

«THE WAYS OF GOD TO MEN»
Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Theodicy

This gospel of divine grace was lost to view during the dark centuries in which the corruption of Rome was unrestrained. It was given to Martin Luther, with his colleagues, to restore the main features of this gospel and these features have been the cherished possessions of Protestants from Reformation days.¹

In approaching *Paradise Lost*, the reader is not left wondering about its purpose, but is readily informed that its twofold aim will be to «assert divine providence and justify the ways of God to men». It is our intention to follow the evolution of such defence as it chiefly appears in Book III. In so doing, we shall see how Milton's apology of God reflects the main tenets of the Reformation, with the Son and the doctrine of substitution as God's ultimate justification. While in many respects we have followed in the footsteps of Danielson's studies in theodicy², a twofold element of originality can be traced in the emphasis placed on the Son's nature and the extent of atonement as necessary features of God's apology.

In his antiprelatical writings, Milton saw the need for a continuing reformation that would bring the Church back to the purity and simplicity of the Gospel. The modern reformation had begun, in Milton's mind, with Wycliffe and Huss only to continue with Luther, Calvin and Zwingli and find its ultimate manifestation in England. While the poet believed England had been called to complete such a reforming process, he found himself fighting against what seemed to hinder its full expression, namely the despicable divergence between the simplicity of the teachings of the Gospel and the complication of ecclesiastical systems, ecclesiology being the true crux of the matter³. Nevertheless, it is

¹) Chafer 1976, pp. 3-4.

²) See bibliography.

³) With reference to the corruption of the clergy and the necessity to replace the Episcopal system with the Presbyterian one, *The Reason of Church-Government* expresses the urge felt by the prophet/Milton before his backsliding nation: «When God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say, or

in the Protestant Reformation that the shape of his thought is to be traced. If Milton entertained a continuous confrontation with areas the modern religious revolution had only partially reformed, it is fairly safe to say that in looking back to Jesus and the Gospel he used the spectacles of that which he considered God's providential work⁴, *lux post tenebras*:

When I recall to mind at last, after so many darke Ages, wherein the huge overshadowing traine of *Error* had almost swept all the Starres out of the Firmament of the *Church*; how the bright and blissful *Reformation* (by Divine Power) strook through the black and settled Night of *Ignorance* and *Antichristian Tyranny*, me thinks a soveraigne and reviving joy needs rush into the bosome of him that reads or heares; and the sweet Odour of the returning *Gospel* imbath his Soule with the fragraney of Heaven.⁵

When seen against such a background Milton's theodicy yields its most authentic significance.

To come to terms with his purpose, Milton must first of all account for the presence of evil in the world: how can God be God⁶ and allow for evil to spread in his universe? Secondly, the poet is to provide the reader with a solution for the presence of evil: is God impotent or do his perfections, namely his justice and love, find an expression after the fall? Empson's confrontation with these questions bespeaks the detraction of God's very nature⁷, resulting in a negative theodicy, yet without accounting for Milton's background and piety⁸. Here's how Milton addresses the first issue:

I made him [Adam] just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
Such I created all the ethereal powers
And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed:
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
Not free, what proof could they have given sincere
Of true allegiance, constant faith, or love,
Where only what they needs must do appeared
Not what they would? What praise could they receive,
What pleasure I, from such obedience paid,
When will and reason (reason also is choice),
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
Made passive both, had served necessity,
Not me? (III.98-111)

what he shall conceal. If he shall think to be silent, as Jeremiah did, because of the reproach and derision he met with daily [...] he would be forc't to confesse as he confest, *his word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, I was weary with forbearing and could not stay* (in Wolfe 1953, p. 803).

⁴) Cfr. Christopher 1989, p. 194.

⁵) *Of Reformation in England and the causes that have hitherto hindered it*, Wolfe 1953, p. 524.

⁶) That is, informed by the perfections the Scriptures ascribe to him.

⁷) Empson 1961. See also Bryson 2004.

⁸) Unlike Danielson 1989, p. 144.

Milton is here referring to both pre-lapsarian man (98) and Satan with «all ethereal powers» (100-101), all sharing in the same creational freedom. The only way for God to make his creatures free was to make them «free to fall», lest they should be automata that could only serve «necessity»⁹. So, why should God make them free in the first place if he foreknew the outcome of their choice? Because «not free, what proof could they have given sincere of true allegiance, constant faith, or love?». What value would allegiance, faith and love have if they could do nothing but be faithful, believe and love? They would please God and be praiseworthy only if they freely discarded disobedience and bent their «will and reason» to the personal service of God.

