

Cambridge University Press
0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
Eric Osborn
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

Eric Osborn's book presents a major study of Irenaeus (125–200), bishop of Lyons, who attacked Gnostic theosophy with positive ideas as well as negative critiques. Irenaeus' combination of argument and imagery, logic and aesthetic, was directed to a new document, the Christian bible. Dominated by a Socratic love of truth and a classical love of beauty he was a founder of Western humanism. Erasmus, who edited the first printed edition of Irenaeus, praised him for his freshness and vigour. He is today valued for his splendid aphorisms, his optimism, love of the created world, evolutionary view of history, theology of beauty, and humour. Why have two millennia of European culture been so creative? Irenaeus points to the sources: Greek ways of thinking and the Christian bible. Irenaeus' thought is complex, yet infinitely rewarding to the critical reader, and this full study of it will be of interest to theologians, historians of ideas, classicists, scientists and students.

ERIC OSBORN is Honorary Professor at the Department of History, La Trobe University and Professorial Fellow at the Department of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology, University of Melbourne. His books (some of which have been translated into French and German) include *The beginning of Christian philosophy* (Cambridge, 1981), *The emergence of Christian theology* (Cambridge, 1993) and *Tertullian, first theologian of the West* (Cambridge, 1997).

Cambridge University Press
0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
Eric Osborn
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

ERIC OSBORN

*Honorary Professor, La Trobe University, Melbourne
and
Professorial Fellow, University of Melbourne*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
 Eric Osborn
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Eric Osborn 2001

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. System L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Osborn, Eric Francis.
 Irenaeus of Lyons / Eric Osborn.
 p. cm.
 Includes bibliographical references and index.
 ISBN 0 521 80006 4 (hardback)
 1. Christian saints – France – Lyon – Biography.
 2. Irenaeus, Saint, Bishop of Lyon. I. Title.
 BR1720.L7 O83 2001
 270.1'092 – dc 21
 [B] 2001 025635 CIP

ISBN 0 521 80006 4 hardback

Cambridge University Press
0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
Eric Osborn
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*To
Sophie and Genevieve*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi

1	Irenaeus: argument and imagery	1
1.1	Life and work	1
1.2	Irenaeus philosophus?	7
1.3	The unexpected jungle	9
1.4	Source criticism and conceptual bankruptcy	10
1.5	Content, contour and conflict	12
1.6	Truth and beauty: the two criteria	18
1.7	The four concepts	20
1.8	Argument and images	22

PART I DIVINE INTELLECT

2	One God: Intellect and love	27
2.1	Attributes of God: from opulence to omnipresence	28
2.2	Metaphysic of mind	32
2.3	Divine Intellect in Irenaeus	38
2.4	Plotinus	44
2.5	Knowledge, love and unity of the divine Intellect	46

PART II ECONOMY

3	One creator: <i>ut sapiens architectus et maximus rex</i>	51
3.1	Two analogies – wise architect and sovereign king	51
3.2.1	Sovereign king	52
3.2.2	Enclosing, not enclosed	55
3.2.3	One creator, no regress	56
3.3.1	Wise architect – word and plan	58

3.3.2	Wise architect – the configuration of created things	60
3.4	Plotinus' argument for a good creator	62
3.5	God needs nothing	64
3.6.1	<i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> : concept without formula (Justin)	65
3.6.2	<i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> : formula without concept (Basilides)	68
3.6.3	<i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> : formula and concept (Irenaeus)	69
3.7	Immediacy	73
4	Economy: God as architect of time	74
4.1	Economy and divine architect	75
4.2.1	Economy as accustoming	80
4.2.2	Economy as progressive revelation	82
4.2.3	Economy as the ascent of man	85
4.2.4	Economy as polemic: history as knowledge	86
4.3	Trinity and the hands of God	89
4.4	River and movement	93
PART III RECAPITULATION		
5	Recapitulation: correction and perfection	97
5.1	Recapitulation, a complex concept	97
5.2	Correction	100
5.3.1	Perfection of being	104
5.3.2	Joy in truth; perfection of truth	108
5.3.3	Perfection of goodness	109
5.4.1	Christology: two Adams	110
5.4.2	Word of God	111
5.4.3	One mediator	112
5.4.4	Father and son	113
5.4.5	The name	114
5.5	The totality of recapitulation	115
6	Recapitulation: inauguration and consummation	117
6.1.1	Inauguration of new life	117
6.1.2	Life through the cross	118
6.2.1	Christ as head and cornerstone	121
6.2.2	The unity of the church	123
6.3	The economy of apostolic truth	126
6.4	New way of life	130
6.5	Baptism, eucharist and ministry	132
6.6.1	Consummation: one God alone will reign	134
6.6.2	When Christ shall come again	135
6.6.3	Resurrection	136

