

A Law beyond Grace in The Prologue to *Senchas Már*¹

Daniel James Watson
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

There is an extensive and varied extant corpus of medieval Irish theological material, both in Latin and the vernacular, from the seventh century onwards. Yet, apart from Eriugena and his rough contemporaries at the Carolingian court, the philosophical significance of pre-scholastic² Irish contributions to the development of Christian theology has been almost completely neglected.³ This is likely due, in part, to the fact that the astonishing degree of theological speculation which is to be found in Early Irish literature is most often worked out in the form of narratives about the distant past, instead of a more transparently discursive idiom. The tendency of philosophical investigation in early medieval Ireland to use the *dramatis personae* of historiography as its medium, rather than the categories of Aristotelean logic, has certainly been interpreted by some as a sign of the absence of any such investigation.⁴ However, the baselessness of this assumption is readily seen when we consider Early Irish

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2 Vernacular engagements with scholasticism have also been neglected, but see Elizabeth Boyle, "Neoplatonic Thought in Medieval Ireland: The Evidence of *Scéla na esergi*", *Medium Aevum* 78 (2009): 216–230.

3 John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 48; *idem*, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2–3. For a notable exception, see John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2011).

4 A position that receives its fullest expression in Charles Donahue, "Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance", *Traditio* 21 (1965): 55–116, at 65–6. Other notable examples include D.A. Binchy, "Review: The Church in Early Irish Society" by Kathleen Hughes, *Studia*

speculations on the respective modes of knowledge proper to Nature and to the Church. Here our best introduction will be the prologue⁵ to the seventh-century law-text, *Senchas Már* ([The] Great Tradition),⁶ which is found in its eighth-century Old Irish glosses.⁷

In The Prologue to *Senchas Már*, the high-king, Loegaire, following St. Patrick's defeat of his *magi* (*druíd*)⁸ in a contest of miracles,⁹ assembles the best of the men of Ireland to discuss their laws. Before Patrick arrives, those assembled express their fear that moral and political chaos will result if the 'Law of Forgiveness' (*cáin dílguda*),¹⁰ preached by Patrick, is adopted. They resolve to pay a man, Núadu, to kill a member of Patrick's household, intending to accept Patrick's 'Law of Forgiveness' if he forgives the crime, and to reject it if he does not.¹¹ Patrick's reaction is to look up to heaven, after which earthquakes ensue, causing the men of Ireland to plead the forgiveness preached by Patrick. But he refuses to make a judgement on the matter himself, rather entrusting it to the 'royal-poet' (*rígfíled*) of Ireland, Dubthach.¹²

Hibernica 7 (1967): 217–9, at 218; Proinsias Mac Cana, "The Sinless Otherworld of *Imnram Brain*", *Ériu* 27 (1976): 95–115, at 100; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology", in *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, ed. Matthieu Boyd (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 51–64, at 52.

5 For the prose of this narrative, see John Carey's edition and translation: "The Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the '*Senchas Már*'", *Ériu* 45 (1994): 1–32, (*PSM*, hereafter). The verse portion of this narrative is edited in Kim McCone, "Dubthach maccu Lugair and a Matter of Life and Death in the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*", *Peritia* 5 (1986): 1–35, at 29–35 with translation at 6–8 (*DML*, hereafter).

6 Liam Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text 'Senchas Már' and the Question of its Date*, Quiggin Memorial Lectures 13 (Cambridge: ASNC, 2011), 34–42.

7 For the dating of the *Old Irish Glosses to 'Senchas Már'* (*OGSM*, hereafter) and further discussion, see Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the 'Corpus Iuris Hibernici'* (Dublin: DIAS, 2005), 338–46. For a consideration of The Prologue to the *Senchas Már* in relation to the *OGSM* as a whole, see 24, 40, 71, 160, 338 and esp. 345.

8 *PSM* §1.2. The standard Latin translation of 'druí' (i.e. druid) in medieval Irish literature is 'magus'.

9 *PSM* §1.

10 *PSM* §2.3.

11 *PSM* §2.

12 *PSM* §4.6.

