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## THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

### I

HARNACK, writing of the Gnostic crisis of the Church in the second century, tells us that this theoretical dualism was overcome by rejecting it from theology and seeking to find an understanding of Evil in that freedom of the creature, which is necessary in the plan of God (*Das Mönchtum*, p. 12). The catholic Irenaeus holds that the end of man (perfection) is realised through the free decision of man upon the basis of his God-given capacity: "liberum eum (*scil.* hominem) deus fecit ab initio, habentem suam potestatem . . . ad utendum sententia dei voluntarie et non coactum a deo . . . posuit in homine potestatem electionis quemadmodum in angelis." Likewise for Tertullian the freedom of the will is in no way obliterated by the *vitium naturae* (*de cultu fem.* 2. 8). We hear of the "libera arbitrii potestas, quod ἀνεξουσίον dicitur" (*de anima*). Or again, *against Marcion* (II. 5, 6): "liberum et sui arbitrii et suae potestatis invenio hominem a deo institutum, nullam magis imaginem et similitudinem dei in illo animadvertens quam eius modi status formam." From which we may conclude "ut quod ei evenit non deo sed ipsi debeat exprobari." From the time of the Gnostic crisis on, therefore, it became normal to regard as a legitimate and wholesome attitude for Christian faith an emphasis on the freedom of the human will and its responsibility for either good or evil. It was upon the soil of this tradition that Pelagianism was able to exist within the Church. Almost contemporary with the Pelagian controversy, the danger from Manicheism had reproduced a situation like that of the second-century Gnosticism, and it was necessary to reiterate the emphasis on the will as cause of good or evil. Augustine himself wrote in this controversy a work entitled *de Libero Arbitrio*.

The central aim of Pelagianism was again to vindicate the freedom and responsibility of the human will. This movement, if we can call it such, achieves deliberate and formulated expression in the early fifth century, not so much spontaneously as in reply to the contrary emphasis now becoming apparent in Augustine, and in his *Confessions* particularly. While much of

the Church may have been hitherto unconsciously Pelagian, conscious and explicit Pelagianism appears as a reaction.

The *Confessions* of Augustine, which appeared c. 379, quickly became popular, as the author himself tells us (*de dono pers.* 53), in Western Christianity. In these volumes there was much which, to any one who constantly insisted on the importance and responsibility of free will and choice for the Christian, could only appear unnecessary, incomprehensible, deplorable or even dangerous. There was the idea of the helplessness of man to find God, except by grace from God : “ quis mihi dabit acquiescere in te ? quis mihi dabit ut venias in cor meum ? ” (*Conf.* I. 5). By grace was wrought a new birth, the imparting of a nature incomprehensibly new ; it makes us *ex nolentibus volentes*. Augustine would pray, “ Da quod iubes, et iube quod vis.” Apart from this grace, all human life lay under a bondage of sin, a bondage which made man incapable of escape ; sin was understood not atomistically, as the consequences of any isolated act of will, but as a state, the state of man by nature, even in infants of one day old (*Conf.* I. 7)—not that God originated sin—“ peccatum non fecisti in eo ”—but in Adam all died.

This was not simply new in the Church. Tertullian in particular had said many things of the same kind ; he had made the distinction of *natura* and *gratia*, or *virtus* and *gratia* ; he had spoken of the “ vitium originis ”, of “ mors cum ipso genere traducta ”. He had said, “ quod maxime bonum, id maxime penes deum, nec alius id, quam qui possidet, dispensat, ut cuique dignatur ”. Nevertheless the reiteration and restatement of these thoughts in Augustine seems to have broken upon the Western Church with a force which demanded attention anew. Tertullian, after all, as a Montanist, commanded perhaps less influence than he might otherwise have had. The very personal intimacy of Augustine’s *Confessions* showed that the thought of their author was not going to be a mere system of academic speculation, but was going to have clear and immediate effect upon the whole structure of Christian piety. His psychological interest would soon produce its counterpart in the Christian consciousness everywhere. This is almost explicit in the *Confessions* : “ indicabo me talibus ; respirent in bonis meis, suspirent in malis meis ” (X. 4). And not only did Augustinianism appeal to and react upon Christian life and experience, it

also rested upon a diligent study of the authoritative scriptures of the Church, above all of Paul's epistles ; and indeed it was upon the basis of that study that the *Confessions* were written. For all these reasons Augustinianism was certain to appear to its opponents to be not only erroneous but peculiarly powerful and dangerous.