Cambridge University Press
 0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
 Eric Osborn
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of contents ix

	6.6.4 Communion and separation	137
	6.6.5 Antichrist and chiliasm	138
PART IV PARTICIPATION		
7	Logic and the rule of truth: participation in truth	143
7.1	Canon and criterion	143
7.2	Compendium of truth	145
7.3	Charisma and truth	146
7.4	What does the rule say?	149
7.5	Conversion, recovery of reason, faith and sight	150
7.6.1	Heresy	150
7.6.2	Contemporary assessment	153
7.6.3	Sophistry	154
7.7	Parody: theology for horses	156
7.8	<i>Consonantia</i>	159
8	Scripture as mind and will of God: participation in truth	162
8.1.1	From prophetic spirit to eternal word	163
8.1.2	Mind and will of God	165
8.1.3	Prophecy: from prediction to presence	167
8.1.4	A rebirth of images	169
8.2.1	The unity and truth of scripture	170
8.2.2	Scripture and tradition	172
8.2.3	Principles of interpretation	172
8.4	Images of the economy: the four Gospels	175
8.5.1	Formation of the Christian bible	178
8.5.2	Canon of scripture	180
8.6.1	Typology and truth	182
8.6.2	Typology and economy	184
8.7	John	186
8.8	Paul	189
9	Aesthetics: participation in beauty	193
9.1	Persistence of aesthetics	193
9.2	A theological aesthetic?	195
9.3	Art and aesthetics in early Christianity	199
9.4	Manifestation, vision and participation	202
9.5.1	Glory	205
9.5.2	Criticism and difficulties	207
9.6	The limits of beauty	209

10	Human growth from creation to resurrection: participation in life	211
10.1.1	Image and likeness: the puzzle	211
10.1.2	Image and likeness: inseparable conjunction	212
10.1.3	Image and likeness: disjunction	213
10.1.4	Solutions to the problem: Fantino and Sesböüé	214
10.2.1	Sin and fall, original sin	216
10.2.2	Perfection of Adam	219
10.3.1	Unity of man as body, soul and spirit	219
10.3.2	Breath of life	221
10.4.1	Spirit transforms flesh into incorruption	225
10.4.2	Strength made perfect in weakness	227
10.4.3	Flesh and glory	229
10.5	Growth through participation	230
11	Goodness and truth: ethics of participation	232
11.1.1	Free will and freedom	232
11.1.2	Horizons of freedom	235
11.2.1	Love of truth	237
11.2.2	Love and natural law	239
11.2.3	Lusts of the flesh	240
11.3	Martyrdom	241
11.4	Ethics and participation	243
11.5	Love of enemies as crux of recapitulation	245
PART V CONCLUSION		
12	The glory of God and man	251
12.1	Humanism: saving the self	251
12.2	Two criteria: argument and imagery	253
12.3.1	Optimism and growth through participation	256
12.3.2	Participation and exchange	257
12.4	The immediacy of God	262
	Appendix: Gnosticism	265
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	275
	<i>Citations from Irenaeus</i>	290
	<i>Citations from the bible</i>	295
	<i>Index of classical authors</i>	298
	<i>Index of patristic authors</i>	301
	<i>General index</i>	303

Preface

In Irenaeus, Athens and Jerusalem meet at Patmos. The visions of the prophets, which point to Christ, take the place of Plato's forms and from them he proves the truth of the apostolic preaching. Here Irenaeus follows Justin but with wider vision, for he is the first writer to have a Christian bible before him. To this text he applies the classical criteria of logic (what is true) and aesthetics (what is fitting) to draw out his four concepts of divine Intellect, economy, recapitulation and participation. His two criteria, along with his exuberant images, present his reader first with a jungle and then with a clear synthesis. From one central point he moves through the universe of biblical imagery, rubbing argument and image together because each is necessary to the other.