Patrick lays hands on Dubthach, so that he may judge the matter by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹³ However, there is another sense in which Dubthach was already thus inspired. He was chosen for this task as a representative of the 'righteous poets and judges of the men of Ireland',¹⁴ through whom the Holy Spirit revealed the 'Law of Nature' (*recht aicnid*),¹⁵ in a manner comparable to the patriarchs and prophets of Scripture.¹⁶ The 'Law of Nature', made known through these righteous poets and judges, is contrasted with the 'Law of Scripture' (*recht litre*), which has now been made known to Ireland through Patrick.¹⁷ Neither Dubthach nor Patrick are able to conciliate the apparent conflict between the respective Laws of Nature and Scripture on their own, since each is limited to one side of the dilemma or the other. However, when, at Patrick's hands, Dubthach also receives the Holy Spirit as it is manifest according to the Law of Scripture,¹⁸ he comes to occupy a position that is beyond the difference between natural and scriptural, secular and ecclesiastical forms of revelation. His transcendence of their mutual distinction allows him to judge the entirety of pre-Christian Irish learning in relation to that of the Church, thus distinguishing what truly belongs to the Law of Nature from what does not, so that the Law of Nature, thus defined, may be incorporated into a single law together with the, now reinterpreted, Law of Scripture.

This is further defined as a determination of what parts of the earlier tradition 'did not go against God's word in the Law of Scripture, or in the New Testament, or against the consciences of the faithful'.¹⁹ Regarding this, it is said: the 'whole Law of Nature was sufficient, save (in what concerns) the faith, and its

13 PSM §4.

14 PSM §7.13: "breithemon 7 filed fíréon fer nÉirenn".

15 PSM §7.6: also referred to as the 'Law of the Prophets' (*recht fáide*).

16 PSM §7.9–10: "amail donaircechain tria ginu inna prímfáide 7 inna n-uasalaithe i recht petarlaice" (as he prophesied through the mouths of the chief prophets and patriarchs in the law of the Old Testament).

17 PSM §7.11 and 15.

18 PSM §7.

19 PSM §7.14–5: "nád tudchaid fri bréthir nDé i recht litre 7 núfiadnaise 7 fri cuibse na crésion".

proper dues, and the knitting together of Church and State',²⁰ but also that it 'reached many things that the Law of Scripture did not reach'.²¹ This does not mean, however, that there is no common content between the two laws. The apparent conflict between the Law of Nature and the Law of Scripture is only resolvable because of the presence of judgements in the Bible understood to have been made before the revelation of Mosaic law, and thus, according to the Law of Nature.²² Moreover, it is only relative to the Law of Nature that it becomes possible to determine the meaning of the Law of Scripture's characteristic requirement of forgiveness. The Law of Scripture's imperative to forgive does not, as it turns out, mean suspending the physical punishments that the Law of Nature demands.²³ But again, in the other direction, it is only relative to the Law of Scripture that the Law of Nature comes to self-consciously reflect on itself as an analogy of divine justice. The 'men of Ireland' knew that moral and social chaos would result from failing to punish murderers. They do not seem to have known that the seriousness of murder lay in harming a being made in the image of God,²⁴ or that a failure to punish murder would mean that earthly judgement had ceased to imitate God's judgement of the rebel angels.²⁵

The immediate result of this conciliation is that Núadu's soul is saved, in accordance with the forgiveness demanded by the Law of Scripture, but his body is killed, in accordance with the Law of Nature.²⁶ The greater result is a synthetic law, in which the Law of

20 PSM §7.17–18: "Roba dí racht aicnid uile inge cretem 7 a cóir 7 a comuaim n-eclaise fri tuaith". The translation above is lightly modified.

21 PSM §7.11: "ar rosiacht racht aicnid már nád roacht recht litre".

22 DML §VII, X and XIV.

23 DML §XV–XIX.

24 DML §XV.

25 DML §IV.

26 DML §XV–XIX; On the patristic context of Dubthach's judgement, see Damien Bracken, "The Fall and the Law in Early Ireland", in *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmission / Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung*, eds. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002), 147–69, at 147–56; *idem*, "Immortality and Capital Punishment: Patristic Concepts in Irish Law", *Peritia* 9 (1995): 167–186.

