# Arminianism In American Religious Life

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The man from whom Arminian Theology derives its name is much less known than the movement itself. Born at Onderwater in The Netherlands in 1560, Jacobus Arminius (latinized from Harmensen) studied theology in Utrecht and Leyden, and later in Geneva under the famous Calvinist Beza. Shortly after his ordination in 1588, he was commissioned to defend Beza's doctrine of Predestination against proposed changes. In the course of his studies, he came to adopt the positions which he had undertaken to refute. Upon his appointment to a professorship in theology in Leyden in 1603, he found himself almost immediately in conflict with Gomarus. who was for the remaining years of Arminius' life to be his chief opponent.

Beginning with an examination of Beza's doctrine of Predestination, Arminius shortly found himself questioning other Calvinistic formulations. Before noting these, it is necessary to observe that he essentially re-defined the Reformed teaching of predestination, in terms as follows: God predestines men to salvation upon the basis of His foresight of what men will do, not (as Gomarus held) upon the basis of an arbitrary election to salvation, with a consequent reprobation of others. The classic Calvinistic position concerning repentance and faith was that God awakens men to these responses because they are predetermined to salvation. This, Arminius felt, confounded human and divine acts, and neutralized human freedom.

In reformulating this tenet, Arminius found himself in conflict with other principles of high Reformed teaching. The teaching of Total Depravity, as currently formulated, seemed likewise in conflict with what he felt to be the Christian doctrine of human freedom. Unconditional Election (with its corollary of unconditional reprobation,) seemed open to the same objection. The tenet of a Limited Atonement seemed inconsistent with clear statements of Scripture which offered salvation to all men. Irresistable Grace appeared to him a teaching which stood or fell with Unconditional Election, as did also the tenet of Unconditional Perseverance.

Arminius did not live to see the issues between himself and Dutch Calvinism resolved by Synod, for he died in 1609 before the meeting of such a Synod, in the calling of which he was largely instrumental. He did not himself formulate an anti-Calvinistic system; and in The Netherlands, Arminianism was rather a Remonstrant movement within the Reformed Church than an institutionalized theology. It may be said also that his followers were more Arminian than was he himself. At the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) about three hundred of Arminians, mostly clergymen and including the eminent Simon Episcopius, were expelled. Nevertheless, arminian teachings exerted a powerful influence upon Dutch theology, and were echoed in the Church of England by the Latitudinarian Movement.

It remained for a new movement in British theology to knit Arminianism into a theology in its own right. The Wesleys, forced by circumstances to pursue their work outside the Church of England, gave to Arminianism a new life. John Wesley shared that which has been a common factor in Arminian thought, namely an aversion to the harsher aspects of Calvin-

ism. We must not, however, suppose that Wesley merely took over the work of Arminius and the Remonstrants wholesale; rather, he added some distinctively new features, notably two: the doctrine of the Witness of the Spirit; and the doctrine of Entire Sanctification.

The significance of Arminianism for American theology grows in large part out of the development of Wesley's thought. Before tracing this, however, it is necessary that we observe within American Calvinism a reaction against some of its features -- in fact, against the same factors which Arminius himself found inacceptable. This reaction had assumed such proportion that by the middle of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards was occupied with the question. By this time, *Arminian* had become a term of reproach, applied to those opponents of Puritanism who found the doctrine of human spiritual inability inacceptable. In this sense, Arminianism in New England was similar to the movement in The Netherlands, namely an unorganized protest movement, centering in theological institutions, but without specific ecclesiastical form. One gets the impression from Calvinistic polemic of this period that the term *Arminian* had become something of an emotionally-charged word, employed rather loosely to discredit those who questioned the formulation of high Calvinism from the point of view of either Scripture or of personal philosophy.

In addition to the effect which this unofficial form of the Arminian movement exerted upon the theology of America, there was brought to bear upon our scene a much more powerful form of anti-Calvinistic theology in the Methodist movement. Beginning about the middle of the eighteenth century, the followers of Wesley penetrated the Colonies, and into the hinter-land of America in a manner which affords one of the most romantic chapters in our religious history. Trained in the theology of John Wesley, which was largely embodied in his Sermons, preachers of varied degrees of education penetrated the wilderness by horseback, evangelizing as they went, and establishing Methodist Societies at a rate almost unparalleled in church history.

