogues* appear to be, in both style and content, rather different from the themes taken up in his exegetico-theological writings, but they were widely read in the monastic centers of later centuries as displaying a model of perfection.

The entire second book of Gregory's *Dialogues* is devoted to the life of Benedict of Nursia (d. ca. 547). In 529 Benedict founded Montecassino, which became the heart of the monastic movement whose rapid spread in the early centuries of the Middle Ages gave rise to a closely connected network of communities throughout Christian Europe. A special merit of Benedict was that he was able to tone down the original eremitical approach typical of late antique monastic asceticism in the East, in which the controlling idea was the mortification of the flesh and the repression of temptations. In its stead he gave western monasticism a decisive orientation to the cenobitical life and, at the same time, called for special attention to the perfection of the individual monk.

The Benedictine style of religious life was valued by many bishops and popes, who promoted its spread beyond the Italian peninsula. It provided an

immediate and satisfactory response to the situation of social diaspora and the crisis of cultural identity that afflicted the Romano-barbarian kingdoms. Subsequently it became the chief instrument for the spread throughout Europe of the religious and intellectual restoration begun by the Carolingians. In addition to a wise encouragement of manual work and the trades needed for the very survival of the monastic community, the *Rule* of Benedict provided for the biblico-liturgical education that was an indispensable means for the spiritual improvement of the individual.

The monk was urged to commit himself daily, but especially during some particular periods of the year, to the reading of (*lectio*) and interior reflection on (*meditatio*) the pages of revelation until he worked through the entire collection of canonical books. He did so with the help of patristic commentaries that offered further ideas on the interpretation of these writings. In preparation for this work the monk was obliged to have at least an essential knowledge of grammar and then also of such rhetorico-dialectical and numerological skills as were indispensable for an adequate grasp of what he was reading. The Benedictine community soon acquired the structure needed for achieving these goals: a school or place of studies for the training of the young and then a place for copying manuscripts (a scriptorium) and a library for the editing and preservation of the necessary manuscript codices.

These cultural aspects were indeed initially only marginal or at most complementary to the spiritual activity of the Benedictines and were not meant to take priority over the intense religious, catechetical, and evangelizing work that provided the context for them. At the same time, however, we may not underestimate the effectiveness with which that initial step gave direction in later centuries to the development of early medieval civilization. For, at least from the viewpoint of religious and intellectual life, this civilization can suitably be described as “monastic,” being based on a desire for spiritual perfection that regarded a literary education as one of its constitutive elements.

## B. ENGLISH MONASTICISM AND BEDE THE VENERABLE

The emphasis on the importance of a literary culture—always directed, initially, to liturgical and religious goals—also marked, to a considerable degree, another parallel monastic movement that at first had its own specific traits but then was increasingly faced with and finally merged with the Benedictine Rule. This movement began in the second half of the fifth century in Ireland and spread first to Britain and then to the continent. We must not overestimate the value of this pre-Carolingian Irish culture or the influence of the phenomenon known as the “peregrination of the Irish” (*peregrinatio Scottorum*), that is, the migration of individual monks from Ireland (which the Romans called *Scotia maior*) to the regions of northern Europe. But it cannot be denied that some of those individuals displayed especially noteworthy scientific, classical, biblical, and patristic abilities.

Whether or not it was due in part to the influence of the cultural contribution made by these *Scoti*, it is certain that, as early as the end of the seventh century and then with even more notable successes during the eighth, there occurred a religious and cultural awakening that was still limited to the monastic world. It began in Scotland and the northern regions of England, where it combined with the flourishing ecclesiastical reorganization promoted by Augustine of Canterbury. It was seen next in the Germanic territories beyond the Rhine, where Irish and English monastic missions contributed greatly to the introduction of Christianity, a movement then completed by the military conquest of Charlemagne.

The most important and most representative witnesses to the intellectual awakening in the English world are the varied works of Bede the Venerable (d. 735), who was one of the major transmitters of ancient culture during these centuries. Bede wrote many short works and more or less extensive exegetical, homiletic, hagiographical, didactic, computational, and historical treatises, but his reputation is linked mainly to an encyclopedic summary of scientific information inherited from the world of late antiquity; it bears the expressive title *The Nature of Things*. It is a learned book, but it does not depart from the basic biblical approach that marks Bede's entire body of work, for it is conceived as a description of the order of the cosmos that, following the model of the principal patristic commentaries, is set within the framework of the story of the six days of creation.

Supported by his awareness of the purpose of his own scientific competence, Bede felt authorized to introduce into the Christian mental universe a mechanistic conception of cosmic physiology that was based on the combination of the four elements and the development of the seminal principles scattered throughout the entire creation. His thought was that these results of secular scientific investigation into natural events were a permanently valid contribution to a better knowledge of the hidden but universally present plan of divine providence. In this manner philosophy once again made its entrance into the monastic world as a comprehensive explanation of the knowledge of truth that is based on faith in revelation. According to the inspired allegorical exegesis Bede gives of the biblical description of Solomon's temple, Christian sages are comparable to the large slanting windows that admitted into the heart of the building the rays of the sun as these made their way in through the higher fissures. Such men mediate the divine illumination, knowing as they do how to make use of the liberal arts and their earthly skills in transmitting this light to the people gathered in assembly.

### C. VIRGILIUS GRAMMATICUS AND ETHICUS ISTER

The works of Bede likewise became part of the limited but orderly didactic baggage that constituted the basic learning of educated monks in the early Middle Ages. This supplemented the efforts of the pre-Carolingian monastic

world to search out its own religious and sapiential roots. This it did by looking, slowly but fruitfully, into now deteriorated and inactive libraries and civil and episcopal archives for the ancient monuments, both patristic and classical, on which to base its recognition of its own cultural identity. In the process it saw to the copying, study, and conservation of these monuments in its scriptoria. Precisely in order to hasten the attainment of the goal, these models were preserved and frequently anthologized in feeble collections of excerpts. In addition, odd ways of reinventing the foundations of the Romano-barbarian cultural universe made their appearance, their purpose being to make these more useful in supporting the reconstruction going on in the politico-religious world.

For example, the name of the author of the *Aeneid* hides the already mentioned counterfeiter who called himself Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and was the author of two learned collections. One was a collection of *Epitomes* (that is, doctrinal summaries). The other was a collection of *Letters* in which problems of a philosophico-grammatical kind were treated in an artificial style and with the frequent introduction of passages from authors and teachers who were likewise invented or at least hidden behind pseudonyms imitative of the classics. These works were perhaps compiled in the second half of the seventh century or the first half of the eighth and in a learned setting scholars have located in southern France, or in an environment not alien to Irish influence, or in the environment of the rabbinical communities scattered throughout western Europe.

The writings of Virgilius Grammaticus frequently display interesting meditations on the effectiveness of the liberal arts in raising the human intellect toward the acquisition of truth. In this approach, which was symbolically expressed, as we noted earlier, in the happy image of the two libraries, pagan and Christian, we can already see, in a preliminary form, the essential methodological structure of a great deal of future medieval theological speculation. The human sciences, each in its own sphere and all of them together in a common educational curriculum, were organized in a hierarchical series of increasingly expansive acquisitions of knowledge. The aim was to effect a progressive sharpening of the soul's cognitive powers, which themselves were arranged in Platonic fashion as an ascending hierarchy of perfections. All of these reach their completion in the illumination of the theological intelligence, which is based on revelation and ordered to the investigation of the mysteries of the divine thought.

The author doubly disguises himself in an anonymous work titled *Cosmography*. This, too, was composed at some unidentifiable point in the seventh century, very probably on the periphery of the Carolingian politico-cultural renaissance, whose ideas of cosmopolitanism and of religious and intellectual uniformity it seems to anticipate. The text claims, indeed, to be a Christianized reworking of a treatise composed by a pagan Greek philosopher named Ethicus Ister (that is, from Istria); the writer who did the reworking says he is a presbyter named Jerome; both personages are evidently fictitious. By means of this artificial

doubling of authors and therefore of authorial responsibilities the anonymous inventor of the entire cultural operation is able to stitch together the two different approaches, philosophical and religious. The teachings and philosophical ideas of the fictitious pagan author can be corrected and nuanced by the continual interventions of the equally fictitious Christian translator and commentator.

In its content, which reflects a taste for encyclopedic learning shared by the writer with Isidore and Bede, the work offers a kind of variegated geographical and physiological description of the structure and shape of the visible cosmos. The description is supplemented by numerous philosophical teachings that are certainly derived from late antique models such as Chalcidius and Macrobius. These teachings have to do with the four elements, the hylomorphic composition of the corporeal order, the creation of paradise using the better parts of matter (similar to the way in which, in the *Timaeus*, the demiurge works in giving existence to the world-soul), the nature of invisible beings (angels and demons), and the ideal preexistence of all created things in the divine wisdom. The criticisms, complements, and observations of presbyter Jerome seek constantly to bring the teachings of Ethicus and his masters into conformity with biblical cosmology as interpreted in line with the Fathers. Thus the fundamental point of the work proves once again to be a concern to recover whatever of value and usefulness for human knowledge of truth had been acquired by ancient seekers, and to do so while purifying it of the inevitable errors caused by an ignorance of revelation.

The writings of Virgilius Grammaticus and the *Cosmography* of Ethicus Ister cannot be traced back directly to authors writing in the monastic world. Even if, however, we leave aside their documented circulation in pre-Carolingian Benedictine centers, it is certain that the cultural enterprise that inspired them was the same as that which, decade after decade and with ever-increasing effectiveness, guided both the curiosity with which monks probed the texts of classical paganism in search of material that would improve their understanding of Scripture, and their scrupulous adherence to the religious teachings of the Fathers. On the other hand, the better representatives of monastic spirituality were aware of and concerned about the fact that the ignorance of churchmen was a defect that could become a dangerous source of even doctrinal errors and that this ignorance could be checked only by increasing their liberal knowledge.

Witness to this consciousness of the essential role of education in the formation of monks can be seen in an unusual episode in the life of Wynfrith (d. 754). The latter was an English monk who, after taking the Latin name of Boniface, oversaw a widespread evangelizing activity, under the control of the papal see, in halfheartedly Christian or still-pagan areas of eastern France and Saxony. When Boniface saw the signs of a serious cultural backwardness in the clergy of Austrasia, he wrote to Pope Zacharias (d. 752) for ideas on what to do to stem the plague of baptisms administered with the scandalous formula: "In the name

of the Father, the *Daughter*, and the Holy Spirit.” We know the pope’s answer: It was not necessary to repeat these baptisms, nor should Boniface fear the spread of a new dreadful heresy; it was, however, absolutely necessary to compel the ignorant prelates responsible for such errors to study grammar.

#### D. BEATUS OF LIÉBANA AND AMBROSE AUTPERT

There was, then, almost at the dawn of the Carolingian renaissance an as yet unachieved balance between the most authentic spiritual motivations of monastic life and the monks’ quest for a fundamental but indispensable literary preparation. This prompted some isolated learned monks to urge on the Christian people a decisive return to the model of cultural experience provided by the Fathers of the Church. In Asturia, one of the few parts of the Iberian Peninsula that had remained free of the rapid Islamic occupation at the beginning of the seventh century, this goal inspired a monk, Beatus of Liébana (d. 798), who derived from it a strong impulse toward his own theological development.

Beatus possessed a high degree of exegetical skill as well as refined powers of rhetorical expression. He conducted an impassioned campaign against Felix, bishop of Urgel, and Elipandus, archbishop of Toledo, both of them representatives of the Mozarabic clergy (that is, of the Christian community that was struggling in the regions controlled by Arabic overlords). He attacked them because they were spreading an adoptionist christological doctrine, which claimed that the man Jesus could not be regarded as the true Son of the Father (an attribute proper to the divine nature of the Word) but only as an adoptive son.

Beatus’ explicit aim was to avoid any weakening of the faith taught by the Fathers, a faith that was true precisely insofar as it was one in the organic structure of its dogmas and was shared by the entire people of Christ. In fact, for people separated by borders and difficult conditions or isolated in hermitages (the only possible refuges from the storms of history), only the sharing of a common faith could in fact be the way to the true salvation ensured by Christ. Just as multiplicity and division had entered the world with the sin of Adam, so too redemption was possible only if human beings returned to the moral and spiritual unity offered by a common participation in the same understanding of the mysteries of the faith. In response, then, to “novelty” and “diversity,” which according to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers lead to heresy and are heresy’s marks, it was necessary to put at the service of the faith the liberal education the Fathers themselves had already used against heretics in order to ensure the unity and cohesion of the authentic religious and cultic tradition.

The same exhortation to uniformity in the understanding of the faith pervades Beatus of Liébana’s best-known work, his monumental commentary on the Apocalypse, which is marked by powerful images aimed at producing an emotional involvement of its readers. This work was destined to have great success

and become widely read during the ensuing centuries. Its success was due not only to the power of its allegorical interpretations, which were enhanced by solid rhetorical skills, but also to the beauty and effectiveness of the painted images that often accompanied the work in sumptuous codexes. These miniatures gave the early Middle Ages a valuable tool for the preaching of theological truth, namely, a visual element and symbolic language.

Ambrose Autpert (d. 784), a monk of San Vincenzo al Volturno in south central Italy, likewise bore witness, again in a commentary on the Apocalypse, to a similar aspiration for the development of a spiritual philosophy. This was a philosophy springing not from a denial but from an anagogical transcending of the natural limits of a mind that, though meant to contemplate the highest truths, must labor here to detach itself from the easy but fruitless consideration of this world's outward appearances. Justification of the need to provide monasteries with authentic centers for the intellectual training and moral strengthening of monks was to be found in the fact that an intensive and progressive intellectual preparation of monks had as its role to accompany them on their necessary cognitive ascent to spiritual realities.

In his short moral work *The Struggle between the Vices and the Virtues* Autpert issues a strong call for such preparation. He also takes the occasion here to condemn the custom of itinerant monasticism. This, he says, robs the development of individuals vowed to interior meditation of the stability and continuity that only life in a monastery ensures as the foundation both of spiritual growth and of the desired solid culture. Only here, in the spiritual training ground of a monastic community with its convergence of sacred and secular education, will soldiers of Christ find themselves called to a constant quest for truth that will never be completed in the present life. Yet this quest is the only authentic "pilgrimage" (*peregrinatio*), one that is entirely interior and leads the human person to the happiness of paradise.

According to Ambrose Autpert, the model of such an unceasing human longing to search unwearyingly for an authentic knowledge of the faith is the Virgin Mary, in homage to whom he preached two well-received sermons. After having experienced in her own body the fullness of the deepest mystery of the faith, namely, the Incarnation, Mary continued to contemplate it with a complete openness of mind but also with the absolute certainty that she could not comprehend it. At this time the birth of a new, closely-knit cultural world was at hand, a world about to issue from the successful restoration of the empire under Charlemagne. Autpert's open proclamation of the irrepressibility and, at the same time, the inevitable incompleteness of human knowledge in face of the fullness of truth believed by faith seems to have been meant as a clear and effective bulwark against excesses. But it was aimed also at dull-witted abridgements of the dynamic compenetration of absolute faith and the rigorous use of reason, a compenetration fully documented in the wisdom of the Church Fathers.

## 5. The Greek East from Justinian to the Second Council of Nicaea

### A. THE SIXTH CENTURY AND JOHN PHILOPONUS

In the Latin West learned individuals were committed to the defense and recovery of the classical and patristic roots on which the rebirth of a past spiritual world depended. In the Greek regions of the Mediterranean, on the other hand, the institutions of imperial Rome continued to rule public life in a relatively stable manner. Within the borders of the empire cultural life, too, could be described as a continuation of the late antique Roman tradition that was still fed, as it had been in the time of Constantine the Great, by the dynamic collaboration of Roman jurisprudence, the Christian religion, and classical Greek philosophy. These several components tended to be combined in a unified outlook in the works of the authors most representative of the sixth century. On the other hand, the balance of the theologico-speculative synthesis they tried to bring about on that basis was unstable and always threatened by the twists and turns of internal discussions and controversies.

The representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy acquired increasingly extensive power. The final claims of the teachers of philosophy and jurisprudence to an intellectual autonomy vanished due to the harsh legislation promulgated by Justinian (emperor from 527 to 565). In 529 he issued edicts restricting the freedom of pagans to teach; these led as a matter of course to the closing of the Neoplatonic school in Athens. In contrast, the rival school of Alexandria enjoyed greater freedom from politico-religious limitations, due in part to its position in an area of strategic importance for the reconquest of Vandal Africa. As a result, the conservatism of the pagan philosophers there was also less radical.

In addition, once the tensions of preceding centuries had been assuaged (these culminated in 415 with the murder of Hypatia, the learned daughter of Theon the mathematician, by fanatical supporters of patriarch Cyril), Alexandria gradually became a tolerant center of studies that was marked by the coexistence and contrast between pagan and Christian theology. In fact, numerous Christian intellectuals studied at the school of Hierocles, a pagan. Among these was Aeneas (d. 594), founder of a school of rhetoric and philosophy in Gaza. In a treatise titled *Theophrastus or the Immortality of the Soul* he defended some fundamental Christian positions on the basis of a strange syncretistic combination of Hellenic philosophies: the soul is immortal because, as Plato taught, it is an autonomously subsisting substance, but it is also, with Aristotle, the formal principle of the body, the resurrection of which it ensures by retaining after death the ability to put the various parts back together. On the other hand, the same writer refuted the idea of the eternity of the world by using the Stoic argument that the world is composed of heterogeneous parts that are subject to becoming and destined to break up.

At Alexandria, again, John the Grammarian (d. 574), the greatest Christian thinker of the sixth century, studied at the school of Neoplatonist Ammonius of

Hermia; John was nicknamed Philoponus (“lover of fatigue”), probably because of his extensive production. He did in fact write many commentaries on Aristotle’s works on physics and logic, two philosophical treatises on *The Eternity of the World* (one against Proclus in 529 and one against Aristotle), a work on *The Making of the World*, mathematical writings, and theological treatises.

The special mark of Philoponus’ speculative synthesis is his constant concern to give a correct Christian interpretation of the teaching of the great philosophers of the past, and of Aristotle in particular. He achieves this interpretation by means of rational tests of their teachings, tests inspired by their own thought. For example, the idea of creation, which is revealed by Scripture but at which the philosophers could not arrive because it is not deducible from experience, can be introduced with complete logical coherence into Aristotelean physics and even makes it possible to avoid some insoluble aporias connected with the eternity of matter.

The thesis on the eternity of the world can likewise be refuted on the basis of Aristotelean principles: if the world is spatially finite inasmuch as spatiality springs from extension, then it is also temporally finite because temporality is its very life. In the same perspective, and anticipating to some extent the late medieval theory of *impetus* (the energy by which a body moves), Philoponus suggests correcting the mechanicism of Aristotelean physics by explaining the movement of projectiles as a causal relationship between mover and moved; this makes it possible to trace every movement back to the efficient causality of God, whose provident motor energy presides over the entire life of the created world.