Let us hear *Areopagitica* echo the same idea in the words:

Many there be that complain of divine Providence for suffering Adam to transgress. Foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force; God therefore left him free.¹⁰

Milton seems here to endorse free will, thus departing from Calvin's supralapsarianism¹¹ and a deterministic idea of foreknowledge¹². If on one hand the passage accounts for the existence of evil in the universe, on the other it calls for the manifestation of God's justice and love. The former demands the transgressor's condemnation, the latter his restoration. Hence Milton's answer to the second question raised above, which presents us with the poet's original handling of Calvinism and Arminianism¹³, or rather his personal handling of Scripture:

As my eternal purpose hath decreed:
 Man shall not quite be lost, but saved who will,
 Yet not of will in him, but grace in me
 Freely vouchsafed [...] (III.173-175)
 By me upheld, that he may know how frail
 His fallen condition is, and to me owe
 All his deliverance, and to none but me.
 Some I have chosen of peculiar grace,
 Elect above the rest; so is my will:

⁹) *Ivi*, p. 149.

¹⁰) Orgel - Goldberg 1991, p. 252.

¹¹) The doctrine that God, when he decreed all the events in the history of the world before creating it, among them decreed the rebellion and fall of Satan and the eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve. According to this view, election occurs before the foundation of the world. In Milton's mind, such an idea would trace the origin of evil back to God himself. And if Milton in Book III.119 says that man's fall «had no less proved certain unforeknown», it is because he has in mind the clear-cut 17th century theological distinction between «certainty» based on non-deterministic foreknowledge and «necessity».

¹²) Danielson 1989, pp. 150-151.

¹³) In the present essay, we will be referring to Arminianism as the system forged by Simon Episcopius, which took Arminius' views much further.

The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned
 Their sinful state, and to appease betimes
 The incensèd Deity, while offered grace
 Invites; for I will clear their senses dark
 What may suffice, and soften stony hearts
 To pray, repent, and bring obedience due [...] (180-191)
 This my longsufferance, and my day of grace,
 They who neglect and scorn shall never taste;
 But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,
 That they may stumble on, and deeper fall;
 And none but such from mercy I exclude (198-202)

Eternity¹⁴ has yielded a decree: «Man won't be lost!» A way to salvation has been predestined in Christ for whosoever «will». The imperfect chiasmus of line 174 is left open by the modal verb that carries here all the weight of conscious choice, thus pointing to the creature's determination¹⁵. God is now freed from Empson's charge of being a Master of Puppets whose grace is both irresistible and inaccessible¹⁶. Yet Milton hurries to specify that such a will in man has *per se* no saving power, the latter resting in God's grace alone. For «it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy»¹⁷. Man's «fallen condition» is so «frail» that if he is ever to find «deliverance», it cannot be but one descending from heaven, «full of grace and truth»¹⁸, «lest any man should boast»¹⁹. But how does man draw from such a heavenly well of grace? How can he partake in it? Milton echoes Calvin in the words, «Some I have chosen of peculiar grace, elect above the rest; so is my will»²⁰, but shows at once all his concern for the remains as he adds, «The rest shall hear me call». While Milton acknowledges God's sovereign election of some «above the rest», he does not embrace Calvin's two-way predestination, but devises a sort of one-way predestinarian view allowing for the true salvation of the rest who believe²¹. To be sure, much like Arminius, Milton has to envisage prevenient grace²² in the words «for I will clear their senses dark what may suffice, and soften stony hearts to pray, repent, and bring obedience due» for the rest (and the elect, as a matter of fact, though not referred to here) to see their need to accept the invitation and frequent warning of God's grace. Man «her aid [God's

¹⁴) In Milton's mind, God is the great I AM, time being to him an ever-flowing present as «beholding from his prospect high, wherein past, present, future he beholds» (III.77-78).

¹⁵) As we shall see next, man's post-lapsarian will is enabled to turn to God by God's prevenient grace, which is bestowed to all.

¹⁶) See Augustine, *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, liber tertius.

¹⁷) Rom. 9.16.

¹⁸) John 1.14.

¹⁹) Eph. 2.9

²⁰) Cfr. Calvin 1854, pp. 150-151.

²¹) Unlike Moses Amyraldus (1596-1664). For Amyraldus the extent of Christ's atonement was unlimited. Nonetheless, he didn't allow for the salvation of the non-elect, whose number amounted to all of those who would reject Christ.