Nature and the Law of Scripture are made into a comprehensive whole. This is *Senchas Már*, of which it is said that ‘no human judge of the Gaels can undo anything which he may find’ in it.²⁷

But what does this story actually mean? The concept of the Law of Nature assumed by it is not what one might expect. When the term ‘Natural Law’ is evoked it is usually in keeping with the Latin Doctors’ following of Origen’s commentary on Romans,²⁸ where it describes the capacity for ethical knowledge and action which remains to every soul in its present fallen state.²⁹ However, for others, such as Eusebius,³⁰ Lactantius³¹ and especially St. John Cassian,³² ‘Natural Law’ seems to be equated with the capacity for ethical knowledge and action which the soul had prior to its fall,³³ rather than what it still possesses in its current state. As such, Natural Law is not, according to them, what remains to the soul of its ethical life, apart from what may be restored through the perception of faith. Rather, it is the ethical content of the soul’s dependence on God through faith, to the degree that this dependence has not been lost through the fall and further abuses of the soul’s powers of deliberation.

A good point of comparison here is the account of the putative virtues of pagan philosophers in St. Augustine’s *De civitate*

27 PSM §8.6–7: “Iss ed nád cumaic nach breithem doennae do Gaedelaib do t[h]aithbiuch, nach ní fogaba”.

28 Origen, *In epistola Pauli ad Romanos, passim*, esp. III.ii.10, III.vii.5–8; IV.iii.1–2, IV.v.7.

29 Ambrose, *Epistola* 73: to Iraneaus; *idem*, *De officiis*, III.15–28; Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, IV.xxxii.63–5, VII.vii–ix.7–9, X.vi.6–10, XXVII.xxv.47–8; Jerome, *Epistola* 121: to Algasia; *idem*, *Comm. in Matt.*, I.iii.15–16, II.xi.21–2, III.xxi.28–32, VI.xxv.26–9; *idem*, *Comm. ad Gal.*, I.5, II.16, III.2, V.17–21; *idem*, *Comm. In Eccl.*, II.33; *idem*, *Comm. in Ezek.*, I.7. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus*, LIII.2; *idem*, *De sermone Domini in monte*, IX.32; *idem*, *De Trinitate*, XIV.xv.21; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, CXVIII.xxv.4; *idem*, *Epistola* 157.

30 Notably, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.ii.6, 10 and 18–23.

31 *Divinae Institutiones*, I.v.1–vii.13, VI.viii.1–ix.24, VI.xvii.1–xviii.2.

32 Notably, *Conlationes*, III.xii–xxii, VIII.xxiii–iv, XIII.i–xviii.

33 *Conlationes*, VIII.xxiii–iv.

*Dei*³⁴ and Cassian's *Conlationes*.³⁵ Augustine sees the virtues of pagan philosophers as virtual rather than actual because they are attained for their own sake,³⁶ or for the sake of a plurality of gods,³⁷ and not for the sake of God himself,³⁸ who is their true end.³⁹ Yet while such virtues have the character of sin, since the pursuit of them as an end in themselves, or for other false ends, involves the subordination of higher to lower goods,⁴⁰ they are correct relative to their immediate practical context.⁴¹ Cassian, however, sees the virtues of pagan philosophers as no more than illusion.⁴² For him, it is only as the soul, in a spirit of contrition, allows itself to be self-consciously lead and instructed by the Spirit of God that any sort of virtue whatever becomes possible.⁴³

In this respect, The Prologue to *Senchas Már* seems to be much closer to Cassian than Augustine, and, in fact, to represent a fairly radical form of Cassian's Natural Law doctrine.⁴⁴ As in Cassian, Natural Law is not conceived as preliminary to, or even distinguishable from, true righteousness, since it is precisely the 'righteous' that receive knowledge of it; the Natural Law and saving faith appear together.⁴⁵ But where Cassian states that knowledge of Natural Law is attained only by means of the 'guidance and illumination of God',⁴⁶ The Prologue uses much stronger, or

34 *De civitate Dei*, VIII.x–xii.

35 *Conlationes*, XIII.iv.1–4.

36 *De civitate Dei*, IX.iv, XIX.iv.

37 *De civitate Dei*, XIX.xxiff, X.i–iii; VIII.xii.

38 *De civitate Dei*, XIX.xxi.20.

39 *De civitate Dei*, XV.xxiii.22, XIX.xi.10.

40 See also *Contra Julianum*, IV.ii.21–22; *De spiritu et littera*, XXVII.48.

41 *De civitate Dei*, XIX.xxv; see also V.xii–xv.