Irenaeus is a difficult author because of conflict within a clear general structure. Loofs identified multiple sources and wished to prove incoherence. His analysis was reasonably rejected by Hitchcock and others. His general claim for multiple sources stands, but his procedure is regressive rather than progressive. An interpreter may note what a source meant in an earlier context, but his chief interest is what the author or compiler makes of anything he includes. A second objection to Irenaeus was more to the point: Koch alleged conceptual bankruptcy or a general lack of coherent ideas.

The first step out of the genuine despair, which every interpreter of Irenaeus knows, is a recognition of Irenaeus' criteria. Alongside his logical argument which pursues truth there is his perception of fitness. This governs the apparently ridiculous claim that there must be four Gospels because there are four winds and because living things are tetramorphous. With prophetic visions as the final

Cambridge University Press
0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
Eric Osborn
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii

Preface

source of truth, aesthetic fitness governs exposition. Here the interpreter of Irenaeus needs a poet. I was fortunate to find Chris Wallace Crabbe's comic poem 'Why does a cauliflower so much resemble a brain?' and to discuss with him the way poetic association works. Prophetic imagery is born afresh in Irenaeus through poetic association. How argument and imagery fit together is an endless inquiry. Their presence as two criteria must be recognised in Irenaeus and the whole of Christian culture.

The other step for an interpreter is to identify the concepts, which govern his author's thought. For much of the twentieth century no one wrote a theology of Irenaeus. Many wrote on specific concepts of economy (divine plan) and recapitulation (summing-up of all things). These concepts do not explain, however, the immediacy of God whose glory is a living man. Following the useful rule that a thinker's ideas centre on the points where his interpreters disagree, the concept of participation emerged. Since participation is always participation of someone or something, the concept of the divine Intellect as the source of all goodness moved to the beginning of the analysis. Participation is only possible if God wills to share his goodness. The four concepts: divine Intellect, economy, recapitulation and participation govern the gospel, which Irenaeus declares. God and man are joined when God becomes what men are in order to bring them to be what he is. Economy and recapitulation join, as Irenaeus puts it, the end to the beginning, man to God. The four concepts are intelligible in succession: the divine Intellect plans the economy, which ends in recapitulation and the sharing of divine goodness. They must be kept together. The immediacy of God is known because God creates from nothing, never allows Adam to leave his hands, becomes man that man might share in God. If we ignore the first and last concepts (divine goodness and participation) we omit the point of the process, which is to join divine glory to human life. Economy and recapitulation lose point without their source (divine goodness) and end (participation).

To the logical exploration of these ideas Irenaeus adds his other criterion, an aesthetic of divine glory. The divine economy is a prolongation of God, which may be seen. Irenaeus is an empiricist whose vision of God is the source of life. This element of Irenaeus

has constituted his appeal to Christians over the centuries. It may be noted in contrast to a modern writer whose language reflects many of the ideas of Irenaeus. T. S. Eliot speaks, as does Irenaeus, of the moment in which past and future are conquered and reconciled, and of the crowned knot of fire in which all is brought to a good end. Yet Eliot writes with the hostility of an Absolute Idealist to empiricism which is the folly of old men. Irenaeus is close to Hopkins who sees God's glory in the world.

