

PELAGIUS and His Theology



Pelagius was an early British theologian that lived toward the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century (c. 360 - c. 420). Of the origin of Pelagius almost nothing is known. The name is supposed to be a Hellenized form of the Cymric *Morgan* (seabegotten). His contemporaries understood that he was of British (probably of Irish) birth, and gave him the appellation *Brito*. He was a large ponderous person, heavy both in body and mind (Jerome, "stolidissimus et Scotorum pultibus praegravatus").

Pelagius was influenced by the monastic enthusiasm which had been kindled in Gaul (modern day France) by Saint Athanasius (A.D. 336), and which, through the energy of Saint Martin of Tours (A.D. 361), rapidly communicated itself to the Britons and Scots. For, though Pelagius remained a layman throughout his life, and though he never appears in any strict connection with a cenobite fraternity, he yet adhered to monastic discipline ("veluti monachus"), and distinguished himself by his purity of life and exceptional sanctity ("egregie Christianus").

He seems to have been one of the earliest, if not the very earliest, of that remarkable series of men who issued from the monasteries of Scotland and Ireland, and carried back to the Continent in a purified form the Christianity they had received from it. Coming to Rome in the beginning of the 5th century (his earliest known writing is of date 405), he found a scandalously low tone of morality prevalent. But his remonstrations were met by the plea of human weakness. To remove this plea by exhibiting the actual powers of human nature became his first object.

It seemed to him that the Augustinian doctrine of total depravity and of the consequent bondage of the will both cut the sinew of all human effort and threw upon God the blame which really belonged to man. His favorite maxim was, "If I ought, I can." The views of Pelagius did not originate in a conscious reaction against the influence of the Augustinian theology, although each of these systems was developed into its ultimate form by the opposition of the other. Neither must too much weight be allowed to the circumstance that Pelagius was a monk, for he was unquestionably alive to the delusive character of much that passed for monkish sanctity. Yet possibly his monastic training may have led him to look more at conduct than at character, and to believe that holiness could be arrived at by rigour of discipline. This view of things suited his matter-of-fact temperament.

Judging from the general style of his writings, his religious development had been equable and peaceful, not marked by the prolonged mental conflict, or the abrupt transitions, which characterized the experience of his great opponent, Saint Augustine of Hippo. With no great penetration he saw very clearly the thing before him, and many of his practical counsels are marked by sagacity, and are expressed with the succinctness of a proverb ("corpus non frangendum, sed regendum est"). His interests were primarily ethical; hence his insistence on the freedom of the will and his limitation of the action of divine grace.

The peculiar tenets of Pelagius, though indicated in the commentaries which he published at Rome previous to A.D. 409, might not so speedily have attracted attention had they not been adopted by Celestius, a much younger and bolder man than his teacher. Celestius, probably an Italian, had been trained as a lawyer, but abandoned his profession for an ascetic life. When Rome was sacked by the Goths (410) the two friends crossed to Africa. There Pelagius once or twice met with Augustine, but very shortly sailed for Palestine, where he justly expected that his opinions would be more cordially received.

Celestius remained in Carthage with the view of receiving ordination. But Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, being warned against him, summoned a synod, at which Paulinus, a deacon of Milan, charged Celestius with holding the following six errors: (1) that Adam would have died even if he had not sinned; (2) that the sin of Adam injured himself alone, not the human race; (3) that new-born children are in the same condition in which Adam was before the fall; (4) that the whole human race does not die because of Adam's death or sin, nor will the race rise again because of the resurrection of Christ; (5) that the law gives entrance to heaven as well as the gospel; (6) that even before the coming of Christ there were men who were entirely without sin.

To these propositions a seventh is sometimes added, "that infants, though unbaptized, have eternal life," a corollary from the third. Celestius did not deny that he held these opinions, but he maintained that they were open questions, on which the Church had never pronounced. The synod, notwithstanding, condemned and excommunicated him. Celestius, after a futile appeal to Rome, went to Ephesus, and there received ordination.