Emphases of the message of the Methodists were, especially, personal responsibility and possible salvation for all men. Both of these were specifically derived from Arminius' tenets. They resulted in a brand of aggressive evangelism which not only produced a phenomenal growth, but also was a dynamic force in christianizing American life at its cutting edge. At the same time, apart from the direct results achieved by Methodist evangelism, there were repercussions within nominally Calvinistic denominations. Whereas strict Calvinism would produce one type of evangelistic approach, Arminianism would logically produce another. In point of fact, frontier evangelism within all groups came to conform to the free-will pattern.

With the growth of Methodism came the development of her fixed institutions—colleges, theological schools, and the like. The theological seminaries became centers for the systematic and scholarly exposition of the Arminian-Wesleyan theology, and produced, particularly in the nineteenth century, a group of very able scholars and a formidable theological literature. Coming later in point of time than the Presbyterians with their Princeton University, the Methodists exerted through their universities a profound influence upon American life.

The institutional impact of Arminianism upon our national life was paralleled by its effect upon the theological atmosphere. Before noting this, however, it is helpful to observe that in The Netherlands, Arminian theology tended, following the death of its immediate formulators, to become attenuated. Some of its adherents became Arian in their Christology; and in general, the Dutch movement succumbed to the impact of liberal theology. In America, however, Wesleyanism remained, through the larger part of the nineteenth century, a vigorous opponent of the New England form of Arianism. It is the studied opinion of this writer that Methodism, up until approximately 1890, compared

favorably in this respect with the Calvinistic denominations.

During the nineteenth century, there were frequent controversies between Arminians and Calvinists, out of which grew numerous articles in periodicals, and occasional volumes such as the able but repetititous work *Objections to Calvinism* by Randolph S. Foster. In general, this controversy raged about the theoretical aspects of high Calvinism which were seldom the subject of public preaching. Whatever good purposes may have been served by this controversy, it certainly had the effect of concentrating the attention of many able Methodist upon Calvinism, as though the Geneva theology were the chief opponent of Christianity. This undeniably drew their efforts away from the task of meeting the real foe of historic Christianity, namely theological liberalism. As a result, when the impact of German thought began to be felt as a consequence of the fashionable student exchanges between American theological seminaries and the theological faculties of Germany, Methodist theologians were caught napping, or, to say the least, so engaged in combatting a fellow-movement as to be unprepared for the real conflict.

The writer is prepared to encounter difference of opinion with respect to this last point. Some Methodists will feel that Calvinism was the foe, and that Liberalism came to free American Arminianism from both this enemy and also the "scholasticism" which they inherited from John Wesley. Calvinists will likewise observe that Methodism succumbed, in large measure, to Liberalism because of the inherent weakness of all forms of Arminian theology. He feels, however, that something can be said for the view that, given a proper view of the issues involved and proper preparation, Arminianism is as able to defend itself against its foes as is Calvinism.

At this point it is well to give brief notice to the particular form which Liberalism has assumed within the Arminian movement. In view of the orientation of Methodism in the direction of large emphasis upon experience, one might expect to discover in its liberalized form a reaction against theology, and a concentration of emphasis upon subjective experiences as sources of religious truth. Sharing with the liberal movement in general an acceptance of conventional higher biblical criticism, with a consequent depreciation of Scripture as a final authority, it faced the common task of discovering a source of authority consistent with its general principles. This task has been undertaken at two levels, the first in rather popular fashion, the second at a more sophisticated level.

In the first instance, there came, chiefly through the popular literature of the Church School and Youth Societies, a general depreciation of religious orthodoxy, in favor of "the life." Objective truth in religion was subordinated to the insights which came to men of good heart and of good will. At the same time, the two crisis religious experiences which were the strength of historic Methodism (namely, conversion and entire sanctification) were replaced in emphasis by "experiences" which were presumably common to all men, and relatively independent of the acceptance of Christian theology. In place of the *New Birth,* there came an emphasis upon life's several transitional experiences as "new births" and a guided reaction against "narrowing" the term 'new birth' to any specific regenerating experience. Emphasis was shifted from conversion to growth, from evangelism to religious education. This does not mean that the term 'evangelism' was eliminated, but rather that it was radically reformulated so as to not only draw emphasis from the evangelistic procedures which made Methodism great, but also identified them with the rather unsophisticated life of the frontier, and hence no longer relevant to the life of the church.

