

# St. Isidore of Seville and Traditional Philosophy

*By Victor Bruno*



*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*

## I

Two of the best introductions to the history of philosophy agree in saying that during a certain part of the development of Western thought there was a period in which philosophy fell into a kind of “depression.” These introductions both bear the title of *History of Philosophy*. One was written by Spanish philosopher Julián Marías and the other by Fr. Frederick Copleston, S.J.<sup>1</sup> The two of them say basically the same thing in different ways: that between the time of St. Augustine’s death and John the Scot’s (Scot Eriugena) and St. Anselm’s there was *no philosophy*. To quote Marías, after Augustine there is “a long gap of four centuries, from the fifth to the ninth, in which actually there is no philosophy.”<sup>2</sup>

Fr. Copleston’s *History* does not say as much, but it acts as if it said. It is meaningful to see how Copleston deals with post-Augustinian thought. From the fall of Rome to Early Scholasticism, only St. Augustine gets a full treatment of this thought. This is meaningful, given that Fr. Copleston’s work is an exhaustive history of Western philosophy in a manner that Marías’s book is not (for instance, the latter summarizes Porphyry’s and Proclus’ philosophies in a single paragraph).

Apart from the Bishop of Hippo, we see figures like St. Ambrose, St. Justin, and Origen, who have their own chapters. But they are exceptions. A figure like St. Isidore of Seville, in Copleston’s view, deserves but a paragraph.<sup>3</sup> Marías is a tad more generous: he dedicates some five and a half pages to him. This is strange, given that St. Isidore was a paramount figure from the ninth century onward, which are the centuries that saw the resurrection of philosophy in the West, according to Marías. The treatment is the same accorded to other important thinkers of the time: despite saying Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite had “immense authority and influence during the Middle Ages,” Julian Marías gives him no more attention than reciting a selection of the titles of some of his works.<sup>4</sup>

It is not superfluous to talk about chapter sizes. Illustrating how the two cited important historians of philosophy value the thought of this

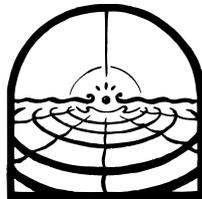
<sup>1</sup> Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, tr. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Strowbridge (New York: Dover, 1967), and Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2: *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Image, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Marías, *Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>3</sup> Copleston, *History*, 2:105.

<sup>4</sup> Marías, *History*, 136-8.

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