42 *Conlationes*, XIII.v.2ff.

43 *Conlationes*, XIII.v.4–vi.3.

44 Building on, but contrasting with John Carey, 'The Two Laws of Dubthach's Judgement', *CMCS* 19 (1990): 1–18, at 8–10.

45 A standard gloss on *aicned* (nature) is ".i. na fer fíréan" (i.e. the justice [or truth] of [the] righteous man); see, for example, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 7 vols., ed. Daniel A. Binchy (Dublin: DIAS, 1978), at 377.12 and 369.2 (*CIH*, hereafter). My thanks to Liam Breatnach for this reference.

46 *Conlationes*, III.xiv: "magisterio et illuminatio Dei".

at least, more specific language, claiming that it is something known and related through a form of prophetic inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, in yet further contrast with the Latin Doctors, it seems not to be accessible to all people, at least to such a degree as makes it possible to instantiate it in the universality of a legal form, since those through whom the Holy Spirit speaks the Natural Law are not only 'righteous' but 'righteous poets and judges'. Evidently there is a relationship between some sort of learning (presumably scientific since not ethical) and one's capacity to be a fitting receptacle of such revelation.

The relationship between learning and one's capacity to be a receptacle of the revelation of Natural Law is clarified when we consider The Prologue in its Early Irish context. Some of the other Old Irish texts that discuss instances of pre-Christian revelation, such as Muirchú's seventh-century Hiberno-Latin life of St. Patrick,⁴⁷ in which we find the basis of The Prologue's more detailed account,⁴⁸ and the ninth-century Old Irish *Milan Glosses* on the Psalms,⁴⁹ differ from The Prologue, either in not emphasizing

47 Muirchú, *Vita sanctii Patricii*, in *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: DIAS, 1979), 61–121; I.27 "Quodam igitur tempore cum tota Britannia incredulitatis algore rigesceret cuiusdam regis egregia filia, cui nomen erat Monesan, Spiritu Sancto repleta, cum quidam eius expeterent amplexus coniugalis non adqueuit cum aquarum multis irrigata esset undis ad id quod nolebat et deterius erat compelli potuit . . . luculentissimo Spiritus Sancti illustrata <consilio> 'nequaquam', inquit, 'hoc faciam'. Quarebat namque per naturam totius creaturae factorem in hoc patriarchae Abraham secuta exemplum".

48 *Vita sanctii Patricii*, I.19; Breatnach, "Senchas Már and the Question", 36, esp. note 126.

49 *Milan Glosses on the Psalms*, in *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*, 3 vols. eds. and trans. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901–10) I, 7–483 (*MGP*, hereafter); relevant glosses include *MGP* 42b, 18: ".i. ní lugu asindet lathar innandule dodia 7 nundfoilsigedar indáas bid *praeceptóir* asidindissed 7 nodprithched ho belaib" (i.e. not less does the disposition of the elements set forth concerning God and manifest Him than though it were a teacher who set it forth and preached it with his lips); *MGP*, 51b, 7: ".i. nad fes cid as maith no as olc denum manídarti écnae dæ" (i.e. that it is not known what is good or evil to do, unless the knowledge of God were given); *MGP* 51b, 10: ".i. intan asmber *duaid intellectum tibi dabo* sechis ardi son dombera dia doneuch nodneirbea ind 7 genas tritit confestar cid as imgabthi do

the education of the proto-Christians who are understood to be taught by God in this way, or in denying the need for such education entirely.⁵⁰ However, this seems to be due to the differing purposes of these texts, rather than conflicting ideas about the necessity of divine instruction to the emergence of moral knowledge. Both the *Milan Glosses* and Muirchú's *Vita* are concerned with how the contemplation of Nature can result in the revelatory knowledge of God that is necessary for an individual to begin to learn how to live a holy life; The Prologue is concerned with the circumstances under which that knowledge can be known sufficiently to become an authoritative basis for the shared legal system of the states that make up Ireland. In which case, little or no intellectual training is needed to make first contact, as it were, but a great deal of training is needed in order to be capable of such comprehensive reception of the Spirit's instruction of the soul as is necessary for the promulgation and maintenance of a just system of laws.