Against Augustine, then, or rather against the dangerous climate of opinion which seemed to accompany any undue reliance upon grace, the Pelagians asserted the freedom of the human will. This was not a mere verbal or theoretical difference. Indeed, on the contrary, actual verbal differences are often lacking, so that the Pelagians seem to say the same thing as their opponents ; because of this, says Augustine, Pelagius was able to deceive the orthodox at Diospolis and elsewhere. It was not the case that the Pelagians, thinking along the same lines as Augustine, came to an opposite conclusion ; on the contrary, their thinking was on different lines altogether ; the premises were totally different, and though the ideas of both might be clothed in similar language at times, the substance of the whole was utterly dissimilar.

The premises of the Pelagian position might be stated as follows. For the maintenance of Christian life and holiness, it is quite essential to insist upon the total responsibility of the individual for the good or evil that he does. Now a man cannot be responsible for the good and evil of his actions unless in every case he is free to choose either good or evil.

Upon these premises the various Pelagian tenets are consequent. Since sin is the consequence of a free choice of each person, one cannot speak of being born in sin ; if sin were something in which one was born, it would not be sinful, for it would not be the result of a free choice of evil ; likewise, until after one is born, one is not in a position to make a free choice, and therefore the child is innocent until it makes its first free choice of evil. Each of us starts life in the same position as Adam did, and it is possible, indeed easily possible, to avoid Adam's failure ; and this "easily" will both encourage the slack to real moral effort and will display the real enormity of sin. When the scriptures say that "in Adam omnes peccaverunt" they mean "in imitation of Adam" ("*sequentes Adam discesseramus a deo*," Pelagius said in his commentary on Romans), and not, as Augustine holds, "de peccati propagine disceptatur"

(*de pecc. merit.* I. 11). Likewise it follows that human nature is not corrupted, or indeed in any way affected, by previous sin. Any suggestion that past sin can make sin inevitable for the future would lead to self-excuse and irresponsibility on these very grounds, to the very thing the wise Roman had deplored: "falso queritur de sua natura genus humanum." No, nature is nature, created as such, and as such not subject to change: "naturalia per accidens non convertuntur . . . quia naturalia ab initio substantiae usque ad terminum illius perseverant"—so Julian (*Op. imperf.* I. 61, II. 76).

Now it should be plain that for Augustine the premises of the Pelagians, as stated above, did not constitute starting-points for thought at all. He was, indeed, aware of the importance of individual responsibility; against the Manichees he had to emphasise this: "liberum voluntatis arbitrium causam esse, ut male faceremus" (*Conf.* VII. 3). But even here there is no suggestion of an equal possibility of doing good. The thought of responsibility is subordinated to that of the necessity of grace; the idea of free will has to fit into the greater framework of the belief in a fallen human nature. Both from an experience which knew nothing of free independent choice of the good, and from the study of the Bible, Augustine found his central thoughts in those of grace and sin. With these as basis his work naturally assumed rather an apodeictic, declaratory, experiential and authoritative form, unlike the deductive reasoning of the Pelagians from their premises.