But in this initial phase of the Byzantine effort to synthesize philosophy and theology, the limits beyond which it was not permissible to push, the rational interpretation of the mysteries of faith were not yet well defined, and logical rigor applied to the reading of dogmas could lead to solutions irreconcilable with the orthodox tradition. Thus the identification of *ousia* (essence, substance) with *physis* (nature) led John Philoponus to regard “nature” as a universal (a genus) and, since each individual can participate in only one nature, to come close to the Monophysite position. At least, this was what he was accused of by Leontius of Byzantium (d. ca. 543), a theologian inspired by Neoplatonism and a supporter of Justinian’s religious policy. It is worth noting how these crisscrossing discussions led to recourse to the logical definition of the meaning of the theological terms involved; this process shows some unusual similarities to the method followed by Boethius in his short works a few decades earlier in the West.

## B. THE SEVENTH CENTURY AND MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

This philosophically based search for terminological accuracy was further emphasized in the following centuries, due in part to the spread of the writings

of Pseudo-Dionysius (whose appearance in Byzantine religious history goes back to the early decades of the sixth century). For, as we said earlier, these writings were marked throughout by the search for an effective speculative synthesis between the dogmas of the faith and the most solid doctrinal positions reached by the thinkers of antiquity. A first successful implementation of this program can be seen in the theological works of Maximus the Confessor (d. 662/663).

Maximus was representative of the aristocrats of Constantinople who withdrew into monastic life in northern Africa. He was among the most indefatigable opponents of Monotheletism, the doctrine that claimed that in Christ there was but a single personal will. This teaching was favored by Emperor Heraclius because it was useful in reaching a compromise with Monophysitism, but it was condemned as heretical by Pope Martin I at a Lateran synod in 649 because it implied that the human nature of the Redeemer was less than complete.

Maximus supported the condemnation and was imprisoned by Constans II, nephew and successor of Heraclius; he was then exiled to Transcaucasia and suffered the mutilation of his tongue and right hand (whence his title as a “confessor,” that is, of the faith). His most mature works date from his African period and were devoted to the complicated exposition of a theological system of a christocentric kind. He wrote various exegetical and ascetical treatises; also worth mentioning are the *Ambigua* or *Disputed Points* addressed to John and the *Questions* addressed to Thalassius, works that offer a coherent clarification of theological problems arising, respectively, from Scripture and from the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus (the “theologian” par excellence in the Byzantine world); the *Mystagogy*, an explanation of the liturgical symbols and mysteries of the church; and an explanation of the Our Father.

In Maximus’ thought the perfect synthesis of divine and human natures in the Incarnation is the center of the history of the cosmos. This began with the creation of multiplicity by God, who is perfect Monad and perfect Triad, and is destined to end in the return to Unity of every division and every imperfection, a return that will at the same time bring the actuation of all creaturely potentialities. On the basis of a prudent synthesis of Platonism and Aristoteleanism Maximus gives an optimistic description of the movement of everything created toward the eschatological completion of the redemption wrought by Christ; this completion at the end of time will not exclude any element in the entire reality of the cosmos and, in particular, any element of the human being.

As Maximus sees it, all the elements, both material and spiritual, of the created world are present in the natural makeup of the human being, who is composed of a body and a soul that is at once an autonomously existing substance and the formative principle and mover of the body. Without losing its own substantial simplicity, the soul works to produce activity and knowledge throughout the hierarchy of vital and spiritual functions (vegetative and nutritive, sensible, imaginative, rational, intellectual). By taking flesh in a complete human

nature, the Word began a historical process whereby the whole of creation is reunited with the divine. This process takes place in a series of steps: from the liberation of individual persons from the passions and the perfecting of their virtues and all their higher capacities to the universal reabsorption of matter by pure spirit, and on to the final reunification of creatures, through the Word, with the ineffable perfection of the trinitarian mystery.

### C. THE EIGHTH CENTURY:

#### THE QUESTION OF IMAGES AND JOHN DAMASCENE

A new crisis affecting the delicate balance of Byzantine theology and the relations of Byzantium with the Roman church arose out of the attack on the veneration of sacred images, triggered in 726 by an edict of Leo III the Isaurian prohibiting the practice. The hardening of the imperial position in a series of forceful steps for the destruction of images (iconoclasm) was due to political considerations but also to the desire to suppress excesses in popular devotion to icons (*iconodulia*), since these increased the power and independence of the monastic world. The synod of Hieria, held in 754 with the support of Constantine V Copronymus, son of Leo III, gave a first victory to iconoclasm and unleashed a real persecution of recalcitrant monks.

Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople seems to have made himself the spokesman of moderate theologians, whose most natural reaction was an attempt to follow the lead of philosophy and introduce a clear definition of the meaning of the objects involved in the controversy, such as *image* and *prototype* (that is, the sacred reality represented by the image), as well as of the kinds of veneration shown to such objects. Thus there was *latreia* (worship), which is reserved to God alone, but also *proskynesis* (obeisance, act of reverence, veneration), which the defenders of *iconodulia* maintained could be paid to images.

The iconoclastic crisis had a first conclusion after the death of Leo IV in 780 when the emperor's mother, Irene, adopted a policy of tolerance toward the advocates of veneration of images in order to broaden acceptance of her assumption of power as regent in the name of her second son, Constantine VI. In this action she had the support of the monks, Patriarch Tarasius, and the Roman see. This was the situation until the convocation in 787 of the second Council of Nicaea (which was regarded as ecumenical because of the participation of the legates of Pope Hadrian I); this council proclaimed the legitimacy of *iconodulia*, which was always to be distinguished from adoration, this being reserved to God alone.

The spacious and coherent theological works of John of Damascus, or John Damascene (d. ca. 750), were produced during the most violent years of the controversy. To the latter he made his own contribution in the form of three treatises in defense of *iconodulia*, his primary concern being to show that the cult of images was part of the earliest Christian tradition. In fact, the whole of

Damascene's theological reflection, published in a large number of wide-ranging writings, is permeated by a constant concern to see religious controversies in the perspective of a uniform religious wisdom that is backed by continuous references to the scriptural foundations and the teachings of the Fathers. This attitude and approach were justified chiefly by the fact that John lived his life in Greek-speaking regions that had been for several decades under Islamic rule—first in Damascus, capital (from 656) of the Umayyad Dynasty, and then in the monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem. His plan to reinforce traditional theological wisdom with the help of a critical competence in philosophy was consciously aimed at rooting more deeply in himself and in his readers a sense of belonging to the universal Christian community and avoiding the impending danger of religious dispersion and cultural breakdown.

This ideal also inspired John's major work, *The Fountain of Knowledge*, which was written after 743 and is divided into three parts corresponding to the ascending hierarchy of knowledges that lead to God. The first part is a *Dialectic* (also cited as "Philosophical Chapters"), which explains the rules developed by the philosophers for avoiding equivocations and giving deductive coherence to the natural sciences; this meant essentially the teachings of Aristotelean logic, explained in the order established by the Neoplatonic commentators on the *Organon*.

The second part is a treatise on *Heresies*, that is, a catalogue of one hundred chapters (to a large extent taken verbatim from Epiphanius of Salamis) explaining the errors that can arise from an uncontrolled application of rational norms to the interpretation of dogmas. It is noteworthy that the final heresy treated was also the most recent, namely the religion of Islam.

The third and final section is devoted to an *Explanation of the Faith*, which Burgundione of Pisa translated into Latin in 1115 under the title of *The Orthodox Faith*. This section is again divided into one hundred chapters and offers a synthesis of the thought of the Fathers. The synthesis is organized into a series of themes, beginning with the unity and trinity of God, passing then to the nature of the cosmos, with an extensive section on cosmology (invisible world and angels, then the visible world) and anthropology (with a good deal of space given to psychological doctrines), and moving on to the theory of redemption, which is explained by following the fundamental passages of the Creed.

While not possessing any originality or any real speculative depth, the work of John Damascene has a more than secondary importance in the history of theological thought because of the formal comprehensiveness and accuracy in compilation that mark his systematic approach. From the viewpoint of methodology, John's certainty about the ancillary role of philosophical proficiency in relation to faith (as ensured by the concordant testimony of the Fathers) allows him to draw freely on the patristic sources and at times even to produce on his own a series of rational arguments that prepare the way for the explanation of dogmas. Some examples: notes on anthropology and psychology, valuable for

explaining some important but unclear aspects of the doctrine of the Incarnation; rational postulates, presented as universally accepted by the wise, such as the government of the cosmos by the Supreme Good, which is indispensable in asserting against the Manichees the universal goodness of the created world despite the seeming existence of evil.

## II. Carolingian Unanimity

Charles had recently begun to reign over the territories of the West and to concentrate all power in his own hands. Meanwhile, the study of letters had almost everywhere been completely forgotten, with the result that the worship of the true godhead was languishing. Then, one day, there landed on the shores of Gaul, along with a group of Breton merchants, two *Scoti* from Ireland, individuals whose knowledge of letters, both secular and sacred, was unparalleled. Having no visible merchandise to display, their custom was to address the crowds that hastened to them in the hope of acquiring something. "If anyone wants wisdom, come to us to acquire it, for in fact it is from us that you can buy it." The news of this spread so quickly and with such an outcry that people who were either amazed or convinced that the two were madmen brought it to the attention of Charles, who had always been an ardent lover of wisdom. He then received the men and kept them with him for a while. Then, when he was obliged to go off on his wars of conquest, he ordered one of the two to remain in Gaul and devote himself to the education of young boys, some from the nobility, others of less high rank, and still others of lowly birth. The other he sent to Italy and put him in charge of an important monastery near Pavia, where he might welcome all those desirous of learning.

We owe this first version of the story about the beginnings of the renaissance to Notker Balbo, a monk of St. Gall, who recorded it in his *The Deeds of Charles* toward the end of the ninth century. By that time the imperial civilization established by Charlemagne and the great period of cultural growth that accompanied it had already shown signs of a first, untimely exhaustion. In later times this story was to be fused with another cultural legend connected with the epic of Charlemagne. The later story, showing little respect for real historical lapses of time, made the founding of the University of Paris the work of some eminent representatives of the community of scholars involved in Charles' political activity: Alcuin, Rhabanus Maurus, Claude of Turin, and John Scotus. All four (still according to the legend) were disciples of Bede, sent by the latter to the continent in order to complete the "transfer of studies" (*translatio studiorum*) that had started in Athens, then passed to Rome, and now reached France by way of the British Isles.

These mythical stories make clear the close connection between the "transfer of studies" and the "transfer of imperial power" (*translatio imperii*), their purpose being to provide the best ideological justification of the latter. That is, Charles had the right to call himself "emperor" of the Romans because he had

created a new political and religious unification of the western peoples and was approved by his solemn coronation in Rome on Christmas night, 800. But this authority was never dissociated either in his mind or in historical fact from his plan to promote a solid cultural education, especially of churchmen (that they might then become his agents in dealing with the other sectors of the population) and thereby to promote also the acceptance by his subjects of a unifying consciousness of being participants in the ongoing political renewal.

Spiritual unity had been the foundation and source of juridical unity in the political thinking of the Carolingian military leaders ever since the first exploits of Charles Martel, victor over the Arabs at Poitiers (732) as head of a military and religious coalition of Christian fighters, and of Pepin the Short, crowned king of the Franks (in 754) by Pope Stephen II in exchange for his support of the church against the territorial usurpations of the Lombards.

Finally, in the case of Charlemagne, the official reestablishment of the Christian empire, based on the model given by Constantine, was explicitly connected with the intention of bringing about a uniformity in morals and ideas among his subjects, this being ensured by faith in revealed truth more than by any other means of persuasion. But if this “unanimity” (the term often used by Alcuin of York, Charles’ cultural adviser, teacher, and personal friend) were to be translated into a real and sincere subordination of minds to the structures erected by a common set of beliefs, it had to be first and foremost a unanimity of the spiritual order and therefore had to spring from a spontaneous and positive voluntary acceptance. Such an acceptance could never be ensured solely by military might and political coercion. In other words, the force leading to such an acceptance would certainly have to be a cultural and religious education.

### *1. Institutional Reform and Cultural and Religious Rebirth*

A telling episode during the successful military campaigns by which Charles rebuilt the empire shows that the intellectuals who worked with him had a keen awareness of their own irreplaceable task as builders and defenders of spiritual unity. In 786, after an exhausting war, Charles succeeded in subduing pagan Saxony and carrying the banners of Christianity into territories never reached by Roman civilization. He also imposed baptism on the entire population, threatening the unwilling with death.

At that point Alcuin wrote the king a courageous letter of reproach in which he criticized the harsh reign of terror thus established in those distant regions. It was neither ethical nor evangelical (he said), and moreover it was useless, to try to force the name of Christ on the barbarians by means of the sword and bloodshed; conversion gained solely by fear would never last. Instead, Charles ought to build schools in the Germanic countries and send scholars there to teach pagans the arts and philosophy as a means of explaining to them the words of Scripture. Only by educating and persuading the rational faculty that all

human beings possess and urging them to recognize the truth communicated by the Gospel, to learn it and find in it the complete fulfillment of all their expectations, would it be possible to bring to life a truly Christian earthly kingdom that would last through the centuries.

The deep humanism that inspired these ideas is the real ideological foundation of the organizational solidity of Carolingian civilization. By means of successive documents and edicts (capitularies) Charles played an active part, from the very beginning of his reign, in promoting and regulating scholastic institutions and advancing the education of monks and churchmen, but also of laypersons possessing jurisdictional responsibilities (it is enough to mention, among the best known of his edicts, the *General Admonition* of 789 and the *Letter on the Cultivation of Letters*).

These documents maintain that a liberal education is a necessary, though not sufficient, foundation for the participation of humanity in the redemption of Christ and, therefore, an indispensable help in consolidating the new political system, which is expressly seen in the context of an essentially religious mission. The restoration of the empire is thereby closely bound up with a rebirth of culture and religion, this being initially based chiefly on the recovery of the literary, scientific-philosophical, and theological tradition of the past, to the extent that traces and evidence of this tradition could be found on the shelves of impoverished civic archives and the still-small monastic libraries.

It is easy to see how this search for ancient evidences, continuing as it were the effort of thinkers of the Romano-barbaric period to recover their classical roots, was initially directed chiefly toward concise encyclopedic abbreviations of knowledge (Cassiodorus, Isidore, Bede, etc.). The latter, moreover, continued to be used as models of the new handbooks devoted to the liberal arts by the early Carolingian teachers.

Then, little by little, the information found in the late antique manuals and collections became the starting point for more comprehensive readings and led to a search for and retrieval of the ancient or late antique texts from which the manuals were derived. From brief notes on the teaching of grammar scholars went back to the works of Donatus and Priscian; a deepening interest in logic brought into circulation once more Boethius' translations of the initial works of the *Organon*; interest in rhetoric sent readers back to the direct study of the works of Cicero and Quintilian; scattered bits of numerology and cosmology led to the renewed reading of Boethius' monographs on the quadrivium and the cosmologico-physiological treatises of Macrobius and Chalcidius. Literary taste became more refined and imitation of the classical models was practiced once again: Virgil and Ovid, Martial and Terence became popular once more, as did the moral contribution of Seneca and, to a lesser degree, the physiological work of Lucretius.

However, given the conscious premise that these readings always had as their ultimate goal the knowledge and understanding of the Bible, an even

greater, indeed essential importance was given to the recovery and spread of the works of the Fathers of the Church. These were carefully read and studied, copied and often anthologized, whether in florilegia (“collections of flowers”) organized by subject, or in new continuous commentaries on the sacred books that began with the erudite stitching together of extracts from Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Bede.

Beginning in the early years of the ninth century an impressive number of sacred and secular manuscripts filled the libraries of the larger abbeys, bearing witness to the quantitative but also qualitative increase in intellectual activity in the empire. Charles’ exhortation to open and organize study centers was immediately answered, especially by the Benedictine monasteries. But schools for advanced juridical and literary studies also came quickly into existence at the cathedrals in cities, though the population there was relatively small. Moreover, a “palace school” or “court school” was established at the itinerant court (or residence) of Charles, who liked to surround himself with masters who taught and carried on dialogues, including with him and his friends and relatives, on literature, the liberal arts, philosophy, and religion.

These same scholars then formed an “academy” of intellectuals with the ruler as its center; they were partly serious, partly jesting, and hid themselves behind the names of ancient poets and men of letters. This cultural world was naturally inclined to dialogue and cultural interchange, which was a source of growth in knowledge. Extensive learned correspondences attest to the exchange of scientific information, moral advice, and religious ideas between teachers and students. In addition, dialogue was often the literary genre preferred in composing new compendia of liberal wisdom, as Alcuin in particular did for explicitly pedagogical purposes. Thus the monotonous handbooks of late antiquity were revised in the form of lively series of rapid questions and lapidary answers; this form was more effective for the direct transmission of information and was better suited for learning by memory. Charlemagne himself, the first student of the empire, is often depicted in these dialogues in the guise of a diligent though educated learner who questions the teacher and in turn reacts satisfactorily to the latter’s queries.

With this real consolidation of basic knowledge in place, the political program of integrating races and customs, no matter how varied, into the imperial unity could be introduced and bear fruit. As in the legend of the “merchants of wisdom,” the men of letters who came to Charlemagne’s court had been trained in the most distant regions of Europe; they came from the islands of the north, like Alcuin; from the Iberian Peninsula, like Theodulf of Orleans; from Bavaria, like Leidrad of Lyons; from Italy, like Peter of Pisa and Paulinus of Aquileia; and from the Lombard south, like historian Paul the Deacon.

The well-educated Carolingian world thus had its origin in the confluence of many traditions. But this fact brought with it the necessity of planning energetic ways of intervening in order to ensure cohesiveness and solidity in the

new system: linguistic unification through the improvement and spread of ecclesiastical Latin; uniformity in writing and spelling, achieved through the spread of a common form of writing that was clear, legible, and elegant; the philological revision and spread of a common text of the Bible; uniformity in liturgical practices; the imposition of a single method of liturgical computation in order to establish a single calendar. In addition—and this was of more than secondary importance—a careful moral and organizational reform of the secular clergy and a compulsory adoption of the *Rule* of Benedict in all monastic communities were successfully carried out.

In summary, a classicizing culture, the unity of the faith, and a moral and institutional reform were the closely interwoven load-bearing elements of the renewal of western Christianity. It is obvious, therefore, that the idea of “unanimity,” on which the entire construction of the new Christian kingdom was based, had a fundamental theological dimension. The task of the emperor was to form and consolidate a community of believers in which, under the harmonious leadership of the episcopate and the military aristocracy, there might come to pass, through a conscious agreement on common goals, a unity of kingdom and church, or, in other words, of the Romano-Carolingian political entity and the mystical body of the apostolic tradition. The attainment of these common goals was subordinated to the active achievement by the Christian people of a complete convergence of faith and reason, of truth revealed and believed and truth naturally grasped by the humanity that, as with each rational individual, is the primary characteristic and distinctive mark of every subject who respects laws and common moral standards.