The other level at which the request for a new religious authority was undertaken was that of Empirical Theology. Taking as a point of departure the postulate that Personality was the final and irreducible

element in the universe, the currents of liberal Arminian thought were guided in the direction of the philosophy of Personal Idealism. This embodied much of the work of Renouvier and Lotze, though its advocates have latterly tended to find in it a "Perennial Philosophy" and to find all true philosophy since Plato to be really a form of Personal Idealism. It would unduly expand this article to sketch in detail the philosophcal movement initated by Borden Parker Bowne, pupil of Hermann Lotze. It must be said, however, that it is a very thorough and well-knit system, embodying an idealistic metaphysics, a rugged value-ethics, and a daring theology.

Relevant to this discussion, two points deserve special mention. First, Personal Idealism is a stalwart defender of man's moral freedom. Having critically examined the factors which serve in some measure to determine human conduct, it preserves at this point the genius of Arminianism in its contention that after all determining factors are recognized, there remains yet to every person a tight area within which he is immune from constraint, and in which he is competent to not only hand down discriminatory moral judgements, but also to commit himself in the most profound moral and spiritual sense.

The second point which is worthy of mention is the tendency within Personal Idealism to make man's negative moral experience (namely his experience with the problem of evil) determinative for theology. This has been accompanied by thorough analysis of the moral situation, and latterly by the assertion that there is an irreducible residue of evil in the universe, the presence of which is irreconcilable with the existence of a God who is both morally perfect (holy) and completely powerful (omnipotent). This has led to the formulation of the position of Theistic Finitism (doctrine of a limited God). The advocates of the system contend that the realities of the universe demand the recognition of an antithesis between a God of all-power and a God of all-goodness. Personal Idealists find little difficulty in sacrificing the first in favor of the second.

The theological implications of such a teaching are obviously profound; it is difficult (or impossible) to reconcile them with the historic principles of the Methodist Church as embodied in the Twenty-Five Articles. In general, however, the ground has been prepared in the major sections of the denomination for the subordination of historic principles of Christianity to what are held to be the clear dictates of experience. With respect to the doctrine of salvation, upon which the emphasis in Arminianism has been strong, the newer theology based upon empiricism shifts the emphasis from what God does for man to *what God does alongside man,* from God in Christ suffering *for* man to what God, involved in the same moral schizophrenia as man, suffers along *with* man. From some points of view at least, the outcome of the moral enterprise is uncertain. One duty lies clearly before man, namely to take place alongside a struggling God in His struggle for Value. Salvation thus comes, not by Grace, but as a result of a life slanted in a certain direction. "Salvation" thus becomes a matter of moral endeavor and is in no vital way related to the death of Christ.

In this connection, one problem deserves special attention: is this movement in Arminian theology the inevitable outcome of Arminian principles? Does this reversal of historic Christian theology, which Personal Idealism implies, follow from those elements in the Arminian approach which it holds in reaction against Calvinism? Some will reply to these queries with a hasty affirmative. Calvinists will feel that Arminianism, in its emphasis upon some measure of human initiative in repentance, has done despite to the doctrine of the divine sovereignty, and has left open the gate to the final renunciation of that sovereignty. Against this argument, some Arminians will reply that those denominations which have been historically Calvinistic have by no means a perfect record in the matter of maintaining high views of God, and that their deviations from historic Christianity are no more to be attributed *to* their historic Calvinism than

are those of methodistic Arminianism to be laid at the door of her opposition to the doctrine of the Divine Decrees as understood by Calvin. Perhaps this is not a strong argument; what it really seems to signify is, that the clue to the success of theological liberalism in the major denominations is to be found elsewhere than in their respective attitudes at one point in their theology.

A final consideration in this paper is the newer historic form which the Arminian movement has assumed in America. It is noteworthy that Arminianism was a powerful guiding force in the religious life of German immigrants of the nineteenth century. There arose in consequence two Churches of strong Arminian principles, namely the United Brethren and the Evangelical Church, newly united to become the Evangelical United Brethren Church. In general, these bodies have maintained their historic doctrinal principles longer than the largest exponent of Arminianism; latterly, however, liberalizing tendencies have become prominent in the life of these bodies.