²²) While it was Augustine who expounded this doctrine, he did so with sole reference to the elect (*De praedestinatione sanctorum*, liber quartus), while Arminius, and Milton along with him, extends it to all. Cfr. Danielson 1989, pp. 156-157; Myers 2006.

grace] can never seek, once dead in sins and lost» (232-233). His senses must then be quickened by God's Spirit to the truth that «atonement for himself, or offering meet, indebted and undone, hath none to bring» (234-235). The Son now becomes the key to disclose God's plans and character, his final Word. It is no wonder lines and lines on end are devoted to the definition of his nature:

Hail, holy Light, offspring of heaven first-born
 Or of the eternal coeternal beam
 May I express thee unblamed? Since God is light,
 And never but in unapproachèd light
 Dwelt from eternity – dwelt then in thee,
 Bright effluence of bright essence increate.
 Or hear'st thou rather pure ethereal stream,
 Whose fountain who shall tell? Before the sun,
 Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice
 Of God, as with a mantle didst invest
 The rising world of waters dark and deep,
 Won from the void and formless infinite. (III.1-12)

Poetry and Scripture are here melded to introduce the Son and his nature and in so doing they apparently cast light upon each other.

Scholars Kelley and Saurat, as opposed to Patrides and Hunter²³, have taken pains trying to read the Arianism of *De Doctrina Christiana* into *Paradise Lost*. Apparently, all of their arguments can be rebutted by acknowledging the Son's twofold nature and his willing subordination, though not inferiority, within the Godhead. In these lines, the Son is «holy Light»²⁴ and if he is described as «offspring of heaven firstborn»²⁵, we soon learn that his generation does not entail a beginning of days, for the Light is «of the eternal coeternal beam». Not only so, but such a Light may be pronounced «unblamed», as it is «holy», that is sinless and pure. If «God is light», and if God has from all eternity dwelt in perfect unattainable light, it must follow that he has dwelt in the Son. The latter then becomes an eternal medium for the Father as the Father is an eternal medium for the Son, as Jesus has it: «I am in the Father and the Father in me»²⁶. As the «bright effluence of bright essence increate» he is «the radiant image of his glory» (62)²⁷, the effulgence of God's glory partaking in the essence of uncreated light, «in [...] [whom] all his Father shone substantially expressed» (139-140), namely the luminous consubstantial expression of the Father, or «the image of the invisible God»²⁸, «the Son of God, in

²³) See bibliography and nt. 37.

²⁴) John 1.9.

²⁵) Col. 1.15. The terms related to the Son's generation relate in Milton to his primacy and uniqueness and do not refer to «the begetting of the Son» thus turning him into a «delegated power» or a «secondary efficient cause» as for Kelley (Kelley 1962, pp. 93-94). Cfr. Lewis 1960, p. 86.

²⁶) John 14.10.

²⁷) Heb. 1.3; Col. 1.15.

²⁸) Col. 1.15.

whom the fullness dwells of love divine» (224-225). And if God alone is love²⁹, «in [Christ] dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily»³⁰. The fullness of divine love can then rightfully be predicated of him. Thus coeternal and coessential with the Father, the Son is «equal to God» (306)³¹, «both God and man» (316) and worthy of that adoration that is due to the true God only (342)³². And the Son was there «in the beginning»³³, the Creator who «before the sun, before the heavens» was, or rather is, and without whom «was not any thing made that was made»³⁴. That same Creator, Milton tells us with John, is about to make a new creation, that same Light that shone over «the rising world of water dark and deep»³⁵ «was coming into the world» (NKJV)³⁶. The hypostatic union of Deity and manhood in Christ proves a necessary element of Milton's theodicy³⁷: the sole sacrificial offering of God can propitiate God eternally³⁸. Man alone can die and be burdened with man's sin.

²⁹) 1 John 4.16.

³⁰) Col. 2.9.

³¹) For Patrides this line settles the issue of Milton's orthodoxy and refutes the Arianism of *Paradise Lost*. See *infra*, nt. 37.

³²) Exod. 34.14.

³³) Gen. 1.1; John 1.1.

³⁴) John 1.3.

³⁵) Gen. 1.2.

³⁶) John 1.9.