Boethius in his *Consolation* looked back with longing to the philosopher-king of the ancient Platonic tradition, while Alcuin, following Boethius, expressly called that ideal to mind (“Happy those kingdoms in which philosophers reign and in which kings study philosophy!”). But in this new context the philosopher-king was also to be a priest-king (precedents: the David of the Bible and the historical Constantine), who would foster the knowledge of truth in his subjects by spreading the revealed word throughout his kingdom and seeing that it was heard there.

## 2. *The Theological Wisdom of Charlemagne’s Liegemen*

### A. TRADITION AND METHOD IN ALCUIN’S THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

Alcuin of York (d. 804), who often used the pen name “Albinus,” occasionally wrote, in some of his many *Letters*, about the intellectual understanding of the contents of revelation, although only in general terms. But never in his writings does he use the word “theology.” At most we hear him speak of “wisdom” or “the true philosophy”; in this he resembled almost all of his contemporaries who, like himself, were more or less influenced by the example of Augustine.

True, at the beginning of his *Dialectic* or *Logic*, a compendium of late antique logic, where he is copying verbatim the division of philosophy given by Isidore in his *Etymologies*, he writes “theology” instead of “theoretical” (philosophy) (but that may have been the reading in the manuscript of Isidore he had before him). But this did not clash completely with his overall conception of knowledge, because in his view the purest philosophical knowledge is always ordered to “the contemplation of heavenly realities.”

An example is given in a short work in dialogue form that bears the expressive title *The True Philosophy* and is intended as an introduction to his slender manuals on the seven arts (one of which is the *Dialectic*). Alcuin here describes human wisdom as an incarnation of immutable and eternal truth in this temporal and transient world; like Christ the Word, of which this wisdom is an image, it participates in both natures, the human and the divine. As such, wisdom is the ultimate goal of human knowledge and action. In addition, as Alcuin reminds Charles in a fine letter of consolation on the occasion of the death of his wife, Liutgard, it is the source of consolation and happiness for all human beings because it assures the soul that it will possess the pleasure proper to the angels and saints, which springs from their union through knowledge with the supreme Good. But Alcuin’s wisdom, which owes a heavy debt to Boethius’ depiction of Philosophy, is also human because it has slowly taken form through the ages due to the laborious studies of the founders of the arts as they endeavored to organize their systems of rules and their classifications of the kinds of knowledge.

Divine Wisdom is the Logos himself, the eternal source of the perfect rationality that marks all of creation. As Alcuin says in another letter to Charles, in which he takes up an Augustinian idea to which we referred earlier, it is therefore evident that “the philosophers were not the creators, but the discoverers of the arts.” In creating, God determined the laws proper to the natural world, and the sages of antiquity “discovered them in nature” and codified the truth thus grasped, though limited and partial, in the teachings of the seven disciplines.

After Boethius, this was perhaps the first explicit revival in medieval thought of the Platonic-Augustinian idea that there is a cosmic order governed by the perfect rationality of the Word, which is reflected in the rules of thought and of the language expressing it, in numbers, proportions, and the harmony of sounds and the celestial bodies. To be philosophers meant, then, to know and understand the divine laws at work in creation and therefore to know the Word; in other words, it meant to be true theologians. Thus in Alcuin’s manual, *Rhetoric and the Virtues*, when Charlemagne, wearing the robe of a disciple, asks what the difference is between the ancient philosophers and Christians, the author replies with the pithy remark: “Only baptism and faith.”

The foundation that is Scripture gives human reason certainty about a knowledge that is then regulated by the classifications and argumentative formulations of the arts. This convergence guarantees the soul the possession of a true body

of knowledge that in turn is the presupposition and means of its participation in the knowledge God has of himself and his work. To this essential cooperation between faith and the rational arts Alcuin himself bears witness in his own writings on theological subjects.

This is true in particular of works Alcuin published to support and carry further the attack of Beatus of Liébana on the Iberian adoptionists. In his capacity as spokesman for both the kingdom of Charlemagne and the church of Christ he makes the condemnation official in several works: a short *Answer to the Heresy of Felix*, a longer treatise in seven books, *Answer to Felix of Urgel*, and one in four books, *Answer to Elipandus of Toledo*. In all these works Alcuin cites a wide range of scriptural and patristic texts to show the “novelty” of the adoptionist doctrine in relation to the orthodox tradition and by that very fact its complete alienation from Christian truth. He then offers a series of rational arguments in order to show the absurd and erroneous consequences flowing from the supposedly doctrinal formulas Felix and Elipandus have introduced, thereby corrupting the true faith.

It is thus possible to discern, in the argumentative procedures adopted by Alcuin in support of orthodoxy, the emergence of the essential norms of a still-embryonic yet already clearcut theologico-speculative method. There is, to begin with, the invocation of Scripture, which has been entrusted to humanity just as a ruler sends out a delegation among his subjects in order to make his wishes known to them. Then there is the recourse to the Fathers, who combined their intense faith with a fully developed rational approach and on this twofold basis provided perfect examples of correct scriptural exegesis. Then, too, there is the comparison of results with the orthodox tradition, which was developed on the basis of patristic teaching and consolidated and defended down the centuries by the authority of the Roman church, with the support of the political authorities. Finally, there is the rational approach of the modern interpreter; this means the application first of the rules of logic and then of those of all the liberal arts, which make possible the stringent testing of orthodoxy in the case of new controversies caused by heretics or unbelievers.

Alcuin’s last work was composed during the years of his withdrawal from public life (801–804), while he served as abbot of the monastery of Tours, and it is the most successful example of his theological method. The work is *Belief in the Holy Trinity* in three books. Here a paraphrastic explanation of the Christian creed, supported by a judicious but careful application of the rules of logic, leads the author on to sketch a summary and systematic picture of the overall contents of the orthodox faith and its principal parts (from Trinitarian doctrine to christology, and from redemption to eschatology). But Alcuin’s method aims only at a first approach to orthodoxy and not at the penetration of the human soul into the mysterious depths of the faith, which can never be made the subject of fully intelligible and exhaustive definitions.

Consequently Alcuin says, with explicit reference to the cultural precedent given by the *Trinity* of Augustine (and, implicitly, that given by Boethius), that

one thing must be made clear about all the forms used in the logical organization of a discourse (categories, distinctions between substance and accident or act and potency, the conversion of a proposition, or syllogistic deduction, and so on). This one thing is that whenever these are used in theological discourse as a help in interpretation (and not as positing conditions for the truth of dogma), they must to some extent surrender something of their demonstrative force and lose as least some measure of their formal rigor.

Human beings have learned the rules of science by studying the traces of the Creator in nature in order then to guide their rational procedures for searching out the truth in visible things. But these rules are altered and suffer changes in their stringency and in the conditions of their use when they are applied to searching out in Scripture the truth of those invisible and supernatural realities from which they are descended. From this twofold process of the descent of the truth of the arts from the truth of the Word and then of the return and transformation of their relative necessity into the absolute necessity of God is born a new knowledge that is theological truth, the loftiest form of knowledge, which allows the human being to draw near the perfect divine rationality, though without comprehending it.

#### B. FRIDUGISUS OF TOURS AND ALCUIN'S "CIRCLE"

The charismatic personality of Alcuin the teacher made him the center of a group of disciples whose work as thinkers is only partially attested by direct documentation. These men put into practice, sometimes more boldly than did their teacher, the method of argumentation he endorsed in the area of theological discussion and demonstration.

The most notable of these disciples was Fridugisus (or Fredegisus) (d. 834), who succeeded Alcuin as head of the abbey of Tours. He wrote a short work titled *The Substance of Nothing and Darkness*, in which he sets out to impose on human language in all its applications, and therefore on Scripture, which uses human language, a strict dependence on the logical principle that to every substantive conveying a meaning there always corresponds a substantial reality.

Thus even the word "nothing" (*nihil*), which points to that out of which (*ex quo*) God brought all creatures into being, and the word "darkness" (*tenebrae*), which describes that which (*quid*) filled the universe prior to the creation of light, necessarily denote something real and existing. And if the words used to express these realities are negative in form (because "nothing" = non-being and "darkness" = non-light, that is, something real but different from the usual substantial being of creatures), the reason is that they certainly hide "something very important and meaningful," and therefore something not directly perceptible by natural human knowledge. If "nothing" has a meaning, as logic assures us it does, it must necessarily signify something that is, or, in other words, a "what is not" that *is* precisely "what is not." It would therefore be unreasonable to claim that "that-which-is-something is not something-that-is."

Because of this very lack of direct perceptibility Fridugisus does not further explain the nature of such a nothing-that-certainly-is-something. By doing so he leaves modern readers with the question of whether or not he is speaking of a preexistent matter such as that of which the classical philosophers had spoken. In any case, it remains true that the embryonic philosophy of language that inspires Fridugisus' line of argument is expressly supported by methodological principles, that is, by a balanced combination of the various kinds of information provided by the true authority and procedures practiced by true reason. The fundamental conviction guiding the writer's thinking is that the relationship between reason and faith, both of which are sources of truth, is so strong and reciprocal as to be circular. First reason and then faith are asked about this "nothing": the former says this "nothing" is something, and the latter teaches that everything has been created by God "from nothing," that is, that the "something" that "nothing" is precedes everything else not only chronologically but in importance and dignity.

When dealing with "darkness" Fridugisus proceeds in the opposite direction. He starts with the faith, that is, with Genesis, which says that the darkness preceded the light and that God differentiated the light from the darkness. He then confronts reason with this fact, and reason remarks that if the "darkness" is perceptible and as such can be given a name, then it must have a real existence.

A letter Charlemagne wrote to Dungal, abbot of Saint-Denis, asking about the correctness of Fridugisus' method bears witness to the puzzlement to which his short work must have given rise in some contemporary readers, especially because it excluded any possibility of submitting the words of Scripture to the allegorical interpretation that had been widely used and recommended by patristic exegetes. It is clear, however, that the question raised by *The Substance of Nothing and Darkness* was not simply a problem of exegesis, because in fact it raises for discussion the very delimitation of the right of logico-deductive reason to intervene in the area of knowledge covered by the authority of the faith.

Alongside this problem of the limits to be placed on rational method as applied to the faith there immediately arises a different problem: that of the possibility of using rational methods in dealing with theological subjects, but doing so *independently* of (that is, while prescinding from) the truth of the faith, although, of course, not in opposition to it.

That this further aspect of the matter was explicitly discussed by the first generation of Carolingian thinkers is shown by a collection of short texts that clearly depend directly on the teaching and personality of Alcuin. The texts are fragmentary, explicitly philosophical from the viewpoint of method, and brought together under the title *Statements*. They are anonymous except for two, the seventh and eighth, which are attributed respectively to Alcuin himself and to his immediate disciple Wizo, nicknamed Candidus. Historians on the whole

agree that these unhomogeneous and fragmentary texts are evidence of the intellectual work that went on in "Alcuin's circle," so called. In practical terms the circle was a group of friends and disciples of the abbot of Tours who were testing the possibility of applying the autonomous demonstrative powers of reason to knowledge of the divine, but without reference to the Scriptures.

Among other shorter reflections on trinitarian doctrine and on the soul, all of them manifestly dependent on models found in Alcuin, a degree of interest attaches to two methods of demonstration that are to be seen in the third and fourth fragments. The aim here is to prove by purely rational arguments the necessity of acknowledging the existence of God, thereby confirming by logic and philosophy what is already made certain, at the level of simple faith, by the authority of revelation. These two early medieval examples of arguments demonstrating with necessity the existence of God are both inspired by the basic Pauline principle that the invisible reality of the divine can be known from visible creatures (Rom 1:20). The arguments are stringently based on logical skills available at the time, the same ones that are brought together in Alcuin's *Dialectic*. They make use, in particular, of the discursive and syllogistic development of an axiomatic and intuitive principle; in logical terms, they use an argument whose evidential character is directly and immediately present to the human intellect.

In the first case (the procedure attested in the third fragment), the starting point is certainty about the hierarchic organization of reality as a whole, following the model of the Porphyrian tree, according to which the higher levels include and govern the lower levels by bringing all the partial perfections of the latter to their completion. Thus simple being is perfected in the living being, and life, in turn, is perfected in intellectual knowledge. It is therefore legitimate to prolong this ascent by admitting a level of existence higher than that of the knowing soul (which is in itself imperfect); this will be the existence of a truly supreme and eternal being who does not depend on other still-higher perfections but governs the entire created cosmos and gives the soul the ability to govern the body.

Taking its cue from the type of dialogue Alcuin preferred, the fourth fragment is structured as a set of questions and answers. In an impressive anticipation of the procedure hallowed about two centuries later in the *Proslogion* of Anselm of Aosta, the argument is based this time on the indubitable self-evidential character of the true definition of God as "a good than which no other is better and a power than which no other is more powerful." The reasoning starts with the premise that if it is possible to find among existing realities one that corresponds to that definition, it will be proven that God exists. At this point (and paralleling what was done in the preceding text), the interlocutor is led by way of a hierarchized consideration of creation to accept that above and beyond the human intellect, which is the highest good and the highest power given us to know, there exists still another, which is the cause of all lesser things. This good being will necessarily be the best of all, or the supreme Good, and its power will be

the greatest of all, or omnipotence, for otherwise we would have to admit that it depends on a still higher cause. But if such a perfect power can truly be thought of, then this being, which is God, must necessarily exist; for “if it did not exist, it would not be truly powerful.”

### C. THEOLOGICAL METHOD IN THE *LIBRI CAROLINI*

Also linked to the intellectual personality of Alcuin (we prescind from the problem of the author’s identity) is another important instance of theological reflection in the first stage of the Carolingian period: namely, *The Capitulary on Images* or *Work against the Synod*, traditionally known as the *Carolingian Books*. Though the text is in fact a real theological treatise of an apologetic-polemical kind, written in a bombastic and redundant style and divided into four books, it presents itself formally, as indicated by the term *capitulare* (used in Frankish legislation), in the garb of a decree issued by the sovereign around 790 and having the force of law in all the territories of the empire.

The document represents an intervention in religious matters, having for its purpose to claim for the king and soon-to-be-emperor of the West the right to demand that his unchallengeable approval be required for the ratification of all episcopal, papal, and conciliar decrees about the true faith. On the basis of this principle Charlemagne issued the *Capitulary*, which repudiated the decrees, mentioned earlier, of the second Council of Nicaea in 787. His reason: in proclaiming the legitimacy of the veneration of images the Council relied on an agreement reached by Empress Irene and Pope Hadrian I without any consultation of the Frankish monarchy and its representatives. In view of the urgent need for official confirmation of Charlemagne’s right to make himself arbiter and guarantor on matters of faith, the Frankish scholars were given the task of developing a text that would serve as a formal condemnation of both iconoclasm and iconodulism and propose a middle way between these two heresies. This middle way meant in practice a respectful esteem of images, not as objects of veneration but as a suitable means of raising the mind of the believer to supra-sensible reality through a sensible representation of it that is purely symbolic.

A still-not-completely settled historiographical debate has yielded various suggestions for the identification of the drafter of this text. Some have opted for Alcuin himself, because it is possible to find many stylistic and, above all, methodological parallels in his writings. Others prefer Theodulf of Orleans, who was in charge of a philological revision of the Bible on which numerous citations in the text seem to depend. In fact, it is probable that the text resulted from the collaborative efforts of a team of specialists; Alcuin and Theodulf may have been members of this team along with others among the more important representatives of the scholars at the court, who had been commissioned to compose a solid refutation of the teaching favorable to the veneration of images that the Council imposed.

The Frankish attack was shot through with the proud claim of a supposed cultural superiority of the West over the materialistic and figurative mentality of the Byzantines. Central to the attack was the idea, remotely Platonic in origin, of the incurable division between corporeity, which is deceitful, disordered, and fortuitous, and suprasensible reality, which is true and immutable. The uneducated oriental theologians maintained that they could attribute to sacred images, made though they were of ugly, corporeal matter, the absurd ability to mediate between the visible and the invisible. In fact, all material images are nothing but shadows of the truth, formed of corporeal elements in order to be used solely as imitations of the changeless. Only when understood in this way can they be offered for the attention of the simple faithful, and then only after careful religious instruction.

The repeated urging of the text to activate the “inner eye,” the eye of the mind that does not let itself be deceived by corporeal appearances, is in fact inspired by the Platonic principle that like knows like. That is, only the intellectual soul that is created in the image of God (and certainly not bodily sensation, which limits itself to the exterior aspect of images) is able to draw near, even if imperfectly, to the suprasensible reality.

The *Carolingian Books* constantly apply these doctrinal principles in the course of a kind of analytical commentary on the canons of Nicaea, which are more or less faithfully translated into Latin. The commentary is supported by a complicated tangle of arguments directed by the rules of the liberal arts and especially logic; there is a continual contrapuntal appeal to the “authority of Scripture” and the “rational investigation of the truth.” The doctrine of the predicables and categories, the square of opposed propositions, topical arguments and various kinds of syllogisms, as well as procedures of a grammatical, rhetorical, arithmological, and mathematical kind—all these are interwoven without letup. Their purpose, however, is not to demonstrate, but only to point to the truth, which, by prejudgment and without any uncertainty, is taken to be identical with the assertions of the true faith, that is, what has always been taught by the western tradition and the Roman church.

### *3. Systematization and Speculative Advances in the Age of Louis the Pious*

As early as the first decade following the proclamation of the empire in the West, a generational change brought to the footlights of the educated Latin world the names of new thinkers who were ready not only to accept the wisdom inherited from their teachers but also to adjust it through verification and experiment. This development of the skills and methodologies of scholars, men of letters, and religious men profited also from a greater degree of distance and autonomy from the centers of political power. With this was combined a cultural decentralization that increasingly began to involve both the great abbeys and the major episcopal sees. A development of this kind also led inevitably to the

rise of increasingly sharper kinds of ideological debates; not infrequently, however, controversies on religious and philosophical subjects concealed reasons for personal dissent and conflicts of a political or administrative kind. Above all, therefore, the reign of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious (814–840), during which administrative division became progressively more extensive due to the rise of a tendency to political disaggregation among the regions making up the empire, also saw an increasingly hostile confrontation between the various tendencies and approaches in theological thought.

#### A. AGOBARD OF LYONS AND THE EARLY THEOLOGICAL DEBATES WITHIN THE CAROLINGIAN WORLD

One of the most productive controversialists of this period was Agobard (d. 840), a Spaniard called to Lyons by bishop Leidrad, whose pupil and then successor he became. He wrote numerous works on a variety of theological subjects; these often corresponded to actions he undertook in an official capacity. He made himself the spokesman for a balanced conception of rational reflection on dogma and was sincerely opposed both to an exaggerated raising of intellectual problems concerning the faith and to the excesses of naïve devotion found among less educated believers, devotion that came perilously close to barbarian superstition.

