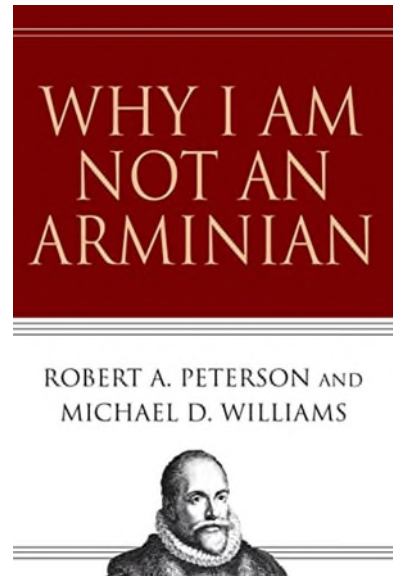


Semi-Pelagianism and the Synod of Orange

Although Pelagius was condemned by the bishop of Rome in 417 and then after his death by the Council of Ephesus in 431, he certainly did not set out to be a heretic. Bernhard Lohse makes the point that Pelagius's intent was "to elevate the difficult ascetic demands which were then permeating monasticism to a position of a fundamental principle for all Christians." While Pelagius's inordinately low view of sin and grace might—and should—strike us as scandalous and indeed heretical, Lohse does not exaggerate when he notes that "there is hardly an opinion" in Pelagius's teaching on sin and grace "for which some confirmation could not be found among the earlier fathers of the church." Indeed, one could easily argue that it was Augustine, not Pelagius, who was out of step with the tradition of the church.



The generation after Augustine and Pelagius would give birth to the Semi-Pelagian movement. Monks like John Cassian and Vincent of Lérins agreed with Augustine regarding the seriousness of sin, yet they objected to his ideas of the total and disabling bondage of the will to sin, the irresistible power of grace and predestination as predicated upon a particular election. In 434 Vincent of Lérins wrote the *Commonitory*, which contained both a polemic against Augustine's doctrine of grace as a dangerous innovation and a description of the Catholic principle of tradition that would become normative for the church. The Augustinian understanding of sin and grace, said Vincent, is contrary to the ancient tradition of the church, "that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense 'Catholic,' which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universality."¹

The Semi-Pelagians were convinced that Augustine's monergistic emphasis upon salvation by grace alone represented a significant departure from the traditional teaching of the church. And a survey of the thought of the apostolic fathers shows that the argument is valid.

While affirming the necessity of grace for salvation, early Christian theological reflection tended to be highly moralistic and even legalistic, emphasizing a view of the

¹ Vincent of Lérins *Commonitory for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies* 2.6.

Christian life that focused more on conduct—often expressed as rigorous prescription—rather than grace, faith or forgiveness. In comparison to Augustine’s monergistic doctrine of grace, the teachings of the apostolic fathers tended toward a synergistic view of redemption. For them, salvation is the result of a *working together* of divine grace and human agency. Human beings are fallen such that they need divine help, but that help cooperates with our own striving toward God and the moral life. The synergism in pre-Augustinian thought held that divine grace is necessary for salvation but that our salvation is as much the product of the exercise of human free will and obedience to the law of God as of grace.

The Semi-Pelagian monastics affirmed the free will and ability of human beings. Yet they were far removed from the humanistic monergism of Pelagius. The Semi-Pelagians insisted that human beings cannot be saved apart from the supernatural assisting grace of God. But the fallen human will is not held in bondage to sin; it is not completely disabled by sinful corruption. Human beings can, unaided by grace, take the first step toward salvation. John Cassian held that human nature is weakened but not disabled by sin; we are fallen but able, fallen enough that we need help, but not so fallen that we cannot contribute to our own recovery. Cassian wrote, “And when He [God] sees in us some beginnings of a good will, He at once enlightens it and strengthens it and urges it on towards salvation, increasing that which He Himself implanted or which He sees to have arisen from our own efforts.”² In Semi-Pelagian synergism, human beings are the initiators of faith. Grace is responsive to our search for God and the good. *God helps those who help themselves.*

Throughout the fifth and early sixth centuries, the Augustinians and the Semi-Pelagians continued their debate, until the bishops met in 529 at the Synod of Orange to seek a resolution of the controversy. Even a century after his death, Augustine’s influence was so great that the synod sought to expunge any lingering strands of Pelagianism within the church. This does not mean, however, that the bishops affirmed Augustine’s teaching in its entirety. Somewhat inconsistently, they affirmed the doctrine of original sin and Augustine’s teaching on the bondage of the will, but they failed to affirm the doctrine of predestination. They argued that the freedom of the will has been destroyed by sin such that the only thing inherent in fallen humankind is “untruth and sin.”³ Faith is not initiated by human beings and then completed by divine grace so that God’s work is dependent upon people. Rather, faith begins in the illuminating work and infused presence of the Holy Spirit, which “precedes” and “enables” human beings’ response to grace.⁴ Much of the language of the Canons of the Council of Orange was taken directly from the works of Augustine. For example, using a citation from Augustine himself, the canons rejected the Pelagian charge that Augustine’s

² Quoted in Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, p. 283.

³ *Canons of the Council of Orange*, para. 1-2, 13, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 3-7, 18.

teaching was deterministic: “Men do their own will and not the will of God when they do what displeases him; but when they follow their own will and comply with the will of God, however willingly they do so, yet it is his will by which what they will is both prepared and instructed.”⁵

Any goodness or righteousness that humankind displays is the result of God’s grace working in them. But this should not be taken as evidence that the Synod of Orange affirmed Augustine’s gracious monergism. The synod softened the Augustinian teaching into a gracious synergism. First, as stated above, the synod did not endorse predestination. The canons explicitly reject predestination to damnation,⁶ but they are completely silent concerning predestination to redemption. Second, while the synod insisted that the initiation of faith begins with the work of grace, it suggested that human agency cooperates with the divine in order to produce redemption. This synergism is subtly but crucially different from that of the Semi-Pelagians. While both see redemption as the product of both divine grace and human effort, the Semi-Pelagians depict redemption as beginning with human agency. The Semi-Augustinian synergism of Orange reversed the sequence. Hence, a person’s contribution to salvation is faithful response to the grace of God. Grace is *prevenient* here in that it precedes human response.