³⁷) Of course, the entire argument contrasts the idea of Milton being the author of both *Paradise Lost* and *Christian Doctrine*. All attempts to account for the discrepancies between the two works seem to build a straw-man or resort to circular arguments. Much has been said as to the relationship between them. Many, since Kelley's attempt (*This great argument: A study of Milton's De Doctrina Christiana as a gloss upon Paradise Lost*, Gloucester [Mass.] 1962), have tried to trace in the latter the main tenets of the former, or else, in Cedric Brown's words, «scholars have spent much effort reading the particular doctrines [of *De Doctrina*] into the poetry of the last years» (Brown 1995, p. 140). Such an attitude has stemmed from two general assumptions, namely that the authorship of *De Doctrina* shouldn't be disputed and that such a systematization of Christian doctrine should inform, even gloss, the works of the Restoration period. While Milton's authorship remains «the most likely for the work» for Brown (*ibid.*), Adams is even more confident as he claims that «in his final years [...] he [Milton] also continued to work on his *Christian Doctrine*» (Adams 2001, p. 694). Specific work on Milton by recognized authorities as C. Hill (Hill 1977) has done a lot to support the conclusions of biographers and anthologists. Not so with William B. Hunter who, in his *The provenance of the Christian Doctrine* (Hunter 1992) and *The provenance of Christian Doctrine: Addenda from the bishop of Salisbury* (Hunter 1993, pp. 191-207) has questioned Milton's authorship of the Latin treatise and stirred a vibrant debate, to which contributions have been made by M. Kelley himself, B.K. Lewalski, J.T. Shawcross and recently by G. Campbell, T.N. Corns, J.K. Hale and F.J. Tweedie (see bibliography). Others, like C.S. Lewis and C.A. Patrides (see bibliography), previously argued against the heterodoxy of *Paradise Lost* while formally accepting Milton's authorship of *Christian Doctrine*. The point is still to be made that while issues regarding free will and God's sovereignty, divorce and church government were still widely debated in the Protestant world and have been to this day, to think that anti-Trinitarian views as are found in *Christian Doctrine* would measure up to Milton's pursuit to bring the nation back to the purity of the Gospel is tantamount to placing him without that same reforming stream he envisaged. Far from completing the reformation, denying the Trinity would have amounted to questioning its very foundational truths, resulting in the exclusion of *Paradise Lost* from standing as its poetical landmark. Finally, the textual evidence reported

«Behold me then, me for him, life for life, I offer, on me let thine anger fall» (236-237). Full provision has been made. A substitute has been found to die man's death and take the creature's condemnation upon himself. The life of the Son for the life of man, to «pay the rigid satisfaction, death for death» (211-212), «to redeem man's mortal crime, and just, the unjust to save» (214-215)³⁹.

O unexampled love,
 Love nowhere to be found less than divine!
 Hail, Son of God, saviour of men; thy name
 Shall be the copious matter of my song
 Henceforth, and never shall my harp thy praise
 Forget, nor from thy Father's praise disjoin. (410-415)

Here now is God's ultimate justification: in justifying man, God is justified as «mercy and justice in [the Son's] face discerned» (407) finally meet at the cross. It is at the cross the Son fulfils God's justice by being subjected to his wrath toward sin while also displaying the fullness of his love as he takes the sinner's place. If Adam's «first disobedience» «makes guilty all his sons; [Jesus'] merit imputed shall absolve them who renounce their own both righteous and unrighteous deeds» (290-292). Those therefore who, repentant, give up their own righteousness and trust Christ for their salvation will be «passively» imputed his absolving merit. No one is excluded but «they who neglect and scorn», they who blindly place their confidence in their righteous deeds and ignore or reject «so great a salvation»⁴⁰. «None but such from mercy I exclude». Man's judgement ultimately amounts to self-judgement. Man passes judgement upon himself as he rejects God's way of salvation⁴¹.

Milton's twofold purpose «to assert eternal providence» and «justify the ways of God to men» has thus been met in the envisagement of two groups of saved ones, namely the elect and the believing rest. What shall we say then? Does God set a double standard? Does a synthesis of the two exist in Milton? Milton does not set a double standard. A synthesis is found in the God-man on the cross, the one way for both groups to «regain the blissful seat». Now delivered from condemnation, restored man is once again free to choose, for

above stands as a positive refutation of the most heterodox arguments in *De Doctrina* and challenges Campbell's own argument according to which «when the poem approaches controversial issues of theology, Milton set aside his own theological opinions (which he expressed elsewhere in his systematic theology, *De Doctrina Christiana*) in favour of a public statement phrased in the language of the Bible» (Campbell 1993, p. xxxvii).

³⁸) Nothing less than God's own perfection can appease God. The angels possess themselves relative righteousness, namely absence of sin which falls yet short of the positive perfections of God.

³⁹) 2 Cor. 5.21; Rom. 3.26. It is Reformed theology that ascribes to Christ's sacrifice a substitutive and atoning value as opposed to the views that relate it to Satan (Origen, Aulen) and those that consider it as a powerful example to influence people (Abelard, Socinus, Grotius, Barth). Cfr. Patrides 1959.

⁴⁰) Heb. 2.3.

⁴¹) As for Satan and his fallen angels, their judgement is irrevocable as they «by their own suggestion fell», while «man falls, deceived by the other first» (129-130).

or against God. A new power is at work in him though that was unknown to Adam, namely God's love in Christ, a compelling power leading him to return heavenly love and serve his fellow man:

«[...] Let her with thee partake what thou hast heard
 Chiefly what may concern her faith to know,
 The great deliverance by her seed to come
 (For by the woman's seed) on all mankind –
 That ye may live, which will be many days,
 Both in one faith unanimous; though sad
 With cause for evils past, yet much more cheered
 With meditation on the happy end.»
 He ended, and they both descend the hill [...] (XII.598-606)

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