The book with the explicit title *Answer to the Objections of Fridugisus* belongs to the first of these areas. In it the author openly attacks the methods of Abbot Fridugisus of Tours by answering some of the criticisms the latter had made of him during a controversy that had evidently been going on for some time, but of whose early stages we are not directly informed. Still, what we read in this text is enough to help us understand the importance and significance of the conflict between the two men. Without making any direct reference to the question of the substantial character of nothing and darkness, the bishop of Lyons expressly criticizes the presumptuousness shown by Fridugisus when he subjects the language of Scripture to insistent and useless justifications of a logico-grammatical kind.

Of interest, too, is that Agobard did not scorn to enter directly into the heart of the controversy with a temperate but shrewd rational criticism aimed at showing the inconsistencies in his adversary's overly rigid and subtle arguments. In this way Agobard made clear his own certainty that error does not spring from the meeting of faith and reason as such, but rather from the lack of moderation in conducting the encounter.

For example, the abbot of Tours says that "God" is something different from "truth," because the sense of the nouns is differently defined. Agobard, however, appealing to the authority of Augustine who maintains the identity of truth and God, replies that the meaning of words is never rigidly fixed by some divine law and that it can even vary according to the use made of it, provided the use

is correct. The meaning of the word “truth,” therefore, can be narrowed or broadened and, because there can be many truths, one can use the word in its broadest sense and say that “God, too, is truth.”

In like manner Fridugisus maintains that it is erroneous to say that there could have been “Christians” before the coming of Christ; his reason for this claim is that the name of a class of beings can be true and therefore predicable only once the founder of the class is in existence. Agobard urges him, here again, to recognize that the requirements of the faith are more truthful than the rules set down by the arts and that, since the name of Christ is eternally true, the holiness of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets can suitably be described as “Christian.” In short, precisely because the application of the logico-grammatical method to theological truth can be useful for the growth of the faith, it is expedient always to use the method under the guidance of the light of revelation and to do so case by case. It is truth that makes the rules of the arts acceptable, and not the other way around.

Agobard thus claims to be the true heir of Alcuin’s method, which was based on moderation and balance, as compared with the excessive concern of Fridugisus for technical procedures. In making this claim Agobard also associates himself with the rational humanism of the common teacher of all the Carolingians. Thus, in his work *The Baptism of Converted Jews*, he maintains that a wise Jew who has been baptized can be honored as a teacher even by Christians.

At the same time he regards it as suitable to fall back on his moderate rationalism only when this is indispensable. For example, when in 818, after the death of Felix of Urgel, he wrote to confirm the erroneousness of the adoptionist teaching, he did not think it necessary to have recourse to arguments of a rational kind that had already been used extensively by Blessed Alcuin and other conquerors of the heresy. He was satisfied, instead, to cram his own work with patristic citations that confirmed the conclusions of those earlier writers. In contrast, when he turned his anxious attention to the survival among the Christian faithful of foolish barbarian beliefs, such as recourse to magicians to bring rain or to the practice of the ordeal and the “judgment of God,” he willingly lingered on simple but direct and well-founded uses of argumentative reason in support of good sense, explaining that anything not created by God did not exist and was therefore pure falsehood.

This principle of an intellectual moderation that was neither a rejection of reason nor an excessive use of it was especially useful to Agobard when he had to tackle the complicated problem set by the liturgical reform associated with Amalarius of Metz; he was deeply involved in this for reasons connected with his task as bishop. Agobard had fallen into disfavor with Louis the Pious because during the first phase of the struggles accompanying the division of the Frankish kingdom he had supported the king’s rebellious firstborn son Lothar. For this reason he was temporarily suspended from his duties and replaced by Amalarius, who served as a “chorbishop” (that is, an auxiliary bishop assigned to be administrator).

Amalarius, for his part, was a fervent supporter of the appropriateness of introducing into the Christian Latin liturgy a strongly symbolic interpretation of the formulas and the sacred objects and furnishings and of every gesture of the priest at the altar. In his view this allegorical interpretation of the liturgical action had value as an easy way of bringing the faithful closer, by analogy, to the deeper meanings of the mysteries. During his stay in Lyons, which lasted about four years, Amalarius worked diligently to impose his program of liturgical reform on the province.

Once Agobard was restored to favor and placed again on the episcopal chair of Lyons he took strong steps to annul what Amalarius had done and even to refute it on the theoretical level. The controversy burned fiercely and involved other important thinkers in the religious world of Lyons; prominent among them was Florus, a monk and a fervent supporter of Agobard. The bishop wrote some intense and angry pages in connection with this controversy. Here again, however, his predominant concern was to cut down to size any unjustified intrusion of philosophical and reductively anthropomorphic and creaturely mental formularies such as were used, in vain, by incompetent interpreters of the faith in their attempt to imprison within them the supernatural meaning of divine realities.

The controversies of which Agobard tells us were obviously not always a matter simply of conflict between individual theses, but often involved different individuals in a broad and variously nuanced debate. This was true in particular of an umpteenth revival of discussion about the veneration of images. Claudius, a Spaniard and bishop of Turin (d. 827) and another longtime representative of Carolingian theology, was led by the text of the *Carolingian Books* to adopt for his own diocese the hardline position of forbidding any representation whatsoever of the divine, whether realistic or symbolic. His intention was to exclude every danger of an excessive materialism of the imagination in the weak minds of the simple faithful. But the political situation had by now changed decisively as compared with the end of the eighth century, and Carolingian interests led in the direction of a comfortable reconciliation with the Byzantines and, above all, with the papacy. In 824 Louis the Pious convoked a synod in Paris in order officially to sanction a moderate attitude of the Frankish episcopate toward iconodulia.

In the following years Louis pressed Dungal of Saint-Denis to intervene and find fault with Claudius. As a result, disagreement over the liceity of veneration of sacred images once again inflamed minds. Dungal urged Claudius to have methodical recourse to the rules of the liberal arts in order thereby to acquire a greater awareness of the value of sacred symbols and a reasonable use of them to the advantage of the faith. But his arguments gave the impulse to a new intervention by the now-elderly Agobard: in a *Book on Paintings and Images* he raised his voice once again to condemn not so much Dungal's position as the presumptuousness the latter showed in appealing to earthly knowledge in order

to justify an abusive extension of the act of worship to something that was only a pale shadow of the divine.

## B. RHABANUS MAURUS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Even though the debates thus far described were marked by factiousness and the adoption of strong individual positions, they were always guided, in the minds of those involved, by a lively concern to preserve the unity of Christian wisdom. In each of these men this goal, even if in different and opposing ways, fed the conviction that they were working in complete continuity with the firm ideals of those who first led the theological and cultural rebirth of the empire. These same years of the reign of Louis the Pious saw, therefore, the appearance of many balanced writers who chose to remain apart from the controversies and devote themselves to safeguarding the systematic character of the original plan of spiritual cohesion and unification that the rulers were entrusting to Carolingian scholars.

Such was the perspective, for example, of Benedict, abbot of Aniane, who led and provided the theoretical basis for the restoration of the authentic Benedictine Rule, a restoration aimed at giving new vitality to the spiritual and cultural task of monasticism. In a short dogmatic work titled *The Protective Walls of the Faith*, Benedict gave new currency to the traditional theological method of collecting patristic authorities, among which he included extensive extracts from the early Carolingian teachers (in particular from the *Statements* of Alcuin's circle), since these had by now become universally recognized models of religious wisdom. Such an approach amounted to manifesting a clear awareness of belonging to an integrated and cohesive theological civilization that could renew itself, constructively and without violent tremors, in constant continuity with its own past.

Other writers, each in a particular area of intellectual activity and working in regional centers scattered throughout the empire, likewise contributed to strengthening the same continuity between old and new. They did so through various efforts to update systematically the learned syntheses of late antiquity. In this connection we may mention the contribution of Christian of Stavelot and Angelomus of Luxeuil in the realm of biblical exegesis and that of Sedulius Scotus and Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, who wrote new grammatical handbooks in which they took note of new "modern" phenomena in Christian Latin due to the influence of the Bible and the liturgy. In addition there was the collection of *Decretals*, attributed to a not more closely identified Isidore Mercator, who offered a first, orderly, and rationalized *summa* of the official documents dealing with canonical jurisdiction.

There were also not a few, though still-embryonic syntheses of ideas for the training of an aristocrat, such as the *Education of a King* by Jonas of Orleans, the *Royal Way* of Smaragdus, and the well-known *Handbook*, which combined

elements of theology with moral advice and was written by Dhuoda, an educated aristocratic lady, for the education of her son.

All these limited contributions were, however, transcended by the monumental literary and religious output of Rhabanus Maurus, the foremost writer and Carolingian scholar of the Germanic world; his great importance was due to his outstanding completeness and depth as an expositor. In his youth Rhabanus was a pupil of Alcuin; he became a teacher, then abbot of the monastery of Fulda, and finally archbishop of Mainz from 847 to 856, the year of his death. He was certainly the best interpreter and implementer of the effort, widespread during these years, to achieve a critical reorganization of knowledge.

His first noteworthy piece of writing, a real masterpiece of theological thinking and, at the same time, of unprecedented rhetorical and poetic ability, gives explicit and important witness to his constant interior desire to present the contents of the Christian faith in an organized, analytical, and unified way. The work is known as *In Praise* (or *The Praises*) *of the Holy Cross*. It consists of a cycle of twenty-eight “figured” poems; that is (following a model that had appeared in the Constantinian era), poetic compositions whose verses use the letters of the words in them to form a number of lattice-like rectangles; within these are graceful sacred, geometrical, or representational illustrations provided by miniaturists working under the author’s guidance. Or else the verses form numerous frameworks or vertical, diagonal, or circular lines that make known the presence of other verses hidden in the intricate web of each image.

Each poem is devoted to bringing out an aspect of the rich symbolism of the cross, the fundamental religious sign that in its dense composition of deep mysteries sums up the truth of the dogmas by connecting all of them with the central theme of the Passion of Christ. Paraphrases and comments in prose explain the theoretical aspects of the compositions, the scriptural and numerological symbols used, and the allegories and eschatological allusions in the poems. Thanks to the complicated overlapping of these numerous semantic levels, *The Praises* become a theological treatise of great depth and density, the carrier of a complex but compact doctrinal system by means of which the author elevates the understanding and devotion of the reader with the help of the arts and very subtle poetic and evocative procedures.

After becoming a teacher at Fulda, Rhabanus wrote *The Training of Clerics*, that is, a manual on the instruction of the monks in which the same ideal, the ascending completion of the understanding of the Christian faith, is now developed into a theological and religious pedagogy. This pedagogy has an organic unity that is secured by using a strict parallelism with the structure of the philosophical sciences. Thus the physics of monastic spirituality is provided by the scriptural *lectio*, which contains the world, that is, the “nature” to which the believer’s search for knowledge is directed. Ethics derives from the practice of the evangelical, theological, and cardinal virtues. Logic, finally, emerges from the totality of the doctrines and methodologies taught by secular scholarship,

which formally supports the doctrinal certainties marking Christian knowledge and morality.

In his mature years, first as abbot of Fulda and then as bishop, Rhabanus set out to prepare a systematic presentation of a complete reading of Scripture that was not only to be theoretical but could also be consulted for concrete and practical purposes; this was to be realized through the compilation of an (almost) complete commentary on the entire scriptural canon. The commentary served as an explanatory aid, built up out of numerous extracts, stitched together here and there by the compiler's original remarks, that were carefully selected from the works of the most reliable commentators of the patristic age and identified by the book to which they referred. The work derived further clarity through careful indications of the origin of the various excerpts, this by means of easily decipherable sigla. In the following centuries this ingenious compilation of the best and most authoritative interpretations of the Bible would be available to monastic readers, among whom it was widely used and appreciated as a very valuable exegetical help. Owing to its anthological nature, it was characterized by a completeness of information and an instructional precision that made it superior to any other available commentary.

There is a fundamental idea that marks Rhabanus' exegetical work but is also in practice the inspiring principle of all his theological writings and the best key for reading them. It is expressed in his commentary on the book of Wisdom in connection with his exegesis of the verse "You have arranged all things by measure, number, and weight" (Wis 11:21). The quantitative and qualitative order of the universe is a sign (he says) of the harmonious arrangement established at the moment of creation by the perfect planning of the divine Intellect. This order is therefore the common reality sought in all the cognitive investigations of the human mind, which by means of these investigations seeks to identify and study the laws governing nature and to compare these with the internal norms of created thought as codified and taught by the liberal arts. In thus discovering the parallelism between the order of creation and the order of thought, human beings learn to know also the organizing perfection of the thought of the Creator, that is, of divine Wisdom, which is the cause of both orders. They can also hope to ascend toward this Wisdom through knowledge and faith, to the point of becoming completely assimilated to its truth.

Rhabanus' final, likewise very ambitious work, was an encyclopedic *The Natures of Things*, an attempt to give an intellectual description of the created world in order better to draw near to the Creator's own understanding of it. The attempt yields a concrete, organized collection of erudite information that is drawn from the extensive heritage of learning accumulated by the Carolingians during the first fifty years of the intellectual renaissance. The original, purely antiquarian and conservational aims of late antique and Romano-barbarian encyclopedic collections are here carried to a new level by Rhabanus in a plan to place knowledge on a new religious foundation. This new foundation promotes

and accompanies the ascensional movement of the soul by setting it free of the bonds of the corporeal world, purifying it through the practice of virtue, and leading it to the most perfect contemplation of the truth.

This deeply theological dimension of the work is here again brought out by a direct reference to the ternary presence, recognizable in every creature, of the principles of universal order established by God in the image of his own Trinity. The being of every thing is determined by the supreme Wisdom which arranges things according to “measure” or quality, “number” or quantity, and “weight,” that is, the proportion or harmonious character of the qualitative and quantitative components, all this in the context of a universal arrangement that is at once rigorously logical, organically esthetic, and ethically perfect.

#### *4. Theological Debate in Carolingian Europe after Verdun*

The theological influence of Rhabanus Maurus, a man already greatly respected and unanimously esteemed during his lifetime, became widespread after his death, especially in the Germanic area. In particular, his encyclopedic and systematic outlook became the dominant characteristic of his more direct disciples. One example is Walafrid Strabo (d. 849), who carefully revised Rhabanus’ commentaries on the Pentateuch and himself wrote a handbook, *Matters Ecclesiastical*, on the essential proficiencies of a churchman.

The same effort at compilation can also be seen in the lengthy *Letter* that Ermenrich of Ellwangen (d. 874), a pupil of Walafrid, sent to Grimoald, abbot of the Swiss monastery of Sankt-Gallen, though the letter shows a lesser degree of methodological consistency. In it the writer explains and paraphrases the twofold evangelical commandment of divine and human love, producing a variegated mosaic of learned variations on the theme; the mosaic feeds a rhapsodic religious meditation with a large number of excerpts, ideas, definitions, models, and precepts attested in the first century of Carolingian literature.

In contrast, the model provided by Rhabanus also stimulated new efforts at methodological development and conceptual accuracy in the use of traditional theological terminology. Eginard, an already elderly man (d. 840), was one of the last survivors of Alcuin’s generation and was known primarily for a famous biography of Charlemagne. He was a close friend of Rhabanus, having been a fellow student at Fulda; with a sure touch he gave voice to the influence of this friendship in his work *The Adoration of the Cross*, which he composed in 836.

In this final echo of the Carolingian debate on images, Eginard set out to explain the legitimate kind of veneration to be reserved for the cross of Christ. He found his answer to the problem in a careful terminological distinction between *oratio* (prayer) and *adoratio* (adoration, worship, veneration). The former is spiritual and interior and is reserved for God alone; the latter, which implies a bodily gesture, is permitted even in relation to sacred objects, the angels, and holy human beings and is therefore most appropriate in relation to the cross as

the fundamental sign of the redemption that leads the soul toward the invisible truth of the divine. Eginard's contribution is valuable chiefly as a testimony to the felt need, widespread in the territories of the empire, of defining the semantic heritage of traditional theological language and safeguarding it against ambiguities and challenges.

Once again, however, efforts such as these at uniformity and the preclusion of possible variations of custom in theology were an indirect sign of the growing tension that was shaking the Carolingian intellectual world. The tension was due to the acceleration of civil conflicts and political divisions caused by the far-from-peaceful parceling out of the territorial inheritance of Louis the Pious among his sons. When the treaty of Verdun in 843 put a temporary end to the civil wars by dividing the empire into three distinct kingdoms, the unifying and centralizing political plan of Charlemagne was henceforth transformed in practice into a complex machinery of divided and polarized authorities that took turns controlling one another. The writers of political treatises during these years showed a clear awareness of the change that had occurred. Sedulius Scotus, for example, in his *Christian Rulers*, which he dedicated to the sons of Louis the Pious, continued to assert the emperor's original role as "vicar of Christ in the government of the church," but he expressly subordinated the activity of earthly rulers to the advice and judgment of the bishops, who are the sole means of control and sole guarantors of continuity for the very exercise of political power.

One of the most effective witnesses to the increased moral and administrative responsibilities of the clergy in the government of the "Christian State" during the decades after the treaty of Verdun was undoubtedly Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims from 845 to 882, the year of his death. From the very beginning of his own governmental activities he was concerned to defend the autonomy of the church against any abuse or interference by the feudal nobility and even by the kings themselves. He never ceased to maintain the directly divine origin of political authority and therefore the obligation of kings and emperors to subordinate their activity to the ministry of the bishops. This doctrine is very clearly expressed in, for example, the treatise *The Divorce of Lothar and Theutberga*, written to condemn Lothar II's intention of repudiating Queen Theutberga in order to marry his concubine.

The control of orthodoxy was evidently another area in which the interventions of Hincmar and other bishops having the same conception of ecclesiastical authority were an indispensable and even symbolic proof of the continuity, despite changing times, of their authority as spiritual leaders of the community of believers.

A degree of cultural awakening occurred toward the middle of the century and was fostered by the at least temporary cessation of civil conflicts. During the same years there occurred an interesting intellectual development in the monastic world, which became increasingly free of royal and episcopal control

and less involved in social and political life. Both of these phenomena led to a considerable increase in suggestions for going more deeply, both methodologically and conceptually, into religious questions. Not infrequently, moreover, the monastic preference was for the more interior aspects of spiritual wisdom and problems connected with the intimate religious and existential relationship of the soul with God. This led to an open confrontation, in the area of the doctrinal development of dogmas, with the harshly critical bishops, who for their part were increasingly concerned to keep under control the ethical and practical conclusions drawn from theological theses and to check the rise of excessively individualistic religious attitudes.

On the other hand, the sovereigns persisted in their determination to proclaim themselves still the guardians responsible for the cultural and religious life of their territory. And while they continued to protect poets and masters of the liberal arts and to subsidize the embryonic schools at their courts, they did not hesitate to claim the role of judge also, and even especially, in debates of a theological kind. In particular, Charles the Bald, last son of Louis the Pious, king of the western part of the empire, and then emperor from 875 on, set himself up as heir to the leading cultural and religious role played by his grandfather Charlemagne. On several occasions he circulated lists of theological problems among representatives of the various classes of intellectual authorities of the day: bishops, monks, and masters of the liberal arts. The effect was to give rise to quarrels among them rather than to promote the emergence of peacemaking solutions.