How do we use the four concepts and the two criteria to combat the accusation of confusion against Irenaeus? First, we must identify the vocabulary which Irenaeus uses to express his concepts. We must learn his language. Because Irenaeus is drawing on different sources, we must show that his opinions are not confined to one part of his work. Secondly, vocabulary takes meaning within argument. Therefore we must trace his arguments which are of three kinds. There is straight logical argument as in the refutation of Gnosticism in Book 2. There is the accumulated imagery of lists of prophecy which prove the truth of the apostolic preaching. Finally there is the composite argument of Irenaeus where the logic leap-frogs through scripture which is its guarantee of truth. This is exemplified in the two arguments, which end in love of enemies as the essence of recapitulation. These different kinds of argument are to be expected from the two criteria of logic and aesthetics.

One point of possible confusion may be clarified. I have hesitantly (because of probable misunderstanding) pointed to the presence of a Platonic paradigm in Irenaeus. He explicitly opposes Platonism on fundamental points: the status of forms and the material world, the meaning of history and the nature of man. Yet willy-nilly he thinks in the framework of his time and shares with the opposing Platonic underworld an intellectual machinery which makes controversy and new thought possible.

Remarkably, the chief influence of Gnosticism on Irenaeus was that it forced him to take Athens seriously. Gnosticism had to be met near Plato. Reasoned argument had to guide a barrage of texts. As a result Gnosticism (theosophy) stimulated its opposite (philosophy) and exegesis to produce Christian theology. Argument and imagery presented to inquirers a better use of the Socratic tradition. Gnostics were strong on picture and myth but weak on argument. When we

have seen this, we begin to understand the second century, that fertile period which formed Western thought.

Since my concern is to understand Irenaeus, his criteria and his concepts, I have taken the account of his Protean opponents at face value. By setting out the teachings to which he is opposed he has defined the indefinable Gnosticism in a way that seems no longer possible. Since the variety of groups called 'Gnostic' rivals the incoherence of contemporary Anglo-American Christianity, some scholars today challenge the usefulness of the term. Even the general assessment of Gnostics is uncertain. Once seen (by Irenaeus and Plotinus) as world-haters, many are now seen as world-lovers, who were concerned to lessen the tension between their religion and society. I have discussed these issues in an appendix; but they are marginal to my purpose. Fortunately, Irenaeus set out carefully the views, which he rejected; their importance for us is that they gave him a stimulus without which he might never have completed the first great synthesis of Christian thought. The exploration of that synthesis is my concern. His claim that the transcendence of divine love implies God's immediacy may be a rejection of the 'separate God' of Gnosticism; but it is much more besides. It is a profound interpretation of the Christian gospel.

Orbe's favoured epithet for Irenaeus was 'rich'. This prolixity has squeezed out many pages of secondary discussion and I cannot hope to indicate my debt to those who have written about him during the last two hundred years. What remains will demonstrate that Irenaeus not only said good things, but that he gave good reasons for saying these things. The general reader may bypass, on first reading, the multiplicity of references to the text, which the scholar needs in order to learn the language of Irenaeus, to prove that the four concepts are universal and to elucidate their meaning. Equally important is the analysis of argument, for it is here, not in the aphorisms, that the synthesis of Irenaeus is evident.

From conversations over the years with Jacques Fantino, E. P. Meijering and John Rist, each of whom read a first draft, and with Norbert Brox, Louis Doutreleau, Robert Grant, Christoph Marksches, Denis Minns, Antonio Orbe, Pierre Prigent, and Bernard Sesboué, I have learnt more than I can say. The late André Benoit was my colleague in Strasbourg twenty years ago.

Cambridge University Press
0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
Eric Osborn
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xv

They all saw Irenaeus' richness of thought, imagery and humanity. I am profoundly grateful to them. John Behr and Bernard Sesboué sent me, in advance, the proofs of their fine new books.

In Rome, the community and library of the Augustinianum have helped me greatly. In Cambridge, Wesley House and my own college (Queens') have always been hospitable, while at Tübingen the Stift has warmly received me. At the local level, I have gained much from colleagues in History at La Trobe University and in Classics at Melbourne. Margot Hyslop of the Borchardt Library, La Trobe, has been a constant help.