In Palestine Pelagius lived unmolested and revered, until in 415 Orosius, a Spanish priest, came from Augustine, who in the meantime had written his *De Peccatorum Meritis*, to warn Jerome against him. The result was that in June of that year Pelagius was cited by Jerome before John, bishop of Jerusalem, and charged with holding that man may be without sin, if only he desires it. This prosecution broke down, and in December of the same year Pelagius was summoned before a synod of fourteen bishops at Diospolis (Lydda). The prosecutors on this occasion were two deposed Gallican bishops, Heros of Arles and Lazarus of Aix, but on account of the illness of one of them neither could appear.

The proceedings, being conducted in various languages and by means of interpreters, lacked certainty, and justified Jerome's application to the synod of the epithet "miserable." But there is no doubt that Pelagius repudiated the assertion of Celestius, that "the divine grace and help is not granted to individual acts, but consists in free will, and in the giving of the law and instruction." At the same time he affirmed that a man is able, if he likes, to live without sin and keep the commandments of God, inasmuch as God gives him this ability. The synod was satisfied with these statements, and pronounced Pelagius to be in agreement with Catholic teaching.



Pelagius naturally plumed himself on his acquittal, and provoked Augustine to give a detailed account of the synod, in which he shows that the language used by Pelagius was ambiguous, but that, being interpreted by his previous written statements, it involved a denial of what the Church understood by *grace* and by man's dependence on it. The North African Church as a whole resented the decisions of Diospolis, and in 416 sent up from their synods of Carthage and Mileve (in Numidia) an appeal to Innocent, bishop of Rome, who, flattered by the tribute thus paid to the see of Rome, decided the question in favor of the African synods.

Though Innocent's successor, Zosimus, wavered for some time, he at length fell in with what he saw to be the general mind of both the ecclesiastical and the civil powers. For, simultaneously with the largely attended African synod which finally condemned Pelagianism in the West, an imperial edict was issued at Ravenna by Emperor Honorius on the 30th of April 418, peremptorily determining the theological question and enacting that not only Pelagius and Celestius but all who accepted their opinions should suffer confiscation of goods and irrevocable banishment.



Thus prompted the Roman bishop, Zosimus, drew up a circular petition inviting all the bishops of Christendom to subscribe to a condemnation of Pelagian opinions. Nineteen Italian bishops refused, among them Julian of Eclanum in Apulia, a man of good birth, approved sanctity and great capacity, who now became the recognized leader of the movement. But not even his acuteness and zeal could redeem a cause which was rendered hopeless when the Eastern Church (Ephesus, 431) confirmed the decision of the West. Pelagius himself disappears after 420; Celestius was last seen at Constantinople seeking the aid of the Patriarch, Nestorius in 428.

Pelagianism

The system of Pelagius is a consistent whole, each part involving the existence of every other. Starting from the idea that "ability limits obligation," and resolved that people should feel their responsibility, he insisted that a person is able to do all

that God commands, and that there is, and can be, no sin where the will is not absolutely free - able to choose good or evil. The favorite Pelagian formula, "Si necessitatis est, peccatum non est; si voluntatis, vitari potest," had an appearance of finality which imposed on superficial minds.

The theory of the will involved in this fundamental axiom of Pelagianism is that which is commonly known as the "liberty of indifference," or "power of contrary choice" - a theory which affirms the freedom of the will, not in the sense that the individual is self-determined, but in the sense that in each volition and at each moment of life, no matter what the previous career of the individual has been, the will is in equipoise, able to choose good or evil.

Since, according to the Pelagian Theology, we are born characterless (*non pleni*), and with no bias towards good or evil (*ut sine virtute, ita et sine vitio*). It follows that we are uninjured by the sin of Adam, save in so far as the evil example of our predecessors misleads and influences us (*non propagine sed exemplo*). There is, in fact, no such thing as original sin, sin being a thing of will and not of nature; for if it could be of nature our sin would be chargeable on God the creator. This will, capable of good as of evil, being the natural endowment of a person, is found in the heathen as well as in the Christian, and the heathen may therefore perfectly keep such law as they know.

But, if everyone has this natural ability to do and to be all that is required for perfect righteousness, what becomes of grace, of the aid of the Holy Spirit, and, in a word, of Christianity? Pelagius vacillates considerably in his use of the word "grace." Sometimes he makes it equivalent to natural endowment. Indeed one of his most careful statements is to this effect: "We distinguish three things - the ability, the will, the act (*posse, velle, esse*). The ability is in nature, and must be referred to God, who has bestowed this on His creature; the other two, the will and the act, must be referred to individual person, because they flow from the fountain of free will" (Aug., *De gr. Christi*, ch. 4).