Pelagius never said there was no such thing as grace. On the contrary, carried away by his own dialectics, he at least once (*NG* 11) says that he does not deny grace, but Augustine does: "tu, qui rem (i.e. possibilitatem non peccandi) negando et quicquid illud est per quod res efficitur procul dubio negas." The subtler form of Pelagianism, therefore, was to affirm the need for grace, but to identify that grace with the constitution of nature. In the two works *De Spiritu et Littera* (412) and *De Natura et Gratia* (415) Augustine attacks two of these subtle formulations.<sup>1</sup>

In *SL* the position is that the Pelagians "affirm God's help; but they make it consist in His gift to man of a perfectly free will, and in His addition to this of commandments and teachings which make known to him what he is to seek, and what to avoid, and so

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated *SL* and *NG*.

enable him to direct his free will to what is good" (Warfield). God has given us, along with free will, His laws and teachings, and that constitutes His grace. Against this, in chapter 5 of his work, Augustine sets forth his thesis that "*praeter quod creatus est homo cum libero arbitrio praeterque doctrinam qua ei praecipitur, etc.*", over and above all these things he must receive the Holy Spirit before he can be just in the eyes of God ; for free will only inclines to evil, and laws and precepts do not produce the love which alone can induce us to seek and obey God : "*caritas Dei diffunditur in cordibus nostris non per liberum arbitrium quod surgit ex nobis, sed per spiritum sanctum, qui datus est nobis.*" Much of the work therefore consists of an elaboration of the principle, *littera occidit, Spiritus vivificat*. The law of moral principles, far from producing *iustitia*, actually produces and instigates sin, deceives and slays men. The grace of the Spirit diffused in our hearts is therefore something quite different from all law and precept. As for free will, this appears only at the end, not at the beginning, of the process of justification : ". . . per gratiam sanatio animae a vitio peccati, per animae sanitatem libertas arbitrii . . ." By grace we do not abolish but establish free will (52). Much of the book consists of expositions of the Pauline epistles in this sense.

In *NG* a similar situation obtains. Behind the whole controversy lies hidden a *sententia* which eventually becomes explicit (59). Pelagius, being accused of ignoring divine graces exclaims against the *caecitas* and *ignavia*, "*quae id sine dei gratia defensari existimat, quod deo tantum audiat debere reputari*" (52). In other words, as he explains, the power of free will belongs not to man, but to nature, and so to the author of nature, namely God ; and so how can that which *proprie* pertains to God be understood apart from His grace ? The thesis that any *potestas* (e.g. of speaking) belongs not to me but to the necessity of nature—that it is for me to will to use the power or not to use it, but not for me to dispose of the actual power itself, which nature necessitates me to have (*non possum non posse loqui*)—is a philosophical argument into which we need not enter, though Augustine himself does enter into it, adducing the example of unpleasant noises, the creaking of a saw or the grunting of a pig. Suffice it to say that for the Pelagians it seemed reasonable to argue that if a thing belonged to nature, nature was the work of God, and as such comprised His *gratia*,

*adiutorium, misericordia*, etc. In a word, grace was identified with nature ; and Augustine's task, briefly, was to separate them. He has to confess that the Pelagians might have something to be said for them if they were speaking of nature before the Fall. But now human nature is vitiated. "Natura hominis . . . iam medico indiget, quia sana non est." There must be two distinct stages, the *natura* and the *medicus*. "Per peccatum originale natura poenalis ad vindictam iustissimam pertinet"—nature leads to wrath, just as law does in *SL*. "Si per naturam iustitia, ergo Christus gratis mortuus est." Not only has the sin in man's nature to be healed, but God even uses sin as the instrument of healing, to subdue men's pride and self-satisfaction ; he uses Satan to destroy Satan's works. To the Pelagian, however, sin could not be dealt with by sin and grace, as if it were a substance. All substances are the creation of God, and therefore good, and therefore inalienably good. Indeed, as far as Christianity is concerned to deal with past sins at all, Pelagianism had little to say ; they did not produce any theory of forgiveness or reconciliation or atonement. We may, however, summarise *NG* as an insistence by Augustine on the two-stage theory, (1) nature under condemnation, (2) grace unto justification, against the attempt in the name of the Creator God to identify the two. Justification, he says, "gratiae est adoptantis, non naturae generantis" (*Enarr. in Psalm.*)

In so far as the Pelagians associated grace with Christ, it was understood as *illuminatio et doctrina*, i.e. much as law and precept in *SL*. Christ works by His example. This, says Augustine (*de gest. Pel.* 30) is a grace, "qua demonstrat et revelat deus quid agere debeamus, non qua donat et adiuvat ut agamus". Apart from this, grace is identified with the constitution of nature and of the moral world. Such grace, as Augustine points out (*Epist.* 178), must be possessed by all the ungodly in common with the Christians—surely one of the most potent arguments for the catholic bishops to whom the letter was addressed.