Such an interpretation, at any rate, fits very nicely with the descriptions of the poetic hierarchy that occur in Old Irish texts whose contents, The Prologue claims, were incorporated into the *Senchas Már's* grand synthesis,⁵¹ namely, those found in the

dénun diulc 7 cid as deinti do dimaith" (*i.e.* when David says, *intellectum tibi dabo*, that is a sign that God will give to everyone that shall trust in Him, and work through Him, that he may know what evil he must avoid doing, and what good he must do).

50 Where the *Vita sanctii Patricii* is silent about Monesan's education, the *Milan Glosses* explicitly deny that any education is needed for a person to become aware of God through contemplation of the created order; *MGP* 42c, 2: ".i. censairse· foglaimme 7 frithgnama doneuch .i. tuuathar hiech belru indas fograigte inna duli 7 dunaibdet etarcae ndæ· trisinnopred ndogniat 7 innimthanud fil foraiþ" (*i.e.* without the art of learning or practice by anyone, *i.e.* it is understood in every nation the way the elements sound and show forth the knowledge of God through the work they do and the alternation that is on them).

51 *PSM* §10.1–3: "roba la fileda a n-oenur brethemnus cosin Immacallaim in Dá Thuaruth i nEmain Mache" (judgement was in the hands of the poets alone until the 'Dialogue of the Two Sages' in Emain Macha) - translation lightly modified; *PSM* §11.6–7: "Isin aimsir-sin domídetar maithi fer nÉrenn tomus n-aí 7 innsce do chách iarna miad, amail ro gabsat isnaib Brethaib Nemed 7rl" (At that time the nobles of Ireland adjudged the measure of lawsuit and speech to

tracts of the *Bretha Nemed* legal tradition⁵² and in *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* ([The] Dialogue of the Two Sages).⁵³ In either case, the degree of a poet's learning is directly linked to the degree of what he knows through divine inspiration.⁵⁴ However, at least in the case of The Prologue, the significance of one's own knowledge relative to the revelation of Natural Law is not simply a question of degree, but also of kind. We find there that while complete authority in interpreting the Law of Nature once belonged only to 'righteous poets and judges', the greater part of this authority was eventually delegated to others, due to the fact that the darkness of their speech was such that the princes could not understand it. Whereas initially 'judgement was in the hands of the poets alone',⁵⁵ they were subsequently deprived of 'the power to judge, save for what pertained properly to them'⁵⁶ so that every vocation came to judge what applied to itself.⁵⁷

This is an important bit of information. For if it is appropriate to divide the judgments, which knowledge the Law of Nature makes possible, by vocation, it shows that these judgments are not moral judgements in any narrow sense of the word. Rather, morality here seems to include whatever deliberations must be

each man according to his rank, as they are reckoned in the *Bretha Nemed* etc.).

52 For discussion and quotations of relevant sections of the *Bretha Nemed Toísech* (esp. CIH 2219.16–31, 2224.4–6) see Liam Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: DIAS, 1987), 36–7; Robin Chapman Stacey, *The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 82–9, 206–7.

53 Whitley Stokes edited and translated this as *The Colloquy of the Two Sages* in *Revue Celtique* 26 (Paris, 1905): 4–64 (*The Dialogue*, hereafter). The prophetic insight of the lesser poet seems to be limited to the normal operation of natural causes and includes very little theological knowledge. The greater poet is able to look back to the beginning of time and to the destruction of the world and contains a great deal of theological knowledge. For further discussion and sources, see page 205 below esp. note 67.

54 See also, the eighth-century Old Irish text, *The Caldron of Poesy*, as edited and translated by Liam Breatnach in *Ériu* 32 (1981): 45–93.

55 See note 51.

56 PSM §11.1: "Doallad didiu breithemnus ar filedaib acht a ndúthaig de".

57 PSM §10–11.

made regarding the proper practice and regulation of a given art or trade. In which case, while the soul does not necessarily seem to depend on divine inspiration for its scientific knowledge⁵⁸, its capacity to deliberate effectively regarding any application of its scientific knowledge seems to emerge only insofar as such inspiration is present and active. In other words, the degree to which a person possesses knowledge of the Natural Law, that is, the practical discernment appropriate to their profession, will be proportional to the degree to which they possess the relevant theoretical knowledge, but only insofar as that theoretical knowledge has come to be illumined by the prophetic revelation of the Holy Spirit which is manifest to the righteous of all ages.

