

## Review

Willemien Otten:        Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking  
                                  *From Eriugena to Emerson*

In *Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking* Willemien Otten advances an idea of nature that diverges from the concept of nature that has been predominant both in theology and science. The idea of a dynamic and comprehensive nature is centuries old but it seems to have been forgotten, covered with layers of suspicions of heterodoxy and heresy.

Otten aims to explore nature (or creation) as driving the structure of thought rather than being driven by it. 'Thinking nature' is not making nature the object of thought, not thinking *about* nature, but it brings out the human encounter with nature in thought. Let nature drive the process instead of bringing prefabricated categories of thought to it.

To show what this means Otten uses a double strategy. She discusses a wide variety of premodern and modern authors, her two central thinkers being Johannes Scottus Eriugena (810-77) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82). She intends to read Eriugena through Emerson. At the same time she surrounds them with what she calls 'congenial minds' of the same era and discusses the work of these thinkers to put Eriugena's and Emerson's work in perspective.

As Otten shows, both Eriugena and Emerson are eccentric thinkers, positioned outside the current Western theological and philosophical canon, but by bringing Eriugena in conversation with Emerson and by discussing other 'congenial minds', she demonstrates that through them we may see an alternate way of dealing with nature as a theme of religious import. The congenial minds are Maximus the Confessor, Augustine of Hippo, Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James. As only one of these thinkers (Schleiermacher) is chronologically placed between Eriugena and Emerson, it is clear that the subtitle of the book is not meant to indicate that *Thinking Nature* will trace a historical process. But the book does show that an all encompassing and dynamic view of nature has been present in Eastern and Western thought for many centuries and that this view may be an inspiration for 21<sup>st</sup> century thinkers on nature and creation.

Eriugena's major work is *Periphyseon (On Natures)*. In five books, written as a dialogue between a master and a student, Eriugena enrolls his vision of nature as a whole. *Periphyseon* gives a division of nature into four species: God as creator, the primordial causes, created beings and God as the final goal of creation. Everything proceeds from God (exitus) and returns to him (reditus). In the course of his work Eriugena gives us also both a literal and an allegorical reading of the book of Genesis. Mankind is the last to be created and man performs the return of creation to God. *Periphyseon* was condemned in 1225 on suspicion of pantheism. Otten refutes this charge as well as other characterizations such as idealism, mysticism and gnostic tendencies.

*Periphyseon* is a long and obscure work and the reading of Emerson may offer a filter to help unpack Eriugena's thought. Important themes in Emerson's thought are 'preaching' and the idea of nature consisting of concentric circles. Preaching is not to be understood as the transmission of the Christian tradition, but as frank speech that helps us to set up rules for speaking about nature. Thinking nature is the opening up of ever wider circles and moving toward ever greater generalization. Man encounters nature in thought and thinking nature thus includes the self. Nature is also dialogue or conversation between God and the self.

The author demonstrates the richness and exceptionality of Eriugena's work against the background of two of his predecessors, whose work he had studied closely. Maximus the Confessor (580 – 662) develops a theological view of the cosmos in which everything is set in motion by Christ's incarnation, a panchristology. Nature's Christological character is discussed in relation to its supporting structures of liturgy and ascetic practice. For Maximus liturgy and the cosmos almost

coincide. Next is addressed Augustine's idea of 'nature taking place', which means that creation takes its own place relatively independent of the divine. Augustine engages in a literal exegesis of the book of Genesis in *De Genesi ad Litteram*. The letter of scripture reflects the cosmic order and created existence is the continuous performance of the divine Word. The discussion of Maximus the Confessor and Augustine provides a background for *Periphyseon* and helps to understand the magnitude of Eriugena's thought.