During the nineteenth century, two significant types of schism occurred within the Methodist Chuch. The first was the general schism, occasioned by a sociological question which divided the nation as a whole. As a result, the Methodist Church South pursued its independent existence until about 1940. There was also the second form, the schism in which a smaller group separated itself from the major body, and maintained a separate existence in the same general geographic location. This second form of schism produced, especially, three bodies, the Methodist Prostestant Church, the Free Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Methodist. (There were also smaller splinter churches, none of which has however become sufficiently large to be reckoned as a force in determining the course of Arminian theology.

The two mentioned last, namely the Free Methodist and the Wesleyan Methodist Churches, have served a special function within the Arminian movement, namely that of conserving explicitly the historic positions of Methodist-Arminian belief. These bodies have grown to significant size, have developed their own organizations to an efficiency comparable to that of the parent body, have maintained their own schools at the collegiate level, and are now developing graduate theological training. It needs to be said that neither of these bodies have sought to develop an independent or 'characteristic' school of theology. They have, however, maintained their historic doctrinal positions and have succeeded in formulating them in such a manner as to make them satisfying to a constituency which includes a high percentage of well-trained and critical persons.

Something needs to be said concerning the independent bodies which have arisen within the Arminian movement during the past half century. The largest of these is the Church of the Nazarene, which has gathered its large membership not only from the unchurched, but also from the liberalized Arminian bodies, many of whose members found the newer forms of theology unsatisfying. For some years, the Nazarene Movement has shown a phenomenal growth, being one of the most rapidly growing Churches in America. It, and its offshoot, the Pilgrim Holiness Church, has followed much the same doctrinal course as the two Methodist bodies just mentioned.

It would require much space to chronicle the remaining bodies which have pursued the Arminian tradition in America, some of which like the Mennonites have had their largest constituency among immigrants from northern Europe who have contributed so richly to our rural America. Likewise, in the Evangelical wing of Quakerism, as expressed by the followers of J. J. Gurney, Arminianism has been a dominant doctrinal force. Mention must be made, however, of a newer and somewhat irregular movement, namely the so-called Pentecostal Movement. It is too early to assess the importance of this branch of the Church. With respect to its doctrine, it is safe to say that it is partly related to Arm-

inianism, and partly to the ecstatic movements which have appeared occasionally during the history of the Church.

It may be said, in conclusion, that the Arminian Movement played a role of superlative significance during the formative period of our nation, both in its direct impact upon the life of the expanding territories which comprise the United States, and also in the impetus which it gave to aggressive evangelism in the Calvinistic bodies. Possibly it is not going too far to observe that its emphasis upon personal responsibility and personal initative contributed also to the general democratic tone of our national life. Certainly the Arminian emphasis upon holiness of life has profoundly influenced the tone of our social structure, which until recently has been in reasonable agreement with the older practical ethic of Methodism, which condemned intemperance, divorce, gambling, and the like. It is significant that the weakening of sentiment against these and kindred evils in American society has been parallel to the relaxation of standards in the major Arminian denominations.

With reference to the future, the prospects for Arminianism in American religious life seem two-fold. First, the denominations in which liberalism has come to be the prevailing theological mood, having already lost their historic Arminian principles, will share the future which the American scene will afford to liberal Christianity in general. In this future, the emphasis promises to be in the direction of extreme stress upon human effort and human endeavor, with a vigorous defense of human moral freedom. Whether the movement will be able to maintain its emphasis upon the unique value of persons in the face of the encroachment of premature collectivisms remains to be seen. Logically it should be a bulwark against both the threatening ant-hill cultures and the materialism upon which they are based.

In those areas of American church life where orthodox Arminianism prevails, there is a discernible tendency toward cooperation with all Evangelical groups, and away from the historic conflict between Arminianism and Calvinism. While recognizing and respecting mutual differences, both Arminians and Calvinists (and it may be noted that most Calvinistic groups in America today hold modified Genevan views) are realizing in increasing measure that the emergency of the times demands that little effort be expended in internecine Christian conflict, and that major emphasis be placed upon a vigorous assertion of the principles of historic Christianity. Leaders in both groups are seeking to exploit the broad areas of doctrinal agreement between the theological movements, recognizing that Arminianism and Calvinism are both *approaches* to theology rather than distinct theologies. These leaders likewise recognize that the vastly increased dimensions of their common task requires an increase in common endeavor based upon a frank recognition of secondary differences within the framework of agreement upon major and essential tenets of the Christian Faith.