As a result, in the middle years of the ninth century the kingdom of France became the setting for a densely interwoven complex of discussions of theological subjects, calling often for the publication of official positions and synodal decrees but almost never leading to open breaks, sanctions, or persistence in schism. The most complex and prolonged of these discussions, and one engaging a great many authors (the discussions often involved the same individuals as protagonists on various fronts), occurred precisely in the years around the middle of the century and had to do with the subject of divine predestination.

In 847, Noting, bishop of Verona, sent Rhabanus Maurus, archbishop of Mainz, a worried letter telling him of how Gottschalk, a German monk of the Mainz archdiocese, was traveling around northeastern Italy preaching a dubiously orthodox doctrine on predestination. Rhabanus was well acquainted with Gottschalk, who had been a monk of Fulda when Rhabanus was abbot there and had always shown a dangerous intolerance of ecclesiastical discipline. At Rhabanus' own request Gottschalk had been transferred by imperial decree to France, first to the monastery of Corbie, then to that of Orbais, which was under the uncompromising jurisdiction of Hincmar of Rheims. The dangerous preacher had evidently fled, perhaps on the pretext of a pilgrimage to Rome and, appealing to the thought of Augustine (so Noting said), was now teaching the inescapable effectiveness of the judgment by which God binds the saints to good and the wicked to evil.

In his reply to Noting, Rhabanus properly expresses his own puzzlement at this teaching, which comes dangerously close to theological determinism, but, without entering into the controversy, he limits himself to asserting the absolute simplicity, unity, and necessary goodness of the divine will. Rhabanus then saw to it that the rebellious monk should appear before him; he had him judged and condemned by a synod of Mainz and sent him back to the monastery in France to which he belonged, in order that he might be judged by his own metropolitan, Hincmar. Hincmar took direct and energetic steps to deal with the matter, which had serious implications for the problem of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and the moral responsibility of the individual. He convoked a synod of the bishops of northern France, which met in the royal palace of Quierzy in the presence of Charles the Bald. Gottschalk was condemned once again, publicly flogged, forced to burn his writings, and warned not to continue preaching the rejected doctrine. The rebellious monk was then locked up in the monastery of Hautvillers, under the supervision of Hincmar, and remained there until his death about twenty years later.

But from his prison Gottschalk began to publish and circulate short writings in defense of his thought. Among others there were a first *Confession*, known as the *Shorter*, a book on *Predestination* in several parts, and *A More Detailed Confession* in which he explains how the unity of the divine nature is not necessarily compromised by a division among the effects of God's will. In this new phase of the debate he thought up a further theoretical refinement of his teaching, this on the basis of a suggestion he derived from the writings of Isidore of Seville. According to the latter, divine predestination should be described in Latin as *gemina* ("twin," "twofold") or "looking in two directions": it is one in itself but double inasmuch as it is reflected in two effects that are equal but distinct. This clever grammatical artifice made it possible, by means of a predicate that is singular in number but has two meanings, to declare that in God there is a singleness of substance but a plurality of effects.

The sophisticated use of the rules of grammar was, in fact, Gottschalk's preferred means of explaining the innermost meanings of the words of revelation. He knew well the deductive methods of logic and the types of rhetorical argument, and he did not scorn their use, but his demonstrations concentrated on grammar, a preference surely due also to his strong personal inclination to base the understanding of the faith on the words of Scripture (an inclination typical of monasticism). In his opinion the rule-bound language of grammar was, because God had created it for this purpose, the most faithful mirror of the universal order of the cosmos, whose perfection and, at the same time, inviolability it reflects. But the compactness of that order is not only formal, because in the area of ethics it links moral values and the destinies of human individuals by establishing an immutable and eternal correspondence between particular actions and the rewards set by God.

Gottschalk constantly referred back to the Augustinian tradition and the theological methods tested during the first decades of the renaissance. For this

reason the circulation of his writings elicited a good deal of sympathy among some important representatives of Frankish religious culture and led in a short time to the establishment of a real theological party on his behalf. Among these men were the elderly and learned philologist Lupus of Ferrières, Bishop Prudentius of Troyes, who fought to base the Christian cultural tradition on the authority of the Fathers, and Ratramnus of Corbie, a monk, theologian, and penetrating cultivator of the liberal arts. But a further, seemingly irrelevant factor linked these individuals despite their divergent interests and training: namely, a shared aversion to the lordly exercise of archiepiscopal authority of a pre-feudal kind. This authority, with the sovereign's support, strengthened the activity of the archbishop of Rheims and gave credibility to such a limited assembly as Quiercy, consisting as it did of aristocrats and prelates trained more to deal with legal and administrative matters than with the study of Christian truth.

In the face of these criticisms Hincmar counterattacked by writing a treatise/pastoral letter *To the Simple [Faithful] and Recluses* (i.e., religious). His purpose was to use citations from the Fathers to strengthen the theoretical positions already expressed by Rhabanus Maurus; he also strongly exhorted his readers to trust with optimistic confidence in the justice and cosmic governance of a God who is an absolute sovereign, provident, and guarantor of just rewards for good done. Hincmar was moved by fear of the consequences of Gottschalk's doctrinal views (fatalism, laxism, superstition) and was concerned to safeguard the church's role as distributor of grace. He therefore urged Gottschalk's supporters to distinguish between divine foreknowledge, which embraces equally both the good and the evil in the world, and predestination, which consists in the restoration of the order violated by human beings. Predestination therefore has for its object redemption and all its effects, that is, the salvation of the just but not the punishment of the wicked, who are solely responsible for their own damnation.

In support of this teaching, which seemed to him the only orthodox doctrine on predestination, Hincmar felt the need of winning the support of reason placed at the service of the faith. He needed also to reply to the abstruse subtleties of Gottschalk and his supporter Ratramnus. Therefore, in 851, probably by way of his ally Pardulus, bishop of Laon, he asked for an opinion on the teachings of Gottschalk from Master John Scotus, a thinker of Irish origin and a protégé of Charles the Bald, who taught and practiced the liberal arts at the school of the court.

In reply to the request John Scotus wrote the short work *Predestination or Divine Predestination*. From its very outset the atmosphere of this work is that of a religious Platonism, which is the foundation of an orderly hierarchic conception of created being and an unbroken aspiration to attain to theological knowledge through the stages of a gradual movement away from matter and from the accidentality of individuals. In this deeply and rationally optimistic setting John Scotus sees no place for the gloomy ethical pessimism of a predestination understood as a rigid and immutably necessary connection between

cause and effect (that is, between goodness and reward, on the one hand, and between wickedness and damnation on the other). In his view such a conception cancels out the very effects of God's mercy and of the grace of the redemption, which Christ wrought in order to save from evil everything that, insofar as it is real, is a work of God and, by that very fact, good.

In a further step John starts with the assumption that, as far as the doctrinal aspects are concerned, the rejection of Gottschalk's error and the criticism of its distance from the authentic teaching of the Fathers are already clearly stated in the replies of Rhabanus and Hincmar. For his part, being, as he is, a master of liberal arts, he chooses to refute Gottschalk by coming down onto the ground of demonstrative method and rigorous argumentation. To the grammatical formalism of his adversary he opposes the (in his view) much more demanding and infallible tool of dialectic (that is, logic), the art of determining the truth and making it manifest.

In accord with a model of Neoplatonic origin (used also by John Damascene), the art contains four methodologies, agreement among which places beyond doubt the solidity of the results reached: division, definition, and deduction, followed by a reconstruction of the concepts being discussed. John also issues an urgent invitation to his readers to deepen their knowledge of Greek, for this will enable them to understand fully the authentic teaching of the Fathers and the effectiveness of the philosophical methodologies used by them. After the statement of its presuppositions, the text of Scotus's little work is divided into nineteen chapters that develop a series, with side-branches, of arguments and demonstrations. These make it possible to bring into focus all the rationally knowable aspects of the complex mystery of predestination and its effects on the destiny of individual souls.

In the process John brings to bear the hermeneutical power of almost all the logical tools available to a Latin thinker during these years: definitions, differences, etymologies, divisions, analyses, oppositions, distinctions, clarifications and checking of concepts and propositions, chains of syllogisms, major premises, and the *topoi* ("topics") or more general areas of thought from which these premises are derived.

The work on *Predestination* is, then, based frankly and effectively on the Augustinian premise (mentioned at the beginning of this book) that "the true philosophy" and "the true religion" are one and the same. The book is a complicated but clear and linear demonstrative structure that is very competently placed at the service of the fundamental principle on which, in the author's view, every possible grasp of the divine attributes, including foreknowledge and predestination, is based. This principle is that the unity of the divine is absolute and incontrovertible and that multiplicity and accidentality belong solely to the created world. The formal structure of the treatise, then, is that supplied by a rigorous set of arguments, all the conclusions of which are constantly supported by confirming citations from the Fathers. But the speculative scenario that is

outlined and confirmed by the arguments is the very one that reciprocally supports it: the optimistic conception of a harmonious universe that is the work of a God who is a wise and provident architect, a universe that is a triumph of beauty and goodness, and whose truth is solidly guaranteed by the strict consistency of thought, language, and reality.

Foreknowledge and predestination or, better, knowledge and appointed destiny (for in God there is no temporal succession) are therefore a single reality in the one divine essence. But for the weak human intellect that is immersed in time they are two different ways in which it is forced to imagine, on the one hand, the natural relationship and, on the other, the moral relationship between created things and the divine arrangement that gives them existence and governs them. If evil exists, it is explicable only by the imperfection of the free creaturely will, which decides to orient its own choices and actions in a direction contrary to the cosmic order that God established, that is, predestined, in an eternal instant outside of time, and bodied forth in the eternal ideas in his Word. In fact, God never punishes the nature he himself created; he does, however, punish the wrong direction taken by the creaturely will. Indeed, the punishment is simply the outcome of the free human will's turning away from its natural object, which is God. It is precisely, and only, by desiring something other than God and what he wills that the sinner punishes himself by losing the good for which every creature is eternally and universally predestined by God.

As soon as John Scotus' little work appeared, its rational form and speculative boldness made it a ready target of theological attacks by representatives of the party opposed to Hincmar of Rheims. Prudentius of Troyes wrote a ferocious treatise, *Predestination: An Answer to John Scotus*, in which he accused the archbishop of having illicitly brought into a difficult religious discussion a "sophist" who was more familiar with Martianus Capella than with the Fathers of the Church and who introduced into the discussion dangerous philosophical ideas that could easily lead to immanentism or Neo-pelagianism. Prudentius was echoed by Florus of Lyons, a monk and author of a series of polemical statements against the decisions and procedures of the synod of Quierzy. In these he directs his arrows chiefly against the "nineteen chapters" of John Scotus (but shows that he had only an indirect and quite superficial knowledge of their contents). At this point Hincmar distanced himself from John Scotus, saying he had nothing in common with him.

In 853 a new teaching of Gottschalk, this time on the Trinity, raised further concerns for the archbishop, who convoked a council at Soissons and once again won a formal condemnation. This "new treachery," as Hincmar described it, consisted in a proposal to introduce the expression *trina deitas* ("triune Godhead") into the liturgy as being appropriate in invocations of the Trinity. It was clearly Gottschalk's intention to confirm, by means of this new formula, the correctness of the grammatical method he had already applied to predestination. The method was based on the use of singular adjectives that had a plural mean-

ing: just as in the case of *gemina* the method served to express the “doubleness” of predestination within the single unity of the will, so now *trina* was used to ensure the “tripleness” of the divine persons within the unity of a single substance. As in the previous case of predestination, the council of Soissons formally rejected this new formula, which it regarded as a liturgical abuse, and asserted the impossibility of combining any multiplicative predicate with “Godhead,” a word that expresses only the one divine substance.

Gottschalk replied to this new condemnation by composing a treatise, *The Triune Deity*, and asking his friend Ratramnus of Corbie, who had already spoken in his favor on predestination, to intervene again in the dispute over the Trinity. From this point on Ratramnus played a leading role in the group opposed to Hincmar and, shortly after receiving Gottschalk’s request, composed a polemical *Divine Predestination* in two books, as well as an anthology of patristic texts in support of *trina deitas*. The archbishop answered in a short work, *The Godhead Is One and not Triune*.

Ratramnus was a trained and careful scholar and one convinced that the primary need was to base theological research on solid definitions and verifications of the reliability of the terminology being used. This methodological reminder was, as mentioned earlier, one that other thinkers also recalled during these years. Ratramnus saw a perfect example and therefore an important model in the *Answer to Eutyches*, the fifth of the short theological works of Boethius, an author who became a favorite source of his thought.

With great logical clarity and procedural consistency Ratramnus applied this methodology as he intervened in almost all the controversies that arose during the time of Charles the Bald; in these disputes he continually called on his opponents to respect the fundamental rule of conceptual clarity. In addition to debates on the subjects of Gottschalk’s preaching, Ratramnus also involved himself in numerous other areas of disagreement. On two occasions he disagreed sharply with doctrines formulated and supported by his own abbot, Paschasius Radbertus of Corbie, one of them dealing with the reality of the eucharistic mystery, the other with the birth of Christ. On two other occasions he intervened in a resolute way on questions arising from the nature of the human soul.

The discussion of the Eucharist went back to the very year of the Treaty of Verdun (843) and was one of those arising directly from a query of Charles the Bald. The latter asked the monks of Corbie whether the eucharistic change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus takes place “in mystery,” that is, symbolically, or “in truth,” that is, in actual reality. The two monks, Paschasius and Ratramnus, were both convinced that the answer to the two alternatives should be “both” (the eucharistic change is symbolic *and* real), but they differed radically in their explanation of the “in reality.” Paschasius Radbertus immediately championed a solution based on a definitely materialistic realism (real material body and real material blood) and sent the sovereign a treatise on *The Body and Blood of the Lord* that he had written a few years earlier.

Ratramnus responded with a treatise bearing the same title, in which he sees the sacrament as an act of high symbolico-spiritual meaning that produces a salvific food for the soul; in order to be such, the food must be separated from the accidents of space and time and from the corruptibility of matter.

Ten years later, in the very year of the Council of Soissons (853), Ratramnus wrote a short work, *The Birth of Christ*, after learning that someone, for the purpose of strengthening the doctrine of Mary's virginity "in the act of giving birth" (*in partu*), was spreading the idea that Christ's birth took place in a miraculous manner and not in the usual natural way. In Ratramnus' opinion these ideas risked detracting from the integrity of Christ's human nature, which can be guaranteed only by a normal and natural birth from the maternal womb. Paschasius Radbertus, for his part, in a document sent to the religious of a monastery of women that was under his protection, had pointed to Mary as the perfect model of virginal integrity, both spiritual and corporeal. He now recognized that he was the object of Ratramnus' attack and replied immediately by circulating his *The Childbirth of the Virgin*. Here he left to God's unqualified omnipotence the choice of the way in which the Virgin brought the Savior into the world. But he maintained a negative certainty: it was impossible that this way should have been a childbirth that compromised her purity, unlike the way in which other human beings, who are stained by original sin, are born.

It is easy to see that in both areas—the Eucharist and the virgin birth—Paschasius' theological choices were inspired by a deeply anti-Platonic and anti-dialectical approach, that is, by a refusal to admit that human reason could claim to describe a cosmic order willed by God and to which God himself had to submit. The concreteness of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of the altar, as well as the certainty about his real birth in a way that fully respected his mother's virginity, were guaranteed solely by the unfathomable and unlimited omnipotence of God, and no exercise of logic could ever provide a sufficiently persuasive explanation.

Ratramnus, on the other hand, bore witness to a spiritualism of a completely opposite kind, one based on a careful definition and delimitation of the scope and effective power of human logic. The rules of dialectic strictly reflect the way in which natural things exist; this is due to the parallelism, established by God at the moment of creation, between the "order of things" and the "order of ideas." But when these rules are applied to something supernatural, such as everything that is an object of revelation, the powers of dialectic inevitably undergo a formal change as they are adapted to the object whose knowableness they intend to measure. (Once again Boethius had explained this in his *Short Sacred Works*, especially the one on the Trinity).

Thus the birth of Jesus is a bodily act belonging to the natural world and therefore takes place in accordance with the laws in force throughout the visible world. In contrast, the eucharistic change is not a material repetition, in time, of Christ's sacrifice, as though it were necessary on each occasion to renew the

redemption of the human race. The change is therefore something purely spiritual and symbolic that cannot be subordinated to the rules of logic and of the natural sciences that depend on them. The measurement of human reason's ability to define, which is checked from time to time by taking into account the nature of the object to which it is applied, is therefore the fulcrum of Ratramnus' method.

This method also governs the first of his two treatises on psychology, a short *The Soul*, in which he maintains that the soul is non-corporeal and non-localizable, that is, that it cannot be conceptually defined according to the principles of the sciences of things visible and corporeal. (The treatise was probably a reply to Hincmar of Rheims, who had advanced contrary views in a short work *The Divine and Multiple Other Aspects of the Soul*.)

It was, however, chiefly in his final work (around 863) that Ratramnus produced the most mature speculative results of his method. The work was the *Book on the Soul*, addressed to bishop Odo of Beauvais, who had for some time been abbot of Corbie in succession to Paschasius. Its purpose was to challenge the teaching on anthropology that was being defended by an anonymous monk of the abbey of Fly, who attributed it to his respected teacher, a not-further-identifiable Macarius Scotus. According to the anonymous writer, Macarius had claimed that from the works of Augustine the idea could be correctly derived that all individual human beings participate in a single universal soul.

In validating the more common theological certainty about the concrete individuality of each personal soul Ratramnus found strong support in his own methodology: he maintained that a universal soul is conceivable only as a product of human logic and not as an actual reality. The reason: since the substance of souls is a primary, single, and real substance, it can only be individual; if it were universal it would be substantial in only a secondary sense, that is, as a sum of characteristics common to various individuals, and it could never be an actual reality, that is, a person endowed with his or her own will and intellect and therefore responsible for his or her moral choices.

Clear once again, in this discussion, is the theological and philosophical influence of Boethius; in fact, Ratramnus includes in his text, paraphrasing and analytically commenting on them, some pages of Boethius, especially from the *Answer to Eutyches* and from the commentaries on the *Isagoge* of Porphyrius. For the first time in the centuries of the early Middle Ages, Ratramnus gives special attention to the discussion of the nature of the universals; he solves the problem by coming out explicitly in favor of the concrete reality of the individual.

The *Book on the Soul* was one of the final products of the period of lively theological discussions that went on in the lands controlled by Charles the Bald. With the deaths of some of the most influential scholars involved in these discussions the more rigid forms of theoretical thought were toned down. In 860, at the Council of Douzy, after various reciprocal condemnations and refutations,

the party of Hincmar and the party that had formed around Florus of Lyons reached a general agreement on predestination: in the final analysis both agreed to forget about Gottschalk and his arguments.