## II

A few more aspects of the controversy now fall to be mentioned.

The controversy was understood to be related to practical religious life. Pelagius is credited with having been a man of a

high standard of Christian life, and he deplored the worldliness of so many people in the Church. Since these people might excuse themselves by blaming their sinful nature, it was, as we have seen, felt essential to emphasise human freedom for good and responsibility for good and evil. Pelagius was, we may suspect, a little proud of his own proficiency in the cure of souls—we may read this between the lines, e.g. in the *Epistle to Demetrias*, 2 : “quotiens mihi de institutione morum etc. dicendum est, soleo prius humanae naturae vim qualitatemque monstrare . . .” At any rate, the practical question of rebuke and exhortation was always in the mind of Augustine’s opponents, and it was not without reason that one of his treatises was on the subject *De Correctione et Gratia*. What Pelagius required was a charter for a system of moral judgments : “unde enim alii iudicaturi sunt, alii iudicandi, nisi quod in eadem natura dispar voluntas est, et quia cum omnes idem possimus, diversa faciamus ?” (*ad Demetr.* 8). We must have a clear justification for judging people who do wrong. On what else can we base our preaching and pastoral work ? Augustine, however, strongly maintained that grace and predestination by no means nullified preaching and rebuke. And if Pelagius put difficulties in Augustine’s way with questions about rebuke, Augustine likewise used as a weapon the practical matter of prayer : “quid stultius quam orare ut facias quod in potestate habeas ?” This was, of course, in the circumstances unanswerable.

The question of baptism also appears in the controversy. For the Pelagians a baptism of infants *in remissionem peccatorum* was, strictly speaking, impossible. It is most likely that they said so at first ; Augustine was shocked to hear such an opinion in conversation, in one of his first contacts with the movement in Carthage (*de pecc. merit.* III. 12). However, such a profession would soon have proved fatal to any movement in the church. The ecclesiastical authorities might not be sure whether they believed in grace or in free will or in both, but they were very sure they believed in baptism. The Pelagians had to haul down their colours on this point, or rather to obscure them. Baptism was necessary if infants were to be saved, said Caelestius in Carthage ; but the connection thereof with original sin was a matter not of orthodoxy but of opinion, and was denied by many prominent Catholics. Julian writing in 419-20 (*Op. imperf.* I. 53), in a passage one suspects to have been made



intentionally obscure, insists on the necessity of baptism for children, but leaves room for the possibility of an original innocence: "haec gratia absolvit reos, non calumniatur innocentes." One may doubt if the Pelagians had a very sincere interest in the matter, and since an acceptance of the sacraments was absolutely necessary for continuance within the Church, they were willing when pressed to concede a point here.

In Christian life, again, the controversy was by no means one between an ascetic and a world-affirming ideal. Pelagius and Caelestius were monks, and preached a monastic ideal of a kind. In spite of their affirmation of the goodness of nature, they insisted upon continence; concupiscence was not of the substance of the flesh, which was of course good. But their monasticism was not of the type which sought as its chief aim the mortification of the flesh; this can be carried to excess, Demetrius is told. The call is rather one to spiritual virtue, goodness of character, and moderation, more in the classical tradition. Perhaps the more logical Pelagian attitude towards the world is seen in Julian, a man who might have lived in Renaissance Italy; the desires of the flesh, being part of nature, are completely good, or at least morally neutral. One of his main lines of opposition to Augustine is an attack on his contempt of God's institution of marriage. Augustine entitles him the *laudator concupiscentiae*.