From John Honner (who edited first and final drafts), Clive Bloomfield (who checked all Irenaeus' references), Grantley McDonald (who checked other references) and Edward Morgan (who found books and typed) I have received indispensable aid through the generosity of the Australian Research Council.

Finally, my thanks go to Jan Chapman and Kevin Taylor of Cambridge University Press who thoughtfully and intelligently guided the manuscript into print.

The book is dedicated, with great affection, to my granddaughters, Sophie and Genevieve.

Cambridge University Press
 0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
 Eric Osborn
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Abbreviations

<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>AJPP</i>	<i>Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology</i>
AHAW.PH	Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften – Philosophisch-historische Klasse
ANCL	Ante-Nicene Christian Library
<i>AThR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>Aug</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>BjRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
<i>BLE</i>	<i>Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique</i>
<i>ChH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
CICL	Cahiers de l'institut catholique de Lyon
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> (7th edn; Berlin, 1951–4)
<i>DR</i>	<i>Downside Review</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de spiritualité</i>
<i>DViv</i>	<i>Dieu vivant</i>
<i>ETHL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses</i>
ETHSt	Erfurter Theologische Studien
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>FZPhTh</i>	<i>Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie</i>
<i>GOTR</i>	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
<i>Greg</i>	<i>Gregorianum</i>
<i>H.E.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>HTh</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>HThR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Irén</i>	<i>Irénikon</i>

List of abbreviations

xvii

<i>JThS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KRS	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, <i>The Presocratic philosophers</i> (2nd edn; Cambridge, 1983)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, <i>The Hellenistic philosophers</i> , 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1987)
<i>Miss</i>	<i>Missionalia</i>
<i>MThZ</i>	<i>Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>Mus</i>	<i>Muséon</i>
<i>NAKG</i>	<i>Nederlandsch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis</i>
NAWG.PH	Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen – Philologisch-historische Klasse
<i>NedThT</i>	<i>Nederlandsche Theologisch Tijdschrift</i>
<i>NRTh</i>	<i>Nouvelle revue théologique</i>
<i>NT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OrChrAn	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<i>PAS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia graeca</i> (Migne)
<i>Ph</i>	<i>Philologus</i>
<i>Phron</i>	<i>Phronesis</i>
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
<i>RevBen</i>	<i>Revue Benedictine</i>
<i>RevSR</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>RFNS</i>	<i>Revista di filosofia neo-scolastica</i>
<i>RHPhR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
<i>RSLR</i>	<i>Revista di storia e letteratura religiosa</i>
<i>RSPhTh</i>	<i>Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
<i>RThAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale</i>
<i>RThPh</i>	<i>Revue de théologie et de philosophie</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes
<i>Schol</i>	<i>Scholastik</i>
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
<i>SJTh</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>StMiss</i>	<i>Studia missionalia</i>

Cambridge University Press
 0521800064 - Irenaeus of Lyons
 Eric Osborn
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xviii

List of abbreviations

<i>StTh</i>	<i>Studia theologica</i>
<i>StudAns</i>	<i>Studia Anselmiana</i>
<i>StudPatr</i>	<i>Studia patristica</i>
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>
<i>SVTQ</i>	<i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>ThH</i>	<i>Théologie historique</i>
<i>ThLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>ThQ</i>	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
<i>ThR</i>	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
<i>ThStK</i>	<i>Theologische Studien und Kritiken</i>
<i>Trad</i>	<i>Traditio</i>
<i>TRE</i>	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TU</i>	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VigChr</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>VetChr</i>	<i>Vetera Christianorum</i>
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>ZKTh</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Titles of Greek patristic writings follow the abbreviations of G. W. H. Lampe, *A dictionary of patristic Greek* (Oxford, 1961).

REFERENCES TO IRENAEUS

(3.3.1) refers to *Against heresies*, Book 3, chapter 3, paragraph 1 (SC);
 (4 pref. 4) refers to *Against heresies*, Book 4, preface, paragraph 4;
 (dem. 20) refers to *Demonstration of the apostolic preaching*, section 20 (SC); (frag. 4) refers to fragment 4 in the edition of W. Harvey (Cambridge, 1857).