During these same years, in which John Scotus remained apart from theological controversies, Charles the Bald gave him the task of retranslating the works of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin in order to replace the muddled version prepared by Hilduin of Saint-Denis about twenty-five years earlier. The maturation of John's skills and thought as a result of this encounter with Neoplatonic Christian theology from the East would lead him to work out a solid, complex, and coherent speculative system that seems today to have been the final and best success produced by the entire philosophical-religious literature of Carolingian civilization.

To the historian, due in part to that ending, the twenty years of theological production and passionate discussions that marked the long reign of Charles the Bald, from the Peace of Verdun to the Council of Douzy, appear to have been, in substance, a period in which the young but already vigorous world of Carolingian religious thought gave itself to study and an assessment of its own strengths. It was a large intellectual laboratory in which tools of research and critical appraisal were forged and improved amid the lively clash of doctrines, factions, and profoundly different ideologies. These tools allowed scholars to improve their cognitive powers and to acquire an ever-greater consciousness of belonging to a unanimous Christianity, within which dissent could have a place only insofar as it served as an incentive to shed light on what was still obscure and uncertain.

### 5. *John Scotus Eriugena*

The island origin of the master whom contemporaries called simply "Iohannes Scottus" is confirmed by a second name indicating origin, which he himself coined: at the beginning of his Latin translation of the *corpus areopagiticum* he describes himself by means of a place-name from ancient Irish combined with a Greek root: "Eriu-gena," that is, born in Ireland.

Neither the year of his birth nor the year of his death is known, nor is it easy to determine just when he entered the service of Charles the Bald. The only certain date is that of his intervention in the controversy over predestination: 851. His activity as teacher of the liberal arts at the court, as well as the basis for Prudentius of Troyes' rebuke that he was excessively familiar with the *Marriage* of Martianus Capella, are documented by his set of learned notes on that text. These show that even in his early years of teaching he possessed a very wide-ranging proficiency in matters scientific and philosophical.

After the composition of his *Predestination*, the depth of his learning and the resultant linguistic and hermeneutical clarity found a splendid opportunity for their application in the translation of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and

later, approximately during the years 860–870, in other valuable translations of important works of Greek patristic thought. These included the *Ambigua* and the *Questions to Thallassius* of Maximus the Confessor and the *Creation of Man* of Gregory of Nyssa. This last was a treatise presenting a Platonic-Christian anthropology based on an allegorical exegesis of the biblical account of the creation of humanity in the image of God; John gave his translation the title *The Image*.

In the area of cultural growth and speculative penetration the first beneficiary of these translations was the author himself, whose familiarity with Greek-language writers was further increased by other texts already to be read in Latin or in any case rendered available during these same years. These included the *Homilies on the Hexaemeron* of Basil of Caesarea (which gave a physico-literal interpretation of the six days of creation, based on the author's philosophical and scientific knowledge), *The Man Well Anchored* (or *On the Faith*: a compendium of dogma) by Epiphanius of Salamis, the *On First Principles* of Origen, and, perhaps mediated by Maximus the Confessor, numerous passages from the sermons of Gregory of Nazianzus.

John Scotus made innovative use of these sources of eastern thought, his deeper knowledge of which, even by itself, gave his work exceptional originality in comparison to all the principal representatives of Carolingian culture. But in addition, John's growth in learning did not neglect the contribution derived from a good many careful readings of the works of the Latin Fathers: Augustine first and foremost, whom John consulted and reflected on with constant and devoted dedication, then Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Hilary of Poitiers. Finally, his cultural background also included, of course, the exemplars of late antique philosophical and literary erudition: in addition to Martianus Capella and Boethius there were the *Timaeus* as commented on by Chalcidius; Macrobius; and the classical Latin writers such as Cicero, Pliny, and Virgil.

During these years of his maturity, on the basis of this substantial and unusual fund of philosophical and theological knowledge John Scotus planned the composition of his major work, *Periphyseon* (*On Natures*), a title that is further evidence of the author's ease with the Greek language and that only in the modern period editors mistakenly replaced with the easier title *The Division of Nature*. This is a lengthy, structured dialogue, in five books, between a Master or Teacher and a Disciple or Pupil. Whereas the style of Alcuin's dialogues was essentially didactic, John's dialogues are marked by an alternation of lengthy and detailed interventions, characterized by a wide-ranging and analytic discussion of each argument or problem met by the two individuals in the course of their reasoning.

The text is full of lengthy extracts from the works of the Fathers (taken in good measure from John's own translations), thereby confirming the important part played in the formation of Eriugena's thought by the sapiential contribution of Greek and Latin patristic literature. The entire speculative plan contained in

the work comes down in practice to an attempt to explain, with the tools available to the created intellect, all the varied manifestations of truth that the mind meets in the study of both visible and invisible realities.

More even than the ancient philosophers, the Fathers of the Church were witnesses to the very important results obtained by such study in the past, the reason for this being that their investigations were based on a complete complementarity between scientific knowledge and the knowledge of revelation. They were based, in other words, on the complete synthesis of “the true religion” and “the true philosophy” which, beginning with the first lines of his *Predestination*, John Scotus proclaimed, as we saw, to be the foundation and justification of all human knowing.

By applying a solid argumentative method based on the rules of liberal knowledge and on a richly expressive but also incisive and measured language, John now intended to take up and, as far as possible, complete this cognitive project. He did so by trying to show how every truth attainable by human beings, from the broadest and most general to the most specific and particular, is always a further insight into the divine. For though the divine is in itself unknowable and unfathomable, it has manifested itself in creation in an infinite number of revelations (or better, to use a favorite term of Maximus the Confessor, of “theophanies”), which the truly wise person is urged to investigate and understand.

The most profound and complete of all the theophanies is certainly God’s revelation of his own truth in the Sacred Scriptures. For this reason the cognitive system of reality that Charles the Bald’s philosopher put together could not but be from its very first expressions a theological system: i.e., a system that, first in the conceptual principles that are its starting point and then in every further development is supported by the necessary information that the sacred text offers to the human mind in order to help and direct it on the long and complicated journey toward the final discovery of truth. This consummation will therefore be the result not only of a sincere belief in the revealed datum but also of a definitive understanding of the truth that is attested by that datum and is an object of belief in it.

Not only, therefore, do a remarkable number of scriptural citations and references fill the pages of the *Periphyseon*; the entire formal approach that is taken in the work and lies behind the complexity of the demonstrative language and the continual developments on problems that present themselves, one after another, to the inquiring mind, is essentially that of an extensive, detailed, and very fruitful commentary on the words of Scripture, starting with those that open the book of Genesis: “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.”

#### A. NATURE AND ITS DIVISIONS

In the opening lines of the *Periphyseon* the Master suggests a single word that is suitable for expressing to the human mind everything that is thinkable, or, in other words, all the things *that are* and, at the same time, all the things

that are not. This all-embracing word is “nature.” The Disciple cannot but agree:

**Master.** When I think hard and when with more than ordinary effort I seek, as far as my powers allow me, to understand the fact that the first and supreme division of all the things that the intellect can perceive or that entirely surpass its powers of penetration is the division between *what is* and *what is not*, then the only word that presents itself to my mind as able, like a genus, to include all things is “nature” (in Greek, *physis*, in Latin, *natura*). Or do you think that this is not correct?

**Disciple.** On the contrary, I am in complete agreement. Indeed, even I, who am taking my very first step on the way of rational thinking, find that that is the situation.

It is from this fundamental premise that human reason must begin its effort to understand what lies hidden within the wealth of meaning proper to the word “nature.” The Master then sets out to demonstrate the knowableness of nature by using the rules established by logic: “nature” is a noun signifying a genus, but a genus to be regarded as the most inclusive one that can be thought. For this reason it is not possible to follow the instructions of Aristotle and formulate a *definition* of this genus, because it cannot be located within a still-more-inclusive semantic field (as “man” is included in “animal” and defined as “rational animal”). In cases of this kind, logic then suggests applying to such broad and complex concepts the opposite logical procedure, namely, *division*.

As a genus, then, nature can be divided into a number of species (or, to use Eriugena’s term, “forms”) through the identification of sufficient differences. It is, however, certainly a very complicated task for the human mind to identify strict distinctions within a concept that must embrace everything that is true, including, therefore, even the ineffable divine essence and its unknowable attributes. It becomes necessary at this point to fall back on the contribution of knowledge of the truth that comes from Christian revelation. In Scripture reason does in fact discover a conceptual factor that enables it to understand a logical and real difference, and therefore a division: the concept of creation. Once it becomes possible to predicate the verb “create” within the field covered by “nature” it also becomes possible to set up a logically correct division of nature.

**Master.** Then *nature* is, as I said, the *general* name that includes everything that is and everything that is not?

**Disciple.** It is. And indeed in an absolutely universal way, since nothing can come to mind that falls outside the meaning of that word.

**Master.** Since, then, we agree that nature is a *general* term, I would like now to apply to it the rule dealing with the division into a number of *species* because of a number of *differences*. . . . It seems to me that on the basis of four differences nature is divided into four species. The first of these is *that which creates and is not created*; the second, *that which is created and creates*; the third, *that*

*which is created and does not create*; the fourth: *that which does not create and is not created*.

The unlimited extension of the term “nature” allows us to include within it all the possible ways in which the verb “create” can be predicated according to the rules of grammar and logic: affirmative and negative, active and passive. As a result, the division of the concept “nature” can be the strictest possible and at the same time the most exhaustive possible: a four-part division based on the Aristotelean square of oppositions.

An educated mind, formed by the reading of the Fathers of the Church, has no difficulty in recognizing at least the first three of the four identified species of “nature.” *That which creates and is not created* is God, the uncaused universal cause. It is no less obvious that the third species, *that which is created and does not create*, a description that is symmetrically opposite to the first, corresponds to the world of multiple individuals, who are the remote effects of the divine creative causality. But the second kind of nature, *that which is created and creates*, is easily recognizable in the divine ideas, which are the primordial models and causes of the multiple individuals; the latter are created inasmuch as they are thought by the Father in the Word, but they are in turn creators of individual effects.

On the other hand, it is more difficult to single out and understand the truth of the fourth species, the nature *that is not created and does not create*. Yet the logical necessity of such a species is presupposed by the stringent argument used in the fourfold division itself. The reality here is divine inasmuch as it is not created, but such an ultimate reality must be something outside of created time and therefore thinkable as the goal of the entire history of being and creating, when God will be only God and all things will find their own truth in God at the end of the process of creation. But an adequate understanding of this ultimate level of reality is not yet possible for the moment. Only after a thorough inquiry into the meaning of the three preceding species and their succession will the human intellect perhaps be in a position to approach the profound truth of the fourth; for the moment, the necessity of this species must be postulated by the harmonious convergence of reason and revelation.

It is evident, on the other hand, that the fourfold division is only a means of moving into a cognitive explanation of the very general word “nature,” which is so comprehensive and complex that the human intellect can aspire to achieve even a minimal understanding of it only at the end of a lengthy and complicated series of rational operations, of which division is but the first. The complexity is also shown by the fact that from the very first lines of *Periphyseon*, even before the fourfold division is given, John Scotus has introduced another and different division of the same concept, a bipartite division into *things that are* and *things that are not*.

When the Disciple expresses puzzlement at this division, the Master answers with an explanation of *that are* and *that are not* that seems to complicate the problem rather than resolve it. He gives a good five different ways of interpreting

the pair, but these are apparently irreconcilable among themselves or at best are alternatives. (1) Things knowable *are*, those that elude creaturely knowledge *are not*. (2) Things located at a lower level in the hierarchy of reality *are*, while those that *are not* are superior to them. (3) Primordial causes *are not*, while their multiple, sensible effects *are*. (4) Spiritual entities *are*; accidental and corporeal things *are not*. (5) Human beings in their condition after original sin *are not*; *being* can be predicated only of the holiness that preceded sin and will follow upon redemption.

It is obvious that in comparison with the quadripartite division this bipartite division seems much less rigorous and effective, all the more so since the Master suggests the possibility that to the five interpretations given can be added other, perhaps countless attempts to explain it. But the explanation of this complicated superimposition of many different interpretations of a single reality comes from later in the work, during a recapitulation of the division of nature at the beginning of the second book. In an evident, even if not explicit reference to the Neoplatonic distinction of the powers of knowing (senses, reason, intellect)—a doctrine about which Eriugena was abundantly informed not only by Boethius but by the writings of Maximus the Confessor—John points to a gradation in logical steps that also justifies the distinction between three different kinds of “division” by means of which the knowing subject apprehends the same object in ways that are distinct but lead to the truth by different paths.

The bodily senses exercise a division of the “whole” into its “parts.” This kind of division has to do solely with material things and lacks any formal accuracy (because the parts of a whole can be divided up at the pleasure of the subject); it is therefore obviously insufficient for explaining the universality of nature. The second form of division is division in the true and proper sense, which follows rules and is symmetrical because based on respect for the laws of logic. This is the work of dianoetic reason, which is capable of knowing, classifying, and deductively organizing the universal aspects of reality. The third form of division is of a supralogical kind. John Scotus describes it as “a kind of intellectual contemplation of the totality of things”; it springs from the intuitive and unmediated (therefore not discursive and deductive) knowledge proper to the highest faculty, the intellect (or *nous*) whose object is always the reality of the totality of things, which includes everything that can be thought.

It is now clear how at the beginning of the work the higher intellect made possible an intuitive perception of the deepest truth of the concept of “nature.” Then, in a more accessible formulation, namely, the bipartite division into *things that are* and *things that are not*, the intellect passed this perception on to dianoetic reason; this last is an inferior instrument but also indispensable to the intellect for a discursive unfolding of its own inherently vague intuitions.

Starting with this initial participation in the highest truth that can be intuited by natural knowledge, reason must then face the task of giving a logical explanation of its contents and consequences. It is precisely in order to initiate and make possible the development of its slow and mediated demonstrative operations

that reason, with the help of both the noetic intellect and faith, formulates its quadripartite division of nature; this division is more understandable and open to investigation because it is formally subject to the laws of logic. This task of dianoetic reason is precisely what Eriugena promises to undertake by tracing the complex structure of the quadripartite division in the course of the work's five books. In the process and by way of a mosaic of interconnected problems he advances toward the attainment of the maximum understanding available to reason of the content of the noetic intuition that was his point of departure.

#### B. THE KNOWABLENESS OF GOD AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MAKING PREDICATIONS ABOUT HIM

The first book of *Periphyseon* is entirely given over to measuring the knowableness of the first kind of nature, *that which creates and is not created* or, in other words, the divine being as uncaused cause and therefore the cause of everything that is real.

As a cause that is not derived from another cause, God is eternal and immutable. He is therefore certainly not on the same level as anything that, being caused, is subject to change and accidentality. In God there are no "accidents," but, for this very reason, in his perfect simplicity there is nothing knowable that can be understood as "substance," since the human mind cannot conceive of substances that are not the actual or potential subjects of inhering accidents. It is therefore not possible to speak of God as like anything else or to speak of him as distinct from or unlike anything else. Evident here is the influence of the "negative theology" of Pseudo-Dionysius: God is utter simplicity and utter perfection, and as such he is utterly profound and impenetrable darkness, precisely because he is the fullness of being. For this reason any attempt by the created intellect to develop a concept matching the truth of the divine is illicit and bound to fail.

Nevertheless, revelation has spoken about God to humanity and in human language. And when human knowledge has endeavored to speak of God it has managed to say something true: as when it asserts that God is the cause of all things and the ultimate end of everything that is. It is therefore possible and appropriate, as Pseudo-Dionysius himself teaches, to develop a positive theology that makes up for the prohibition against formulating meaningful predications about God by introducing terms for the divine perfections that are suggested by revelation or human reason. Accompanying this introduction, however, must be a warning that these terms must always be given a purely metaphorical value and never a literal one.

John Scotus completes this necessary dynamic adaptation of positive theology and negative theology by introducing a third way of predicating about the truth of God. It is a way that results from a productive combination of the first two, namely, a superlative theology. This is effected by applying to God terms

expressing his perfections but correcting them by the preceding addition of “more than” or the prefix “super-.” The terms then assert a true meaning while denying any possible parallels or references to creaturely imperfections. Thus it can be said that God is neither an essence nor a non-essence, but rather is a more-than-essence, which is something that has more both of being and of nonbeing. God is more-than-truth, more-than-goodness, and so on, and even more-than-nature, more-than-creator, more-than-God.

In order to explain what the application of this new theological semantics really involves, John Scotus harks back to an example given by Augustine and Boethius and already picked up by other Carolingian writers. He tests the possibility of predicating of God the ten categories of Aristotle, which according to the philosophers subsume everything meaningful that can be expressed in human language. The result of the inquiry is that words correctly expressing the divine cannot be placed in any of the categories.

This is because, on the one hand, there can be nothing accidental in God and, on the other hand, even substance and relation cannot be predicated of God in a directly affirmative way (although such predications are implied by the patristic tradition in its explanation of the trinitarian formulas). All this means that in God there can be no predication of qualities (he is not “good,” “just,” and so on) or quantities (he is not “great”) or actions (he does not really “love”) or passions (he is not really “loved”); he is not truly “Father” or “Son” or “Holy Spirit” or “divinity” or “one” or “triune,” or, in the final analysis, truly “God.” Moreover, because knowledge itself seems to be in this context not a perfection but a consequence of creaturely imperfection, we can be pushed to the point of saying that God’s perfect wisdom is simply a non-knowing, that is, a divine ignorance.

On the other hand, it is obvious that our intellect cannot avoid predicating the categories if it really wants to express and understand something, even in theological discourse. Eriugena confirms this fact especially by a careful analysis of the final two categories: space and time. There is no subject the human intellect can tackle in an appropriate way without locating it within the coordinates of space and time. This means that instead of being objective modes of being, space and time are *a priori* conditions required if any object at all is to be knowable by the mind. If, then, God is to be in any way thinkable in his utter conceptual indetermination, we must locate even him within spatio-temporal parameters that, according to the rules of superlative theology, have at the same time both a maximal positive and a maximal negative value. This we see when Scripture says that God is “always” (that is, not in a limited time or in any time at all) and “everywhere” (not in a limited space or in any space at all).

This same situation can then be extended to the other categories, all of which, including substance, are not diverse modalities proper to the reality of the object in itself, but true and proper *a priori* forms for organizing the subject’s capacity for knowledge; within these any external datum whatsoever must be placed if it is to be known.

Eriugena's comprehensive analysis of the possibilities of theological language boils down essentially to the recognition that all meaningful terms can be predicated of God not because they are required by God's nature in itself but because of the relationship knowledge establishes between the divine object and the creaturely subject. In complete agreement with the foundations of Neoplatonic gnoseology he confirms the fact that the modes of true knowledge are determined by the capacities of the knowing subject, who is forced to give coherent expression to the representation of the known object in accordance with his/her powers of receiving and representing it. Consequently, it is always true that God is God, is one and three, creator, good, just, great, and so on, not *in himself*, but *for us* who know him. A correct theology, the reliability of which is ensured by the authority of revelation, must always guide the mind in its operations, correcting it and warning it of its limitations and of the errors into which it may fall through excessive assumptions about reality.

