CHAPTER 3

The Theology of the Cosmographia

If the Cosmographia was written at a time of great creativity in natural philosophy, it was also the product of a period of intense religious and theological activity in France. Bernard’s life coincided with a renewed movement for monastic reform, involving a return to the traditions of the early church and the establishment of the new Cistercian and Carthusian orders. Meanwhile, in the northern French schools, theologians were bringing a new rigour to the definition of Christian orthodoxy by writing works that offered systematic accounts of Christian doctrine, instead of the piecemeal treatment of earlier scriptural commentaries. This process would culminate, a decade after the Cosmographia, in the production of the most important theological textbook of the Middle Ages, the Sentences of the Parisian theologian Peter Lombard.¹

The conjunction of these developments with the ambitious philosophy of the schools rekindled debates from the days of the early church about the value of secular learning in Christian education. Such debates focused primarily on the use of the newly fashionable linguistic arts in the discussion of the Eucharist and the Trinity, but also, in the cases of Peter Abelard and William of Conches, they concerned the legitimacy of using natural science to expound the creation story of Genesis. These controversies led to the papal condemnation of Abelard’s teaching at the Council of Sens (1141) and to the letter condemning William of Conches’s Philosophia by the Cistercian monk William of Saint-Thierry (c. 1140–1142).

Early critics were inclined to see the Cosmographia as a similarly heterodox product of the French schools in the 1140s. Bernard’s first editors remarked on his “sceptical” attitude towards theology,² and others spoke more forcefully of a “complete abandonment of the orthodox views”,³ and tendencies towards the heresies of dualism and pantheism.⁴ The Benedictine authors of the

---

² De mundi universitate, ed. Barach and Wrobel, xv.
⁴ De Wulf, Histoire de la philosophie médiévale, 233.
Histoire littéraire de la France were perhaps the first moderns to criticise Bernard’s theology, but because they believed him to have been Bernard of Chartres—the venerable master who led his students in pious Christian colloquia—they had to conjure into existence a professor whose written work somehow lacked the good sense he showed in the classroom. And yet for all these verdicts, there is no evidence that Bernard was prosecuted or his work suppressed. The Cosmographia survives in over fifty manuscripts, and none of those examined for this study appears to have been expurgated to remove theologically dubious material. Furthermore, a well-known gloss in one of these manuscripts informs us that the Cosmographia was recited in France before Pope Eugenius III, who did not apparently supress the work, as he did the teachings of Gilbert of Poitiers during the same French sojourn (1147–1148).

5 Histoire littéraire de la France, XII: 264: “Mais on doit se ressouvenir qu’en tout art, et surtout dans le grand art d’écrire, il y a loin de la connaissance des règles à l’application, du talent de montrer à celui d’exécuter. Il ne fut pas donné à notre habile professeur de franchir absolument cet intervalle, et de mettre autant d’élégance et de correction dans ses écrits, que de méthode et de lumière dans ses leçons.” For the daily prayers in Bernard of Chartres’ classes, see John of Salisbury, Metalogicon I.24, ed. Hall and Keats-Rohan, 53.69–76.

6 By contrast, a twelfth-century copy of Bernard’s Mathematicus (Bern, Burgerbibliothek 710, ff. 82r–92v) removes all references to the pagan gods, astrology and Carthage. The copyist treated the manuscript’s texts of Vergil, Horace and Ovid in a similar way. See Mathematicus, ed. Stone, 213, 216.

7 Bodl. Laud misc. 515, f. 188v (glossing Cos. I.3.55–56, which mentions the pope): “Iste Eugenius fuit papa in cuius presencia liber iste fuit recitatus in Gallia, et captat eius benivolenciam.” The final phrase of this gloss has invariably been translated as “it [i.e. the book] won his benevolent approval” (Cos., 2) or “gained his favour” (Cosmographia, trans. Wetherbee, 135, n. 85). It actually means “it seeks to obtain his favour/approval”, the present tense captat referring not to Eugenius’s response but to the intention of the flattering couplet that it glosses: “Munificens deitas Eugenium comodat orbi, | Donat et in solo munere cuncta semel”. This is important because Peter Godman, adopting the normal mistranslation of the Bodleian gloss (Silent Masters, 233), has argued that Eugenius “expressed an approval that was a factor in the swift and lasting success of the Cosmographia. Its author had satisfied the rules of a procedure Abelard failed to follow, and was granted the twelfth century’s version of a nil obstat” (335). Godman’s claim that there was a “procedure” in place for the papal pre-censorship of texts relies in turn on a misreading of Peter Abelard’s account of the criticism he faced at the Council of Soissons in 1121. The passages reads (Historia calamitatum, ed. J. Monfrin (Paris: Vrin, 1959), 87): “Dicebant [emuli mei] enim ad damnationem libelli satis hoc esse debere quod nec romani pontificis nec Ecclesie auctoritate eum commendatum legere publice pre-sumperam.” Abelard is not saying here that his enemies thought that failure to submit his treatise for papal approval was sufficient for it to be condemned, but that it ought to be (“Dicebant… satis hoc esse debere”). This has been pointed out several times by Constant.