Given that knowledge of the Law of Nature is, in The Prologue, associated with the righteousness of the knower, it must then include a revelation of the incarnation of Christ, such as was universally thought to be the very possibility of anyone being described as 'righteous'. It is, however, quite inexplicit about the necessary character of this revelation. In this it appears to contrast with *Audhacht Athairne* ([The] Testament of Athairne), a narrative in the eighth-century Old Irish law text, *Bretha Nemed Dédenach*, which is part of the same *Bretha Nemed*, legal tradition that The Prologue names as part of the inspired pre-Christian learning that was incorporated into *Senchas Már*.⁵⁹ There, the ancient poet, Athairne, is depicted imparting to his students a revelation of Christ so dogmatically specific as to satisfy the extremely technical definitions and expectations of the *Athanasian Creed*.⁶⁰ Moreover,

58 There are many complexities here which may not be addressed in the present paper. They are, however, discussed at length in the second chapter of Daniel Watson, *Philosophy in Early Medieval Ireland: Nature, Hierarchy and Inspiration*, unpublished PhD thesis (Maynooth, forthcoming).

59 See note 51.

60 Donnchadh Ó Corráin *et al*, "The Laws of the Irish", *Peritia* 3 (1984): 382–438, at 420–21. (CIH 115.3ff): "Udhucht Aithirne annso do thairchedal gheine Criosd, ut dixit Athairne: Gignither Iosa Criosd, Athair aonmac – as aoinfer, as dias, as triar, as toghairm thredhata, as folaiigh n-aonaonta forosnaidh na n-uile gan aicsin, ro baoid gan tosach, biaidh gan fóirchenn; comaosa an Mac 7 an tAthair 7 an Sbiorad Naomh, áonchumhachta 7 aoinmhiadhamhlata - tiugfa

this theological knowledge is presented as the very foundation of his status as a legal authority.⁶¹ For it is only in the context of his teaching them about Christ that they come to ask him how they should live, concerned that it may be some time before the Incarnation he speaks comes to pass. But, in *The Prologue*, the only indication we are given regarding the theological content of this natural revelation is that it included a prophetic foreknowledge of the coming of the ‘white language of the *Beati*’ (i.e. of Psalm 119),⁶² another name used both here and elsewhere in Early Irish literature for the language of Ecclesiastical Law.⁶³

It seems unlikely that the theological content of their prophetic knowledge would be limited to an anticipation of the Law of Scripture if it is to be compared to that of the patriarchs and prophets. Yet *The Prologue* is not forthcoming regarding what further content their theological knowledge may have, suggesting that the simple expectation of the advent of Canon Law,⁶⁴ in which Christ will be made explicitly known, is what we may call the ‘basic minimum’ for saving righteousness.⁶⁵ In this it is again comparable

Tigherna f^{er} Neimhe sgeo talmhan, Slaincídih an Domhain .i. Isu Chriosa d ainm” (The following is the testament of Athairne prophesying the birth of Christ. Athairne said: Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, will be born – the unseen illuminator of all is one person, is two, is three, whose appellation is a Trinity, whose substance is a single unity, has been without beginning, will be without end; the Son and the Father and the Holy Ghost are coeval, a single power, and a single dignity – there will come the Lord of the men of Heaven and Earth, the Redeemer of the World whose name is Jesus Christ’). See Ó Corráin *et al*, “The Laws of the Irish”, 423ff., for a discussion of *Audhacht Athairne* relative to the history of the transmission of the *Athanasian Creed*.

61 Ó Corráin *et al*, “The Laws of the Irish”, 420–22: “Os sinne, ol a félmac fria hAthairne, có bíam, bheas ní thairsiom an taircedol sin do chomhalladh” (As for us, said his pupils to Athairne, how shall we be, perhaps we may not experience the fulfilment of that prophecy?).

62 PSM §7.7–8: “béla mbán mbiait”.

63 Liam Breatnach, “Lawyers in Early Ireland”, in *Brehons, Serjeants and Attorneys: Studies in the History of the Irish Legal Profession*, eds. Daire Hogan and W.N. Osborough (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990), 1–13.

64 Such as we find in the eighth-century Hiberno-Latin canon-law text, *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis; Die irische Kanonensammlung*, ed. Hermann Wasserschleben (Geissen: Tauchnitz, 1874).