Nevertheless, there is a problem with the conclusions of the synod. If faith is a gift of God in that the seeds of faith are found in a grace that precedes the actual expression of faith in the responsive heart, and if grace must be given to people enabling them to respond (for a person cannot take the first step toward God), how does one account for the fact that not all respond in faith to the gospel? It seems that the bishops at Orange sought to escape having to address this question.

While the synod held that divine grace is necessary unto faith, its refusal to affirm the particularism of Augustine’s doctrine of predestination seems to be an implicit affirmation of universal preceding grace. That is, universal repairing and enabling grace is given to all, but each person must obediently respond to the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in order to be saved.

Where Do Calvinism and Arminianism Fit?

The Calvinist understanding of the doctrines of sin and redemption closely conforms to Augustine’s gracious monergism. Redemption is utterly the work of grace. Does the antipathy between Calvinism and Arminianism suggest that Pelagius, the arch-opposite of Augustine, is the proper ancestor of Arminianism? Calvinists have often sought to paint

⁵ Ibid., para. 23.

⁶ Ibid., para. 25.

Arminianism in Pelagian colors. Associating your opponent with a position that the historic faith has repeatedly judged heretical can only help one's cause. However, the allegation that Arminianism is Pelagian is unfortunate and indeed unwarranted. From Jacob Arminius and the "Remonstrant Articles" on, the Arminian tradition has affirmed the corruption of the will by sin and the necessity of grace for redemption. Arminianism is not Pelagian.

If Arminianism cannot be traced back to Pelagius, perhaps the Semi-Pelagianism of John Cassian and Vincent of Lérins is the ancestor of Arminianism. Both Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism insist upon a synergistic view of redemption. A person's salvation is the result of two agencies: (1) God's grace and (2) human faith and obedience. But here again, there are important dissimilarities. The Semi-Pelagians thought of salvation as beginning with human beings. We must first seek God; and his grace is a response to that seeking. The Arminians of the seventeenth century, however, held that the human will has been so corrupted by sin that a person cannot seek grace without the enablement of grace. They therefore affirmed the necessity and priority of grace in redemption. Grace must go before a person's response to the gospel. This suggests that Arminianism is closer to Semi-Augustinianism than it is to Semi-Pelagianism or Pelagianism. The word *Pelagian* as a description of Arminians—or Roman Catholics for that matter—does them an injustice because it associates them with a theological tradition that is truly heretical in that Pelagius trivialized grace, and in so doing trivialized the work of Christ. Both the Semi-Augustinians of the fifth and sixth centuries and the Arminians of the seventeenth century sought understandings of sin and redemption that were qualifications of Augustinianism. Semi-Augustinianism was not a Pelagianism that had moved toward Augustine but rather a softening of Augustinianism that sought to modify or excise elements of Augustine's teaching that were found offensive (particularist election and a doctrine of divine agency that seemed to render human agency irrelevant). As Arminianism began as a reaction to the Augustinian commitments of the Reformed churches and reacted negatively to much the same issues as had the Semi-Augustinians, Arminianism is properly understood as Semi-Augustinianism.

Yet we should appreciate the reality that the four positions sketched here as coming out of the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy of the fifth century do not exhaust the list of possible ways that sin and redemption can be understood or the ways in which divine agency can be thought of as relating to human action and decision making. Yes, Augustinianism (salvation is all of God's grace) and Pelagianism (salvation is the product of human achievement) do seem to mark the polar extremes. But what lies between might be more of a continuum than a few discrete points. Between the two monergistic poles is the admixture, the synergism of dual agency in redemption. The realization of a continuum of beliefs may help us understand something of the diversity of belief within a tradition.

In 529 the Synod of Orange declared Semi-Pelagianism a heresy and declared a form of Augustinianism to be the official teaching of the Roman Church. Yet the emphasis upon the cooperation of human agency in redemption left a space for Semi-Pelagian ideas to flourish in popular belief. Even though the synod did not affirm a doctrine of meritorious works and insisted that God's grace is the sole efficient cause of salvation, a Semi-Pelagian—and often an outright Pelagian—view of human agency would dominate in common folk belief. Indeed, the customs and structures that arose within the medieval Roman Church would lean toward a view of Christianity as a religion of performance, merit and obligatory rite. Something quite similar seems to exist within the Arminian tradition. Popular Arminian writing often tends to be so dismissive of anything that might qualify "libertarian free will" that it gives itself over to a moralist and meritorious doctrine of redemption. Redemption is offered by God, but we must earn it. This is, of course, the very danger that the Calvinist sees in all synergistic understandings of redemption.

But we Calvinists have our own version of popular or folk belief as well. If Arminian popular belief tends toward the overestimation of human ability and the redemptive contribution of human achievement, Calvinist popular belief often seems to overemphasize its redemptive monergism. We seek to out-Augustine Augustine. If a little monergism is good, more is better. As a result, we make God the sole cause of all things, sin as well as grace, unbelief as well as belief. And human beings do become mere pawns or actors walking through the scenery of their lives.

The Augustine-Pelagius controversy is our first monumental historical event. This controversy sets the stage for the following two chapters, which focus on issues keenly debated by Augustine and Pelagius and still disputed today: predestination and the perseverance of the saints.