But at other times he admits a much wider range to grace, so as to make Augustine doubt whether his meaning is not, after all, orthodox. But, when he speaks of grace "sanctifying," "assisting," and so forth, it is only that one may "more easily" accomplish what one could with more difficulty accomplish without grace. A decisive passage occurs in the letter he sent to the see of Rome along with his *Confessio fidei*: "We maintain that free will exists generally in all humanity, in Christians, Jews, and Gentiles; they have all equally received it by nature, but in Christians only is it assisted by grace.

In others this good of their original creation is naked and unarmed. They shall be judged and condemned because, though possessed of free will, by which they might come to the faith and merit the grace of God, they make an ill use of their freedom; while Christians shall be rewarded because, by using their free will correctly, they merit the grace of the Lord and keep His commandments" (ibid. chs. 33, 34).

Pelagius allowed to grace everything but the initial determining movement towards salvation. He ascribed to the unassisted human will power to accept and use the proffered salvation of Christ. It was at this point his departure from the Catholic creed could be made apparent: Pelagius maintains, expressly and by implication, that it is the human will which takes the initiative, and is the determining factor in the salvation of the individual; while the Church maintains that it is the divine will that takes the initiative by renewing and enabling the human will to accept and use the aid or grace offered.

Semi-pelagianism

It was easy for Augustine to show that this was an "impia opinio," (impious opinion); it was easy for him to expose the defective character of a theory of the will which implied that God was not holy because He is *necessarily* holy; it was easy for him to show that the positions of Pelagius were anti-Scriptural; but, though his arguments prevailed, they did not wholly convince, and the rise of Semi-pelagianism - an attempt to hold a middle course between the harshness of Augustinianism and the obvious errors of Pelagianism - is full of significance.

This earnest and conciliatory movement discovered itself simultaneously in North Africa and in southern Gaul. In the former Church, which naturally desired to adhere to the views of its own great theologian, Augustine, the monks of Adrumetum found themselves either sunk to the verge of despair or provoked to licentiousness by his predestinarian teaching. When this was reported to Augustine he wrote two elaborate treatises to show that when God ordains the end He also ordains the means, and if any man is ordained to life eternal he is thereby ordained to holiness and zealous effort.

But meanwhile some of the monks themselves had struck out a *via media* (middle way) which ascribed to God sovereign grace and yet left intact individual human responsibility. A similar scheme was adopted by Cassian of Marseilles (hence Semi-pelagians are often spoken of as *Massilians*), and was afterwards ably advocated by Vincent of Lerins and Faustus of Rhegium. These writers, in opposition to Pelagius, maintained that the human individual was damaged by the fall, and seemed indeed disposed to purchase a certificate of orthodoxy by the abusive epithets they heaped upon Pelagians (*ranae*, and *muscae moriturae*).

The difference of Semi-pelagianism is the tenet that in regeneration, and all that results from it, the divine and the human will are co-operating (synergistic) coefficient factors. After finding considerable acceptance, this theory was ultimately condemned, because it retained the root-principle of Pelagianism - that one has some ability to will good and that the beginning of salvation *may* be with the human individual. The Councils of Orange and Valence (A.D. 529), however, which condemned Semi-pelagianism, did so with the significant restriction that predestination to evil was not to be taught - a restriction so agreeable to the general feeling of the Church that, three centuries after, Gottschalk was sentenced to be degraded from the priesthood, scourged and imprisoned for teaching reprobation. The questions raised by Pelagius continually recur, but, without tracing the strife as sustained by Thomists and Jansenists on the one side and the Jesuits and Arminians on the other, this article can only indicate the general bearing of the controversy on society and the Church.