65 See Marenbon’s discussion of the ‘Pauline minimum’; John Marenbon,

to *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* where the inferior of the two sages in question remains associated with the quality of ‘righteousness’ (*fírinne*),⁶⁶ even though his prophetic power makes him capable of no further theological knowledge than the simple acknowledgement of God’s existence, and this, possibly with the superior poet’s help.⁶⁷ That said, this should not be taken, in either text, as having any reflection on the level of doctrinal knowledge thought to be available to righteous poets of the highest ranks. In all this it remains that either the relatively relaxed position of *The Prologue* and the *Immacallam*, or the rigorist view of *Audhacht Athairne*, regarding the necessary theological content of what is known in saving faith, seem like valid enough interpretations of someone like Augustine’s theories regarding the salvation of pre-Christians. But one might have to go to high-medieval France⁶⁸ to find another *milieu* in which either extreme would be in any way the norm.

The Natural Law’s contribution to knowledge seems to be the provision of a complete account of moral life, broadly conceived,⁶⁹ excepting the explicit contents of the Law of Scripture, and the character of the Church’s relationship to the State, at the same time as it has, as we have seen, a significant amount of shared content

Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz (Princeton and Oxford, 2015), 65–66, 87.

66 *The Dialogue*, X.27: Néde characterises the sources of his poetic knowledge as things “i focantar fírinne” (in which righteousness is taught).

67 Néde’s theological statements occur in the context of his recognition of Ferchertne’s superior knowledge; *The Dialogue*, X.268–71: “fetar mo Dia dúlech./ fetar mo rus fáithi, / fetar mo choll creth, / fetar mo Dia trēn / fetar rofili faith Fercheirdne” (I know my God creative / I know my wisest of prophets / I know my hazel of poetry / I know my mighty God / I know that Ferchertne is a great poet and prophet).

68 See, for example, William of Champeaux, *Sententiae*, CCLXI.36–46; Hugh of St Victor, *De sacramentis christianae fidei*, II.6–7; Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, III.xxv.2.2–3; *idem*, *Summa fratris Alexandri*, III, inq. 2, tr.2, q.1, chap. 4, art. 1; Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, III, d.25, a.1, q.2; Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, q.14, a.11; *idem*, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa–IIe, q.2, a.7. For an overview of Augustine’s views on this subject, their high-medieval French reception, and further references, see Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*, 32–4, 65–66, 168–172.

69 See pages 202–3 above.

with the Law of Scripture.⁷⁰ Moreover, even in their differences, we have observed that these laws are mutually clarifying in their relation to each other. This does not mean, however, that The Prologue portrays them as equal. Here, as in Biblical exegesis from Philo onwards (and before in Aristotle), natural knowledge,⁷¹ or 'philosophy', as it were, is *ancilla theologiae*, 'the handmaiden of theology', although it occupies some of the prophetic territory often reserved for theology in the usual form of this distinction.⁷² Even so, 'philosophy', as such, is ascribed, not quite an autonomy, but an importance and an independence such as it would rarely have among Christian authorities prior to the High Middle Ages.⁷³ It remains that the soul's natural knowledge does not, according to The Prologue, seem to be capable of verifying its own contents in the way claimed by those who have the more dialectical understanding of reason's natural powers which follows from Plato's *Parmenides* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁷⁴ Although false judgement is assumed, as in so many other places in medieval Irish literature, to reveal itself corporeally, in the form of blemishes

70 See pages 197–8 above.

71 DML §XV–XIX.

72 See, for example, Philo, *De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratia*, 12; *idem*, *Legum Allegoriae*, III.244; Clement, *Strom.*, I.v.29; Cassian, *Collationes Patrum*, X.8; Origen, *Philocalia*, XIII.1; *idem*, *Homiliae in Genesim*, XI.2; Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, II.xl.60–61. For the history of this idea from Philo of Alexandria up to the twelfth century, see Bernard Baudoux, "Philosophia ancilla theologiae", *Antonianum* 12 (1937): 293–326; Malcom de Mowbray, "Philosophy as the Handmaid of Theology: Biblical Exegesis in the Service of Scholarship", *Traditio* 59 (2004): 1–37; for the significance of this idea's Aristotelian prehistory for Sts. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, see Robert Crouse, "St. Thomas, St. Albert, Aristotle: *Philosophia ancilla theologiae*", in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale Tommaso nel suo settimo centenario*, i (Naples, 1975): 181–185.