In this regard Augustine was continually attacked, especially by Julian, as retaining his former Manicheism. Adam's sin was in fact a very slight one, namely eating an apple. It seemed serious to Augustine, who as a Manichee thought his God was enclosed within plants and vegetables, so that Adam must have damaged his God. From this source came his disparagement of nature, marriage, and responsible morality. Many modern scholars, including Harnack, agree that Augustine never completely got rid of his Manicheism; I myself see in him no world-denying features which were not common to the Catholicism of his time.

In the treatment of the Scriptures, all that can be said is in the favour of Augustine. While Pelagius laid down the principle, "scientiam legis non usurpare debere indoctum" (Jerome, *adv. Pel.* I. 29), the only serious and responsible exposition of Scripture in the controversy was that of Augustine. The premises and reasonings of the Pelagians lay, as we have seen, elsewhere, and all they did was to seek in the Scriptures for

justification for their ideas ; often foolishly and irresponsibly—as in the argument that, since the scripture mentions no sins committed by Abel, he must have been sinless (*NG* 44). Whole strings of texts were cited, indicating the righteousness of various biblical characters—but all Augustine had to say in answer was, “ Yes, but only *per gratiam* ”. Against all this Augustine’s position is based upon continuous, diligent and profound exegesis of the Bible, especially in *SL*.

### III

There remains the question of a critique of Augustine’s position. We shall maintain that, while Augustine was indubitably in the right over against the Pelagians, there were some respects in which he did not fully appreciate the nature of the conflict, and that his position is affected by this failure.

In fact Pelagianism represented a recrudescence of Classicism. C. N. Cochrane (*Christianity and Classical Culture* [1939], p. 452) says it was virtually “ an idealism of the classical type ”, whatever he may mean by that. He proceeds to expound his meaning in a sense which perhaps follows the Roman Catholic philosophical interpretation of Augustine, but totally misses the issue at stake in the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius was in fact not concerned to “ divorce ‘ mind ’ from ‘ interest ’ and ‘ affection ’ ” ; the Augustinian doctrine of the will and of the dynamic personality were not relevant to or affected by this controversy ; the last thing for which Augustine blamed Pelagius was for “ introducing afresh a dualism between creature and Creator ”.

The Classicism of Religion lay not in any metaphysical idealism, as Cochrane would have it, but rather in his rational or philosophical approach to questions of human behaviour. The basis for the whole thing is found neither in the Bible nor in church tradition nor in any experience of the facts of sin but in a moral axiom : goodness is possible only where there is freedom of choice and responsibility. This moral axiom being approved, it is legitimate to deduce from it not only moral and quasi-religious precepts but virtually cosmological *dogmata* also. This is worked out in convincing syllogistic form in the *Definitiones* of Caelestius. For example : “ quaerendum est, peccatum voluntatis an necessitatis est, si necessitatis est, peccatum non est ; si voluntatis est, vitari potest.” Or again, at random : “ deus

autem quod dedit, certe bonum est, *negari enim non potest.*" Whatever was self-evident to the ethical Greek, is *res probata* in the *Definitiones*. We are in the world of accepted Greek ethical thinking. It is natural and proper to treat the question of sin and free will by the method of argumentation from self-evident moral axioms.

This is the real Classicism of the Pelagians. It carries with it a strong impression of common sense, which commends Pelagianism to the English and may serve to warn us how easily European common sense merges into a Greek ethic.

Now in fact Augustine did not lay his finger upon this as the point at issue. He was too much a Classicist himself for this to be possible. It is noticeable that he does not offer us a real rationale of Pelagianism : he can say why they are wrong, he can even identify as paganism the statement that " God helps those who help themselves," but he fails to point out precisely why they are saying these wrong things, what ideological basis underlies their errors. He does not see that the keystone of the Pelagian position is in the use of philosophical argumentation ; and because he himself allows the use of this method, he is unable to deny it to others.