The anthropology of Pelagius was essentially naturalistic. It threatened to supersede grace by nature, to deny all immediate divine influence, and so to make Christianity practically useless. Pelagius himself did not carry his rationalism through to its logical conclusions; but the logical consequence of his system was, as Augustine perceived, the denial of the atonement and other central truths of revealed religion. And, while the Pelagians never existed as a sect separate from the Church Catholic, yet wherever rationalism has infected any part of the Church there Pelagianism has sooner or later appeared; and the term "Pelagian" has been continued to denote views which minimize the effects of the fall and unduly magnify human natural ability. These views and tendencies have appeared in theologies which are not in other respects rationalistic, as, *e.g.* in Arminianism; and their presence in such theologies is explained by the desire to remove everything which might seem to discourage human effort.

It is not easy to determine how far the vices which ate so deeply into the life of the Church of the Middle Ages were due to the sharpness with which some of the severer features of the Augustinian theology were defined during the Pelagian controversy. The pernicious belief in the magical efficacy of the sacraments and the consequent defective ethical power of religion, the superstitious eagerness to accept the Church's creed without examining or really believing it, the falsity and cruelty engendered and propagated by the idea that in the Church's cause all weapons were justifiable, these vices were undoubtedly due to the belief that the visible church was the sole divinely-appointed repository of grace. And the sharply accentuated tone in which Augustinianism affirmed man's inability quickened the craving for that grace or direct agency of God upon the soul which the Church declared to be needful and administered through her divinely appointed persons and sacraments, and thus brought a decided impulse to the development of the sacerdotal system.

Again, although it may fairly be doubted whether, as the theologian Baur supposes, Augustine was permanently tainted with the Manichaeic notion of the inherent evil of matter, it can scarcely be questioned that his views on marriage as elicited by the Pelagian controversy gave a considerable impulse to the already prevalent idea of the superiority of virginity. When the Pelagians declared that Augustine's theory of original sin discredited marriage by the implication that even the children of the regenerate were born in sin, he could only reply (*De nuptiis et concupiscentia*) that marriage now cannot partake of the spotless purity of the marriage of unfallen humanity, and that, though what is evil in concupiscence is made a good use of in marriage, it is still a thing to be ashamed of - not only with the shame of natural modesty (which he does not take into account) but with the shame of guilt. So that, although Augustine is careful to point out the advantages of marriage, an indelible stigma is still left even on the lawful procreation of children.



"The Pelagians deserve respect," says the 19th century German theologian, Harnack, "for their purity of motive, their horror of the Manichaeic leaven and the *opus operatum*, their insistence on clearness, and their intention to defend the Deity. But we cannot but decide that their doctrine fails to recognize the misery of sin and evil, that in its deepest roots it remains godless, that it knows, and seeks to know, nothing of redemption, and that it is dominated by an empty formalism (a notional mythology), which does justice at no single point to actual quantities, and on a closer examination consists

Adolph von Harnack of sheer contradictions. In the *form* in which this doctrine was *expressed* by Pelagius - and in fact also by Julian - i.e. with all the accommodations to which he condescended, it was not a novelty. But in its fundamental thought it was; or rather, it was an innovation because it abandoned in spite of all accommodations in expression, the pole of the mystical doctrine of redemption, which the Church had steadfastly maintained side by side with the doctrine of freedom."

In the Pelagian controversy some of the fundamental differences between the Eastern and Western theologies appear. The former laid stress on "the supernatural character of Christianity as a fact in the objective world" and developed the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation; the Western emphasized "the supernatural character of Christianity as an agency in the subjective world" and developed the doctrines of sin and grace. All the Greek fathers from Origen to Chrysostom had been jealous for human freedom and loath to make sin a natural power, though of course admitting a general state of sinfulness. The early British monasteries had been connected with the Orient. Pelagius was familiar with the Greek language and theology, and when he came to Rome he was much in the company of Rufinus and his circle who were endeavoring to propagate Greek theology in the Latin Church.

Literature - Pelagius's *Commentarii in epistolas Pauli*, *Libellus fidei ad Innocentium* and *Epistola ad Demetriadem* are preserved in Jerome's works (vol. v. of Martiani's ed., vol. xi. of Vallarsi's). The last-named was also published separately by Semler (Halle, 1775). There are of course many citations in the Anti-Pelagian Treatises of Augustine. On the *Commentaries* see *Journal of Theol. Studies*, vii. 568, viii. 526; an edition is being prepared for the *Cambridge Texts and Studies* by A. Souter.