73 For a possible precursor, see Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum*, XI.6.

74 For a quintessential example, see Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*, 1074.17–1076.1. On this aspect of Proclus, see Jean Trouillard, *La Mystagogie de Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982), 196–202; *idem*, "Le 'Parménide' de Platon et son interprétation néoplatonicienne", *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 23 (1973): 89–100; *idem*, *L'Un et L'Âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972), 88–89.

upon the face of the one that makes it,⁷⁵ that which is truly known by the Law of Nature requires that which is known by the Law of Scripture to distinguish between the totality of its true contents and such unworthy traditions as have become mixed with it.⁷⁶ Conversely, the contents that belong to the canon of Scripture do not need to be further determined through engagement with the Irish instantiations of the Law of Nature. The whole of the Law of Nature as uttered by the Holy Spirit through the mouths of righteous judges and poets is found to be true, but it is only through inspiration by that greater revelation which is accessible through the Church alone that what actually belongs to the Law of Nature can be identified.⁷⁷ Thus, in a fascinating twist, the very thing for which the secular hierarchies of the poets and judges are revealed to be utterly dependent on the ecclesiastical is the definition and confirmation of a field of knowledge that belongs to the secular hierarchies alone. Moreover, the field of knowledge that is proper to the secular hierarchies, thus defined, ends up being what allows the Church, in turn, to come to understand the knowledge that is proper to itself in a way which was not attainable for it on its own. For it is only relative to the Law of Nature that the Law of Scripture comes to properly understand its own doctrine of forgiveness.

Neither law is capable, by its own means, of resolving the apparent tension between itself and the other law. As we have seen, it is only when Dubthach comes to occupy a perspective which is on both sides of the dilemma, prior to the difference between them, that their conciliation becomes attainable. Such a gesture towards a knowledge so divine as to be beyond the distinction between natural and ecclesiastical modes of knowledge is not entirely without precedent,⁷⁸ and to some extent, seems to anticipate certain

75 *DML* §XI.

76 See pages 195–8 above.

77 *PSM* §7.

78 Of these, Eusebius' portrayal of Constantine is most notable. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IX–X; *idem*, *Oratio de laudibus Constantini*. However, this is not a case of direct influence. The Constantine of Rufinus'

features of the thought of Eriugena,⁷⁹ yet it remains a remarkable development in the history of Christian theology and even of ideas as a whole. Explicit gestures towards a unity which precedes the difference between natural and supernatural, between the kind of theology that becomes available through philosophical study, and the kind of theology that only becomes available through the additional means of a divinely instituted liturgical hierarchy, seem to be confined, for the most part, to the heirs of Proclus. Yet there is no reason to suppose that any of the texts by which Proclus was mediated to the Latin West would have been available to our Old Irish glossator. In this, The Prologue is not merely imitative in its following of Cassian but conciliates his understanding of Natural Law with the definite distinctions between kinds of law (Natural/Mosaic/New Testament) that are characteristic of the Latin Doctors. Once a Natural Law that is revealed through inspiration becomes distinct from other laws, a parallel distinction, between multiple forms of inspiration becomes necessary to account for the bases of multiple laws.⁸⁰ There is clearly much more work to be done on understanding the theology of this invaluable narrative. However, it is hoped that this preliminary foray will, at least, demonstrate that, prior to Eriugena, early medieval Ireland was a source of profound speculation on the central problems of philosophy with results that are as surprising as they are significant relative to the larger tradition from which they emerge.

version of the *Historia*, the version known in medieval Ireland, does not transcend the distinction between secular and ecclesiastical spheres in the same way.

79 See, for example, Eriugena's famous statement: "nemo intrat in caelum nisi per philosophiam" (*Annotiones in Martianus Capellam*, LVII.15). For him the work of religion may broadly be said to amount to a recovery of the arts, such as they exist in the soul's very essence, and especially the art of dialectic by which they are ordered in relation to each other; *idem*, *Periphyseon*, II.557B–559B, IV.748A–749A, IV.767C–770A, V.868C–869C.

80 Further discussion in Chapter 2 of Watson, *Philosophy in Early Medieval Ireland*.