In a work like *SZ* a certain difference of method is noticeable between various sections. There is a long main section consisting in an admirable exegesis of the teaching of Romans on law and grace ; the treatment throughout this is purely biblical in method (though the doctrine of infused grace is not true to Paul) and not philosophical. We do not work by moral axioms and deductions. On the other hand we find sections like section 53 on the relation of *voluntas* and *potestas*. The treatment is philosophical, the terminology is carefully defined, and the argument is analogical ; that is to say, to clarify the relation of *voluntas* and *potestas* in connection with faith, these two concepts are considered as they apply in any sphere of life or activity, and the conclusions thereby reached are allowed to apply to the relationship of faith. In other words, a kind of *analogia entis* is presupposed for the argument. Warfield in describing this section as " absorbingly interesting " was perhaps carried away by his enthusiasm.

In *NG* even more space is devoted to philosophical argumentation. When Pelagius produces one of his philosophical arguments, Augustine, far from disallowing this method, affirms

it by making use of it himself in reply. So on the question of how sin can corrupt when it is not a substance (22), answered by the analogy of hunger ; so also when Pelagius holds that our natural powers are not *potestatis nostrae* but *in naturali necessitate*, Augustine comes to meet him with counter-arguments about the grunting of pigs, etc., as remarked above.

This attitude of Augustine's was, of course, in keeping with the general trends of his thought. He remained to the end a man of the classical spirit in philosophy. The early works written at Cassiciacum were never renounced. The *Confessions* contain much that is in the classical spirit—typically, for example, the section VII. 11, "How creatures are, and yet are not" ; or the utterly hypothetical argument of the next section, to the effect that "All that is, is good" ; or again, the Platonic mysticism of that experience with Monica at Ostia, when all corporal, particular, created things were left behind. Or, to omit these higher themes, many a little turn of phrase shows how the classical axioms are still unquestioned : in *NG* 57, "quis ullo modo velle esse possit infelix?"—a sentiment so utterly convincing to antiquity ; likewise the contemptibility of *nihil*, when of that boyhood theft he says "quia et illud nihil est" (*Conf.* II. 8). We need not accumulate instances. Augustine's own thought remained so classical in type that his main criticism of Classicism in the *De Civitate Dei* could not be radical. And in the Pelagian controversy he might notice the obtrusively philosophical inspiration of a Julian ("quis non ipso nominum sectarumque conglobatarum strepitu terretur?" he asks, and refers to the "nebulae de Aristotelicis categoriis") but we could scarcely expect him to seize upon and challenge the simple rational mode of thought which was the natural common sense of the time, and perhaps still is. That mode of thought could be challenged only from one direction—namely from the personal thought of the Bible ; and Augustine indeed brings personality into European thought, but—and this "but" meant that Classicism was still in control—personality psychologically understood.

Karl Barth remarks (*K.D.* II. 2. 337) that it is no accident that the father of the classic doctrine of Predestination was also the discoverer of the literary genre of Christian autobiography. The interest in the destiny and mystery of the individual dominates both. Classicism in the Pelagians had felt the same

interest and had given its verdict for a free self-determination of the individual. The predestination doctrine, which was Augustine's final rejection of the Pelagian position, was also controlled by classicism, in so far as it had to give a deterministic answer to the problem set by Classical self-determinism.

Warfield speaks as if another ten years of life would have seen a Reformation doctrine of grace triumph over the doctrine of the Church in Augustine. But in fact we cannot so easily claim him from Roman Catholicism. When Classicism attacked Christianity in the Pelagians, their refutation was not accomplished without the alliance of Classicism ; and even in the doctrine of predestinating grace it was the classical thought engrained in the author's mind which made him interpret sin and grace psychologically ; and this psychologism led at once to the doctrine of infused grace, which is the heart of all Roman Catholic piety.

JAMES BARR.

*New College,  
Edinburgh.*