### C. THE KNOWABLENESS OF CREATURES: THE SUBSTANTIAL TRIAD

If the semantic grid of the ten categories provides the formal coordinates the mind necessarily uses in receiving into itself, knowing, and organizing the images of things that come from without, we must conclude that nothing is truly knowable by the human mind as it is in itself, in its underlying substance or *ousia*. Instead, its reality can show itself to our minds only insofar as it is enveloped in the phenomenal appearances given it by the accidents defined in the categories. No created substance is knowable in itself, but only by means of the network of spatio-temporal, qualitative, quantitative, and other relationships that, in order to know it, the knowing intellect establishes between this substance and other substances. This manifestation of the object under the veil of the accidents is always a product made within the subject, a phantasm. The substantial truth of things in themselves truly exists only in the eternal mind of God, that is, in the Word, who truly is the "beginning" in which, according to the words of Scripture, "God made the heavens and the earth," that is, all things.

The second species or kind of nature, namely *that which is created and creates*, is the subject of the second book of the *Periphyseon*. The words describe God insofar as he is the divine creative thought, and they describe a creature insofar as the ideas (or divine notions, the primordial, eternal, intelligible, and perfect causes) are the true being, changeless and preceding any accidental manifestation, or, in other words, the true substance of the multiple, individual, and visible effects derived from the ideas. Guided by the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Maximus the Confessor, Eriugena passes beyond the widespread Augustinianism of his age and engages in a penetrating study of the ideas as something more than simple immutable models on which God draws in his work of organizing the created world. The "reasons" (*rationes* or *logoi*) of the divine mind, although produced by the latter, are in their turn creative and productive of things

insofar as these reasons are divine and connatural (“coeternal,” says Eriugena) to the Word (the *Logos* or *Ratio* of God), a person in the Trinity whose activity consists in devoting himself to the planning and production of created reality.

It was Maximus, once again, who suggested to John Scotus a metaphysical key essential for a correct understanding of the relationship between God the creator, the mediating causes in creation, and visible created effects. According to the teaching of Maximus, in every created reality can be seen a perfect triad of metaphysical components that are the universal trace of the trinitarian manifestation of God: substance (*ousia*), potency or power (*dynamis*), and act (*energeia*). This threefoldness is manifested to human knowledge only in distinct and differentiated forms, due to which each substance seems to pass from an infinite series of unfulfilled potentialities to a no-less-infinite series of actualities that are only partial and are still laden with unfulfilled potentialities.

The third kind of nature, *that which is created and does not create*, is precisely these imperfect and fragmented manifestations of the multiplicity of potentialities that are activated; behind this manifestation the true original substantiality of the object is hidden and remains invisible. Even when the human creature turns to knowledge of itself, it finds itself in the presence only of imperfect external manifestations of its own *ousia*. In contrast, in the mind of God all things (including the “I” of each knowing individual) are completely gathered up in eternal and perfect ideas, in the complete harmony of potency and act, that is, in that complete and perfect actuality (Greek *entelecheia*) in which the substance fulfills all its potentialities without exception.

The ideas, then, are creation as known by God in the Word, which is the true place, that is, the place of original ideal existence, of all reality. The multiple effects are the same creation as known by the imperfect created intelligence. The third kind of nature, the world of pure actual appearances, is therefore only a phenomenal reality: the appearing of imperfect creaturely potentialities and actualities in the course of a history of reality that unfolds—but only for finite mind, which is itself part of that reality—in the multiplication of phenomenal spaces and times.

But since effects are the manifestation of divine causes to the creaturely mind, and since the divine causes are a manifestation of the divine thought, Eriugena can say that in everything that is and is true, without exception, there is a *theophany*, a manifestation of God: an appearing of that which is in itself invisible, a showing forth of God’s perfect substantial subsistence in the imperfect succession of multiple potentialities and actualities. Any phantasm is deceptive only insofar as the subject regards it as the manifestation of something individual, separate from God, and self-subsisting as an individual thing. In fact, it is really a theophany, since it is an appearing of God in what comes from God. It can therefore be said that each thing is God, and this can be said without bringing any risk of an immanentist confusion of the divine and the creaturely because only in God is every manifestation of multiplicity and diversity reduced

to unity, whereas creatures are creatures insofar as they perpetuate the division between potential being (that is, the pure possibility of being) and actual being.

#### D. CREATION AND PROCESSION: ERIUGENA'S HEXAEMERON

The history of God's work is, then, according to John Scotus, the description of a twofold process: a descent (or procession) from causes to effects and a return from actual multiplicity to the originating divine causality. This return is the result of the natural tendency of all things to the reunification of their being in perfect self-knowledge, which, for its part, is a participation in the pure divine knowledge that contemplates, in the eternal changelessness of the ideal substance, the perfect balance of potency and act.

The third book of the *Periphyseon* is devoted to a description of the procession, set in the framework of an extensive commentary on the six days of creation as narrated in Genesis. This is a Hexaemeron that Eriugena tackles with a great display of sophisticated knowledge in the areas of the sciences, physiology, and astronomy. Making his own the principle that Scripture contains an inexhaustible depth of meanings (like the limitless gleaming colors of a peacock's tail), he engages in a broad and structured exegesis that takes over patristic interpretations, even of the same verses, that may differ but are all true. Thus he advances from the naturalistic interpretation of Basil to the allegorical one of Augustine, and, finally, to the exposition of his personal interpretation, which enables him to take the divine work of creation and to find and develop therein the fundamental elements of his own system.

Thus the creation of light on the first day is for him an allusion to the descent of causes into their effects. On the second day the locating of the firmament between the upper and the lower waters describes the appearance of the four elements and of the spatio-temporal bounds that divide spiritual creatures from corporeal. The emergence of the dry land on the third day describes the combining of forms with matter that gives rise to individuals. In the exegesis of the fourth day John Scotus displays a noteworthy knowledge of astronomy as he describes a system that is geocentric but sees the planets circling the sun while the sun circles the earth. On the fifth day the multiplication of the corporeal, vegetable, and animal species on the face of the earth describes the appearance of the visible accidents that cover and hide the *ousia* of each thing, so that the created earth becomes a symbol of the original ideal substantiality of all things that is hidden by the appearance of imperfect creaturely potentialities and actualities.

The presentation of Eriugena's anthropology, which is introduced by the exegesis of the sixth day, is dominated by the conception of the human being as the central creature in the cosmos and the goal of the divine work, toward which all created reality is moving and in which everything is included and brought into harmony. The human being is the true middle or center of the

cosmos and the metaphysical workshop of the world, in which all the creaturely lives—corporeal, sensible, imaginative, rational, and intellectual—are accounted for.

In the mind of the human being, whose knowledge is thus the most complex and therefore also the most complete of all creaturely kinds of knowledge, all creatures exist in the form of cognitive notions, although these are imperfect inasmuch as they reflect not the *ousia* in its original ideal state but the dispersion of these creatures in the accidental setting of space and time. In this sense, then, human beings are truly “images” of God to the extent that their intellect is modeled on the Word as its archetype. But whereas in God creatures are known in the ideal perfection of their full actuality (*entelecheia*), human knowledge is only a potential image of the divine knowledge. This is the “image of God” that the human person at its creation receives along with the task of actualizing it by one day attaining to the “likeness” of God; that achievement will mark the definitive convergence of human and divine knowledge.

#### E. ORIGINAL SIN AND THE INTERRUPTION OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

By placing Adam in the earthly paradise Scripture tells us, in symbolic form, of this assignment to human beings of their central task in the economy of creation: to rise up from the world to God in order to acquire in him a perfect knowledge of the world and thereby aspire to the knowledge of God himself. By carrying out this duty, human beings would have been able to discover, in their true knowledge, the real essence of things. And when they reversed direction and traversed, while also unifying, the stages in the manifold diversification of created effects, this action was to be the very accomplishment of the definitive return (not only cognitive but real inasmuch as really known) of all multiplicity to the real unity of the divine ideal knowledge. It would mean the return from individuals to species, from species to genera and therefore from senses to reason, from reason to intellect, from created intellect to the divine Word, ending in the final reunification of all that is true in the peaceful divine contemplation of reality, that is, in the repose of the seventh day.

But the completion of this journey was possible only as the result of a free choice by the created will, a choice willed by God precisely because it meant a free decision to love him. But original sin, described in the pages of Genesis (to the exegesis of which the fifth book of the *Periphyseon* is devoted), interrupted and halted the divine plan, for it diverted human beings, and with them the entire creation that is recapitulated in them, from the course of action that was to lead them to the achievement of the “likeness to God,” that is, of their own complete actualization and, at the same time, the complete actualization of the entire creation.

The loss of friendship with God thus brought with it a radical upheaval in the correct order of the human cognitive powers, an upheaval that was at the

same time the cause and the definitive consequence of the sin itself and the reason for and result of the divine punishment.

Drawing in part on Ambrose's *Paradise* and in part on Gregory of Nyssa's *The Image*, John Scotus here gives an attractive exegesis of the biblical story of our first parents' sin. His exegesis explains the nature of the tragic interruption of the process that was to lead them to the ability to know the truth of all things in God. Adam is a symbol of the intellect, which is invited by God to contemplate the truth of creation; the invitation is contained in the promise that Adam will eat the fruit of the tree of Life, which is the Word himself in whom the eternal ideal substances have their existence.

But Eve, who represents the lower form of knowledge, allows herself to be infected and enthralled by the groundless outward appearances of sensuality. These are symbolized by the serpent, who urges her to pluck the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This fruit, however, God had forbidden because it represents the cognitive confusion that is at the source of the imperfect natural knowledge of human beings, who are continually looking for distinctions between truth and falsity. And instead of Adam's remaining submissive to the guidance of the noetic intellect, he allows Eve to involve him, too, in the loss of the intuitive contemplation of truth. As a result, the entire human soul is cast down into the deceitful phenomenological world of disordered particular, spatio-temporal, and accidental forms of knowledge.

Adam and Eve now realize that they are naked, for they have been stripped of the truth that protected them, like a clean tunic, from the iniquities of error. God covers them with clothes made of skins, that is, the sensible body, which henceforth rules the higher faculties of knowledge. The divine punishment solidifies this inversion of the cognitive order, for which human beings themselves are solely responsible, but at the same time the punishment includes the promise of a future redemption. God curses the serpent because the dominion of irrational sensuality over the soul is not part of the order of nature. Sensual passion will therefore creep along, feeding on earthly appetites, but only until the proper order of knowledge is restored and the serpent's head is crushed by the foot of the woman, that is, by the soul, which will once again correctly direct its own aspiration for knowledge.

Until that time comes, Eve will have to bring forth her individual acts of knowing with pain and toil (that is, her children or her *conceptus*, as the Latin of Genesis has it, an allusion to the particular "concepts" of the sciences, which are laboriously developed through dialectical investigation). Adam, for his part, will have to till the earth; the earth, as we have seen, signifies the *ousia* or true substance of things, which is covered by the thorns of cognitive appearances that no longer permit the intellect to approach the truth of the primordial essences. But, since Adam himself is earth (or the universal human, one of the eternal substantial ideas in the divine Word), his state of condemnation cannot change the hidden eternal perfection of the truth, which has only temporarily been lost.

It has been lost “until you return to the earth from which you were drawn” (Gen 3:19), says the divine voice, thereby solemnly prophesying the return of the human person to the changeless divine idea in which its truth resides.

#### F. REDEMPTION FROM SIN AND THE RETURN

The incarnation of Christ is the way, and the only possible one, that permits a reconciliation between creation, which has distanced itself from God, and the Word in which creation continues to be rooted in primordial truth. In fact only the Word, by a completely unmerited act of divine love, is able to turn around the dispersive thrust of creaturely knowledge by uniting his own divine nature to a human nature. And inasmuch as the Word takes flesh in a human being, who is the “workshop of the world,” he recapitulates in himself not only the entire human race but the whole of creation.

The new Adam has thus made possible both the reversal of creation’s descent and alienation from its divine cause and the beginning of the universal return to the true knowledge God has of the world and of himself, and therefore to the world’s true reality in God. And precisely because this conclusion involves a return to the authentic order of knowledge, the formula at the beginning of the *Periphyseon* that alluded to this transcending of creaturely gnoseological coordinates could only find expression in a logically negative form: the nature *that is neither created nor creates* (to the complex treatment of which the fifth book of Eriugena’s work is devoted). The fourth species or kind of nature, which will become a reality at the end of time, will in fact not be created, because the entire universe of things visible and invisible that God created will return to its primordial causes, which exist in God, and nothing further will be created. Nor will this fourth nature create anything, because it will be contained within its own fullness, and “God will be all in all things” (1 Cor 15:28).

The descent of Christ into creation occurred in order to heal the break caused by sin and to renew the possibility of beatitude for all human beings. Thanks to that descent, humanity will be able to traverse in the opposite direction the stages of the descent that alienated it from God. The risen body of Christ dissolved the bond with materiality and the chain of accidentality, and thereby anticipated within history the future condition of all the bodies that will arise in him at the end of historical time. This condition is that of a “spiritual body” in which corporeity is not eliminated but returns to the original perfection of its authentic substantiality.

This perfect body, which was that of Adam in paradise, will be united with the soul, which has been purified of all the dross of earthly multiplicity, and together with the soul will restore the unified truth of the human substance by reconstituting with it the perfection of the divine idea that created it. Together with the human being, who is “intermediary for the world,” the whole of created nature will return to its causes and, as air is absorbed by light, will be united

with the Word in the fulfillment of all its created potentialities. Nothing of the divine work will be lost, but it will be fulfilled in the triumph of its complete actualization, its *entelecheia*, the eschatological reunification of potency and act, which is that very “fullness of the stature (Greek *hēlikia*) of Christ” that Paul promises to all the resurrected.

In the final victory of nature over dispersion and separation from God the substance of sinners, too, will be redeemed. Those who continue to reject the universal offer of grace, if there are any such, will be punished not in their substance (*ousia*) but in their free will, which continues to remain persistently within the limits and imperfection of their individuality. Meanwhile, the entire cosmos will participate in the beatifying vision of God in all things. But among the redeemed there will be differences of personal condition in beatitude; these differences are consequences of the individual way of perfection each traveled during his or her earthly life. In a harmonious combination of the various forms of reward, the beatific vision will be granted in varying degrees, dependent on the greater or lesser completeness reached by the potential capacities of each person. Thus all will be caught up by the triumphant divine light in the eternal sabbath that will conclude the history of creation. Being in this situation will be for some (the damned) a source of torment, for others the source of complete happiness, but with varying degrees of intensity.

There is, then, a general return, the perfecting of all natural capacities that is shared by all. But, as John Scotus tells us in an inspired exegesis of the parable of the five foolish and the five wise virgins (Matt 25:1-13), he foresees some privileged individuals enjoying a mystical marriage with the Word. The possibility of contemplating God in God himself will be limited to the “special return” of the few chosen individuals who have fully merited a direct participation in a union of humanity and divinity that will repeat in eternity the historical condition of the incarnate Christ. As the Word really became a human being in history, so these true followers of Christ will really become God in eternity; as participants in the effects of Christ’s humanization they will experience in themselves the final deification reserved to the elect (the *theōsis* spoken of by the most enlightened among the Greek Fathers).

#### G. BEYOND THEOLOGY

In the present life the theological intellect can reach an understanding of this ending of universal history, but only as a certainty that is necessary but incomprehensible. Only the deified human being can understand deification. But in the centuries-long course of the history of creation the cooperation of revelation and intelligence permits the searcher for truth at least to move, in the measure of his or her ability, toward an understanding of the mystery through the exercise of theological knowledge.

John Scotus never explains the concept of theology as something different from the highest form of philosophical knowledge. However, in three of his

mature works he does provide some points useful in clarifying the role and finality of the knowledge with which human beings try, by a balancing of faith and reason, to anticipate in present theological understanding the content of the future beatific vision. The three are: an incomplete *Commentary* on the Gospel of John, his inspired *Homily* on the Prologue of the same Fourth Gospel (here we find his interpretation, which we saw earlier, of the race of Peter and John to the tomb as an allegory of the proper relation between reason and faith), and a commentary on the first treatise of Pseudo-Dionysius, the *Explanations of the Heavenly Hierarchy*.

This last-named work explains the various degrees of creaturely knowledge of the divine, a knowledge that is always imperfect and therefore of a theophanic kind. In the present condition of humanity after original sin the essential theophanic tool that enables human beings to achieve a theological knowledge is the reading of Scripture. But the effectiveness of revealed language in communicating is not of one kind only. At a lower level the divine Word (which John Scotus, like Dionysius, calls simply “theology”) achieves expression by relying on the natural meanings of a language that can be understood and, with the help of the philosophical sciences, analyzed by dianoetic reason. We may say that to this order of theological knowledge belongs the entire effort to grasp scriptural truth, as attested by the complex speculative developments of the *Periphyseon*.

But in Scripture God also expresses himself in an allogical and artful way, using as it were a supernatural poetic art capable of raising created minds above the immediate literal meaning. Here symbolic expressions, parables, anagogical allusions, and even, at times, tetralogical (monstrous) images lift the intellect of the believer toward impenetrable mystical heights that human language is not capable of signifying directly. Finally, beyond the enjoyment of the revealed text that is written in human words there is the understanding of the divine that is reserved to angelic intellects that, in a more or less perfect way depending on their place in a hierarchic order, intuitively grasp the truth present in the countless theophanies scattered throughout creation.

Human beings manage only occasionally to reach this supremely perfect natural knowledge, when through the constant exercise of their lower faculties they are able to rise to the point of activating the intuitive and unifying power of the pure intellect. They reach, that is, the kind of knowing had by the angels themselves (thereby confirming the idea of human beings as occupying a middle place in the universe, capable, as they are, of rising from bodily sensation to angelic knowledge). At the same time, however, even this intellectual theological knowledge that is typical of the angels and attainable by perfect human beings is still indirect and incomplete inasmuch as it is based on theophanies. Such is the knowledge promised in Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* to the blessed who share in the common or “general return.” In the present life no one can anticipate the superlative conditions of the deifying beatific vision that is proper to the blessed for whom the “special return” is reserved.

But in a single instance in the entire history of the cosmos, by an exceptional and completely unmerited grant from God, it was possible for a created mind to rise to the vision in which God eternally contemplates himself and, in himself, all things. This privileged human being was John the evangelist, who was elevated to a state utterly transcending all creaturely limitations and to the vision of God in God and thus to an understanding of the divinity of the Word, who “was with God” and “was God” (John 1:1).