In the second part of the book Otten concentrates on the work of modern theologians, especially Emerson (the *Divinity School Address*, *Nature* and *Circles*). However, in the case of Emerson the congenial minds seem to be less congenial than Maximus and Augustine were for Eriugena. The modern thinkers who surround Emerson are Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and William James (1842-1910). In the work of these authors we see that new themes arise: the prominence of the self, the emphasis on experience and feeling in religion and the distinction between religion and morality. However, the combination of similarities and differences in Schleiermacher – Emerson – James is complex and hard to unravel. This means that a reader not familiar with Emerson's work gets only scattered glimpses of his thought. For this reason it is not easy to understand the uniqueness of his position in modern theology that Otten wants to demonstrate.

From the discussion of premodern and modern authors an idea of nature emerges that is more capacious than the idea that has dominated Christian thought but also differs from pantheism. Thinking nature in the alternate tradition inserts an element of self reflection as constitutive of nature's identity. Nature is integrally linked to God and self. The *Periphyseon* is started by a spark of concentrated thinking ('saepe mihi cogitanti') by which the self pushes nature forward. For Emerson 'thinking nature' includes the self as the inner core of a circle. Otten presents a wide-ranging conception of nature as conversation including God and the self and her book mirrors the broad plan of its subject. We can see this in her extensive choice of authors but also in her references to other disciplines like literature and poetry. She suggests a new way of interpreting *Periphyseon* by pointing out its literary aspects, specifically performativity. Thus we may come to understand the drama of the self's journey through nature.

Otten starts by expressing her desire for a more capacious canon of Western religious thought (p.7). The concrete goals of the flanking chapters are to clarify how Eriugena and Emerson stand out from their age while also showing what these authors share. Thus we can leave behind the conventional notions of creation. A broader concept of nature has been an undercurrent in philosophy and theology for centuries and it may prove to be a useful concept in current discussions on nature and creation. This alternate way of thinking demands less restrictions on theological thinking and a more imaginative approach. Certainly Otten's own work is a clear example of imaginative thinking. She chooses her authors from various ages and traditions and frequently uses images and examples from literature, art and music. For her the *Periphyseon* presents an 'earthly polyphonic soundscape' (p.203). In fact *Thinking Nature* itself is laid out like a classical musical composition, with many parts, different voices and *Periphyseon* as its recurring theme. It is an elaborate and original composition, but it is no easy listening. Notwithstanding the comprehensive view of nature, the broad canon of Western thought that she advocates and her imaginative approach, Otten's book counts little over 200 pages and her style of writing is compact. This ambitious project thus requires not only close reading but also a thorough knowledge of the history of Christian thought.

The author considers her musings on nature quite different from most environmental projects. She chooses a fresh approach, a different way of looking at nature but one with ancient roots. *Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking* is an intricate thinking of thinking nature. Yet we may assume that Otten also has ecological problems in mind. After all there are several references to discussions on environmental issues and Otten hopes that if we can conceive of nature as thinking, expressed in the

notion of 'thinking nature' we may develop a concept of nature that reclaims agency and empowerment.

The book ends with a discussion of Emerson. Theological publications often concentrate on stewardship, which involves human dominion over nature. This is apparently not what we find in Emerson. In Emerson, and in Eriugena as well, the ultimate result of thinking nature is the release of nature into the free thought that carries us and it onward (p.217).

I think that in the present discussion on nature it is important to keep in mind that Emerson is a 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker. For a 19<sup>th</sup> century American thinker, living on the edge of a pristine continent, 'nature' still has connotations of 'unspoilt' en 'wild'. Between Eriugena and Emerson there is a gap of one thousand years, but when it comes to nature this gap looks smaller than the gap between Emerson and our own age. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is hardly a place on earth where human influence and intrusion are absent. What does this human infiltration in nature mean for the relation man – nature – God? The thoughts of Eriugena, Emerson and associated minds seem to be a far cry from current discussions on nature in the media, in science and in theology. Willemien Otten has revealed a tradition of profound and beautiful thinking that may be very fruitful for the present day. But it is also clear that any theologian or philosopher who wants to take up this line of thought must be an imaginative thinker, willing to make a leap through time and between worlds of thinking.

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