John Scotus celebrates this unique event with genuine speculative emotion, especially in his *Homily*, and then makes a thorough analysis of its theological content in his commentary on the Fourth Gospel. The supercelestial flight of the apostle John, a spiritual eagle who was able to fix his gaze on the sun of the divinity, ended with his return to earth in order to proclaim to humanity with prophetic voice the truth that “the Word became flesh” in space and time. By this proclamation he revealed that all who believe can someday reach the higher theological knowledge that he had been able to enjoy for a single instant outside of time.

## 6. *Theological Learning and Thought in the Greek East of the Ninth Century and in the Late Carolingian West*

### A. THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT IN BYZANTIUM FROM THE NEW CONTROVERSY ON IMAGES TO THE PHOTIAN SCHISM

From the middle of the ninth century on, the frontier lands of Christianity, both Greek and Latin, experienced a new wave of attacks from outside peoples: the Normans from the Northwest, the Hungarians and Slavs from the East, the Arabs from the Mediterranean. In the West this new affliction became a further cause of serious social disorder within a political system that was obviously already weakened and subjected to a gradual feudal decentralization. This worked to the advantage of local lords to whom the populations looked for the defense of the territory and who saw to the maintenance of a limited but indispensable regional economic network.

In the Byzantine world the emperors reacted both to the intensifying internal tensions that had become endemic, as well as to the new increase in external pressures, by energetically tightening the screws in order to strengthen monarchical authority. Indeed, rather than representing a weakening of the office of the emperor, the frequency with which rapid successions to the throne occurred, often as the result of violence and depositions, was a sign of an impulse to strengthen the central authority, which sought to free itself, with the help of the army if necessary, from any interference by aristocrats, monks, and priests. As early as the first half of the ninth century this process of concentrating political power had important consequences, even in the religious sphere.

Leo V, the Armenian, was acclaimed emperor by the military in 813 because of the defeats the empire had suffered in war against the Bulgarians. Beginning

in the first months of his rule, and with the specific intention of protecting the monarchy against increasing interference by monasteries, he inaugurated a second phase in the imperial imposition of iconoclasm. This return to the past promptly elicited a response from the two most important representatives of the ecclesiastical culture of the time: Nicephorus of Constantinople and Theodore of Studios. In contrast to the strongly polemical attitudes that marked the anti-iconoclastic literature of the previous century, both these men promoted a renewed commitment to theological research based on a methodical use of the argumentative tools originating in philosophy.

Nicephorus of Constantinople (d. 828/829) had been a collaborator of Patriarch Tarasius before succeeding him in 806. During an intense decade of eremitical withdrawal before becoming patriarch he had received a monastic formation, in the course of which he acquired a solid intellectual preparation. His official resistance to iconoclasm led to his deposition in 815 and then to an exile that lasted until his death. While far away from Constantinople he composed his most important works, among them his *Greater Defense* and three *Replies* or *Refutations*, in which he showed how iconoclasm and the ancient heresies, from Arianism to Monophysitism and Monotheletism, sprang from a common root. This he identified as the erroneous effort, made in order to facilitate reason's acceptance of the faith, to exaggerate the more spiritual aspects of the Christian religion by introducing into it a dangerous reduction of the physical concreteness of Christ's human nature.

Theodore (d. 826) was the founder and energizer of the monastery of Studios in Constantinople, which was for centuries an important study center with its own fruitful scriptorium and an increasingly well-stocked library. His works display an even more obvious familiarity with classical literature and the exercise of a theological reflection based on the collaboration of biblico-patristic culture and philosophical speculation. He became an outstanding figure in the iconophile party, especially after Nicephorus was exiled; he himself was later sent away from Constantinople. He was a prolific writer, whose works also supported his considerable activity as a reformer of monastic life. He wrote a great many *Letters*, *Homilies*, and poetic compositions; of special importance among his interventions against iconoclasm were his three *Refutations*, in which the use of philosophical tools in support of theological controversy was even more notable and effective than in the works of Nicephorus.

The renewal and perfecting of a methodology for the defense of religious truth was thus the common characteristic of the second generation of anti-iconoclastic polemicists. The interventions of Nicephorus and Theodore were solidly supported by an extensive biblical and patristic erudition that was energetically employed against theological error in order to defend the unity of the religious tradition. But precisely in order to ensure its stability, both men set this scriptural and patristic traditionalism within an unassailable logical and speculative framework. Thus the need of refinements, beyond those of the eighth-century writers, led these two writers to draw on the foundations laid by Aristotle for categories,

definitions, and conceptual comparisons that were useful especially in defining an “image” and its relationship to its “archetype.”

Nicephorus explained this relationship by appealing to the concepts of “participation” and “analogy”; Theophorus appealed rather to the principle of mimesis or imitation. But especially evident in both cases was the felt need to make clear that the legitimacy of the veneration of christological images in particular was based on the very theological justification of the mystery as a whole. Pictorial representations had in fact the function of recalling the Incarnation, which was the historical manifestation of the divinity of the Word in a corporeal and visible reality and, as such, could be represented in sufficiently meaningful expressions. Such expressions included both theological discourse and, even more, visual images that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries and are universally understandable and therefore of high informational and educational value.

Motives of a political kind also led, under Michael III, to the definitive restoration of the veneration of images, which had been sanctioned by a solemn council in Constantinople in 843. When Michael attained his majority in 857 he made his uncle, Bardo, his associate in governing. Bardo favored a monarchic centralization and devoted himself to an attempt to remove the cultural monopoly held by religious and monastic parties. It seems that Bardo should be credited with having promoted the reorganization of studies at the university of Constantinople, where the study of mathematics and astronomy was combined with the reading of Plato and the Neoplatonic philosophers. The new consolidation of political authority, which was quickly stabilized when Basil I seized power in 867 and the Macedonian dynasty was founded, was thus accompanied by a new era of cultural stability, which fostered the systematization and erudite rethinking of the literary, but also the juridical, scientific, and religious patrimonies.

The foremost figure in the political and cultural life of those years was Photius (d. ca. 891), who came from an aristocratic family that had always had a hand in political and religious matters during the recent period. Photius was a layman, but in 858 Bardo raised him to the patriarchate after the deposition of Patriarch Ignatius for political reasons and despite the opposition of the episcopal party and the Roman church. As a result of the break between Rome and Constantinople and the reciprocal excommunications of Pope Nicholas I and Photius, 867 marked the beginning of a real schism (the “Photian schism”), with its aftermath of serious controversies between Latin and Greek Christianity. During this period, as often happens, the polemics shifted appreciably from the institutional level to other sensitive ecclesiological and theological areas. Two examples: the rivalry between western and eastern missionaries in the conversion of the Slavs and, for the first time, a difference in trinitarian formulas, especially due to the introduction of the *Filioque* into the Latin liturgy’s description of the procession of the Holy Spirit (“from the Father” alone, according to the Greeks; “from the Father and from the Son,” according to the Latins).

In 868 the new pope, Hadrian II, asked western theologians to take a position on this last subject of debate. The invitation was accepted by Bishop Aeneas of Paris and the now-elderly Ratramnus of Corbie, who wrote an *Answer to the Objections of the Greeks* in which he had an opportunity to make a final interesting application of his theological method. After his coronation Basil I initiated a policy of rapprochement with the Roman church and therefore deposed Photius. In 869 a council in Constantinople (regarded as the eighth ecumenical) ended the schism and restored Ignatius to his office.

In the years that followed, however, the papacy became involved in a serious internal crisis due to the hostility of the Roman aristocracy to John VIII; that group opted for antipope Formosus of Ostia. Photius profited by this situation and the death of Ignatius to have himself once again recognized as patriarch in 877. John VIII excommunicated him a second time, but then in 882 John was assassinated. Only a lengthy series of protests by John's increasingly weaker successors led finally to the definitive deposition of Photius in 886.

During his exile the elderly ex-patriarch devoted himself to the writing of a lengthy theological work in which he responded to the attacks made on him by Latin scholars: the work was his *Mystagogy* (that is, mystical teaching) of the *Holy Spirit*. Fed as it was by the author's great knowledge of philosophy (he knew and made extensive use of the writings of Aristotle, especially those on logic, and of works of the Neoplatonists), his defense of the eastern trinitarian formula was marked by a profound theological acumen, as he continually moved back and forth between scriptural citations and rational arguments. In rejecting the legitimacy of the *Filioque* he emphasized, above all, the fact that the coeternity of the divine persons is guaranteed by the procession of the Spirit from the Father alone, just as the Son is generated by the Father alone.

Yet, despite the insightful structure of the arguments, the tone had now become tranquil, and the writer's criticism did not become a direct attack on the authority of the church of Rome and the Latin patristic tradition. He knew the latter and cited it accurately. This was a sign of a conscious maturing of his own theological wisdom, which moved beyond the limits of the controversies of the moment and contributed to a renewed pride in his continuity with the age-old spiritual heritage of the Greek world and his independence of the Roman church and the criticisms of Latin scholars.

If we look at the man in this same perspective we must appreciate his extraordinary fertility as a writer, for he was the author not only of a large number of theological and homiletic works but also of some learned compilations, the purpose of which was to collect, organize, link together, and pass on to others the many-sided evidences of his vast erudition. Especially noteworthy here is the wide range of information about the books, secular or Christian, he claims to have read, and which he sets down in the elaborate collection he calls his *Library*. This is a real encyclopedia of notes on his reading; they take the form of summaries, comments, short extracts, and passages giving the historical, cultural,

and philological setting of the books, and they cover an impressive number of works from the past. In not a few instances what Photius says supplies the only or at least the most authoritative evidence that has come down to us.

#### B. IN THE WEST: THE LATE CAROLINGIAN SCHOOL

Learning and a wide range of books written in widely varying settings and widely varying genres are not always signs, as they were in Photius' case, of an increase in a generation's cultural efforts. They can also be a clear sign of a decadence in the intellectual sphere that in turn reflects a wider crisis of civic, spiritual, and moral identity.

In the last decades of the ninth century the Latin West saw a progressive and almost inevitable disintegration of the political ideals that maintained the structures of the Carolingian empire and, along with those ideals, of the cultural vitality that had likewise supported and accompanied the structures. The political breakup led to the intensification of open rivalries between corrupt and weak rulers who were no longer capable of controlling the foreign enemies who were infiltrating the territories of the empire. Moral corruption spread also among the representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which became involved in struggles for power, and even in the monastic world. The Roman church had for some time been subject to the arrogant activity of ambitious aristocrats.

Charles the Bald died in 877, a few months after sanctioning in the Capitulary of Quierzy the inheritability of the high offices and feudal possessions of the crown's most important collaborators. His death left the empire to be the booty in fierce struggles over the succession. The last attempt at territorial unification under a single emperor failed with the death of Charles the Fat in 888. Thereafter, while the Danes were storming the northern coasts, the empire broke up into various regional centers of power.

In this environment educated and religious individuals were no longer filled with the great enthusiasm for research that had marked the most fruitful minds of past years. The activity of the Palatine School ceased with the disappearance of the last heirs of Charlemagne, and the vitality of the episcopal schools likewise began to fade. Only the monasteries continued to be centers of intellectual life, but now in isolation and amid the monotony of their customary ways; thus the scriptoria continued and even intensified the copying of ancient and patristic texts and the libraries continued to grow, but the approach of educated men to these treasures was notably passive. In the writers of these years the search for wisdom soon degenerated into a voracious but often uncritical curiosity. The writers wandered about among ancient and recent literary documents in search of the elements of a basic learning that could be brought together in the form of brief, summary notes and then passed on in easily understood and available didactic forms.

The principal method of conveying this didactic erudition was the *glossa*: a brief, basic comment made up of more or less short notes placed between the

lines, or in the margins, of literary, philosophical, or patristic classics and of manuals for the teaching of the liberal arts or the books of the Bible. From the point of view of form these were quite unorganized comments containing a very fluid and malleable material. So malleable, indeed, was the material that even if the inscription explicitly identified its author, or at least made him easily identifiable, the material could be continually recast from one manuscript to another, with completions, corrections, or additional notes. The reason for this adaptability was that the primary value of the comments was to supply information for use with the work being analyzed.

From the viewpoint of content the glossator's comments served not only to explain or clarify points in the text being commented on. They often took the occasion also to introduce other useful ideas, doctrinal additions, information, and sometimes even anecdotes having no direct connection with the subject. Such stories, however, contributed to the expansion of a comprehensive cultural patrimony the glossator wanted to pass on to his colleagues or disciples. It was as if, within a complicated system of reciprocal references, the elements of all this erudition were being set before the reader so as to complete the picture, with some of them explaining the true teaching contained in others, and vice versa.

The two most notable representatives of this cultural phenomenon, which was characterized precisely by its typical lack of originality, were Heiric and Remigius. Both belonged to the school that had developed at the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Germain in the episcopal city of Auxerre; this school, like those of Laon and Quierzy, reflected the last gleams of the culture of the Carolingian palace. Their cultural importance thus reflected the influence of the three types of study center that had vied among themselves for cultural primacy in mature Carolingian civilization: the urban, the monastic, and the curial. In their learned compilations Heiric and Remigius were the first witnesses to the initial spread of the philosophical and theological influence of John Scotus Eriugena; they may also have been his collaborators or his students.

Heiric of Auxerre (d. ca. 876) was certainly a pupil of Haymo, a renowned author of homilies and biblical commentaries and himself linked to the cultural personality of Eriugena. Heiric left direct evidence of the didactic activity of his teachers in his *Collectanea*, a collection of notes on his reading of the various texts that were the subject of commentary in the lectures he followed. In the kind of program it represents, although certainly not in the richness of its interests and the wide range of its contents, the *Collectanea* may be likened to the *Library* of Photius. The influence of Eriugena is evident in some of Heiric's *Homilies* and above all in a hagiographical work, the *Life*, in verse, of Germanus, patron of the monastery of Auxerre. Here the author is inspired by the *Periphyseon* when he describes the ascent of the saint toward the highest gnoseological and ontological goals of the "return," including even deification.

As an author of glosses, Heiric stands out especially for a commentary on the Pseudo-Augustinian *Ten Categories* (a Neoplatonic paraphrase of Aristotle's *Categories* that was especially esteemed in the Carolingian period). Here, again

under the influence of John Scotus, Heiric propounds, among other things, a reintegration of all created reality into an ontological pyramid of genera and species that is dominated by the ten categories or supreme genera. At the apex of the pyramid is the all-inclusive concept of “nature,” which includes both God and creatures. Heiric warns, however, that dianoetic reason, using its own logical tools (such as definition and univocity), is not able to capture such a maximal reunification of “all the things that are and those that are not” in a meaning supplied by a single mental concept. Such an action is rather the work of the higher noetic intuition of the intellect.

This passage makes clear the educational and popular role that the late Carolingian teachers assigned to their learned comments. In his glossa, Heiric in fact constructs a cosmic ladder of reality that is useful both for showing the classificatory effectiveness of Aristotelean logic (in this case, the doctrine of the ten categories) and for exemplifying the bold unifying vision of being that is proper to Eriugena’s system, in which two doctrinal worlds are fused in a single instructive explanation of reality.

Remigius of Auxerre (d. 908), a student under Heiric, was the most prolific and representative author of glosses in the late Carolingian period. He was active both in the monastic sphere and in the urban schools, especially those at the cathedrals. He has left a large number of comments on texts from every discipline that was practiced in the scholastic curriculum of those years: Sacred Scripture, liturgy, liberal arts, logic, philosophy, and theology. These texts show clearly a plan to bring together in a usable summary of ideas and information the most important results reached by western wisdom during the century just ending. Thus Remigius does not disdain to set side by side, as plausible alternative yet complementary explanations of one and the same concept, doctrines that differ among themselves in origin and context or are even contradictory. For example, when commenting on the Latin text of the Mass he is not afraid to combine in a single gloss the most boldly allegorical interpretations of Amalarius of Metz and the moralizing and spiritual readings recommended by Florus of Lyons, who when living had been Amalarius’ most implacable critic.

Above all, some of Remigius’ best organized and most successful comments, such as those on the *Consolation* of Boethius and his short theological works, the one on the handbook of Martianus Capella on the liberal arts and the one on Genesis, make one point clear, namely, that this cultural irenicism allowed Remigius to combine information and suggestions produced by the wisdom of the various Carolingians and to develop a comprehensive conception of cosmic reality and of relations between creatures and creator. His glosses helped spread this conception widely in the Latin-language schools. At the center of this doctrine Remigius places the Platonic and Augustinian principle of the derivation of all things from the Ideas that God eternally thinks in his Word, who is the Art and Wisdom of the Father and the Life of everything that exists. This was the idea that Alcuin had made the foundation of Carolingian theology and that

John Scotus had turned into the core of his entire ontological system. Remigius, for his part, avoids all rationalistic excesses as he quietly makes this idea the basis of a comprehensive conception of the universe as the arrangement of things according to the order established by God.

In short, toward the end of the ninth century the late Carolingian cultural world displayed a gradual rigidification into a network of texts and related ideas within the framework of an institutional and mental structure that was decidedly technical and scholastic in its approach. Therein its cultivators, beginning with the elements of grammar in order with their aid to enter upon meditation on Scripture, made their own the classical desire to achieve the perfection of knowledge by ascending from corporeal realities to those that are intelligible. This scholastic mentality, then, was not a cage imprisoning the sapiential aspirations of the Latin West. It was a fertile soil that was arid and bare at the time, but in which, after a period of silence, there would spring up renewed thinking about the intelligibility of the world and of religious truth. Moreover, the thinkers of the following generations would have no difficulty in regarding this renewal as the natural development, without any break in continuity, of the speculative activity and intellectual productivity of the Carolingian period.

## Chapter 2

# The Contradictions of the Transitional Period: The Ancients versus the Moderns

### I. Theological Platonism and Ecclesiastical Reform in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries

#### *1. The Renewal of Studies in the Ottonian Age*

##### A. THE REFORM OF MONASTIC LIFE AND THE CLUNIAC MOVEMENT

During the years when Remigius of Auxerre was teaching in Paris he was also charged with reorganizing the cathedral school of Notre Dame, which in the following centuries would become the most important scholastic center in France. Among the young men who attended his courses was a canon of Tours named Odo. After being converted to a monastic life and having been elected abbot of Cluny, Odo became in the following years the principal force behind a reform movement in the Benedictine Order; in the tenth and eleventh centuries this movement gradually spread, first in France and then in the rest of Christian Europe.

During this lengthy period the Cluniac movement was not the only effective plan at work in the reconstruction of the monastic communities and the restoration of the moral and religious foundations on which the ascetical ideal of late antiquity was based. During the Carolingian period the work of reformers who were supported by the imperial structures, such as Benedict of Aniane, had given an energetic impulse toward uniformity and respect for the Benedictine *Rule*. Now, in the later period, some important monastic centers promoted an internal reorganization of the cenobitic system: two such were Brogne in Flanders and Gorze near Metz in Lorraine. Later, various eremitical movements developed in Italy due to the work of such individuals as Romuald of Ravenna (d. 1027), whose teaching gave rise in the eleventh century to the Camaldolese congregation, and John Gualbert (d. 1083), the founder of Vallombrosa near Florence.