

The Human Problem

A Survey of the Conflicting Schools of Thought

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Basic to any system of theology, psychology, pedagogy, or even practical politics, is a philosophy of the nature of man. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" Is his origin "in the frog pond" or the Garden of Eden? Is he made a "little lower than the angels," or is he cousin to the brute? Is he a fallen being, or is his "progress onward and upward forever"? Is he depraved and perverted, or is his original nature unaffected? Does he need regeneration or the right kind of education? Are the remedial measures by which he must be helped to be found in theology or sociology? Are his chief hindrances and evils heredity, or are they environmental? Must he have a redeemer to save him out of his sins, or should the emphasis be upon "salvation by character"? In fine, is the Grace of God to be magnified or the Grace of Nature?

These are persistent questions. The religious mind has struggled with them for centuries. There is a tendency in the pragmatic utilitarianism of our day to ignore them, but the fact remains that they must be answered in an implicit or tacit way before one can preach a sermon or engage in religious, social or educational work. It is the purpose of this discussion to trace the development of this problem as it is seen in the history of Christian thought. Much confusion exists today simply because the church at large is not familiar with this general background of thought that was developed in the early centuries, and that has been variously restated in later periods of history. By comparing and contrasting these schools in their basic assumptions, and discovering again what the leaders of thought have had to say on

the subject, the servant of Christ should be more thoroughly furnished unto his task.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The church has always been under the compulsion of necessity to defend its doctrines against those who would pervert them. This has given rise to great controversies, not infrequently to be followed by the formulation of basic creeds succinctly stated. Such was the Arian controversy which culminated in the Nicene Creed of 325 A. D., defining the position of the church on the doctrine of the Trinity. This creed safeguarded the church against the heresies of Monarchianism, Subordinationism, and Arianism; and in 381 A. D., at the Council of Constantinople, another clause was added which effectually curbed the Macedonian heresy relating to the nature of the Holy Spirit.

With the doctrine of the Trinity thus definitively stated, the church was now forced, by the appearance of erroneous teachings, to define its position on the Christological problem. Having asserted the full deity of Christ in the Godhead at Nicea, the question now turned upon the relation of the human and divine natures in Christ. This problem had been recognized by the Fathers from earliest days, but by 362 A. D. the rise of Apollinarianism forced the attention of the church upon the question in a more precise manner. The Chalcedonian Creed of 451 A. D. gave the church's answer to the question concerning the nature of Christ, thereby ruling out the heresies of Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and Monophysitism.

It was inevitable that the thought of the church must focus upon the most basic problem of all—the nature of man himself. In the ensuing controversy, known in Church History as the Anthropological controversy of the fifth century, the fashion of thought respecting the nature of man was set for all the succeeding centuries. Today all sociologists, psychologists, and theologians base their system upon one or another of the three basic theories developed at this time, unless they accept materialism.

The principal protagonists in the opening phases of the controversy were Augustine and Pelagius, who stood poles apart in their positions. Their spiritual successors were, on the one hand, Calvin in the 16th century and the present day Calvinistic fundamentalists, and, on the other, the Socinians of the 17th century and present day modernism. Between the two were found the Semi-Pelagians of the 5th century, the Arminians of the 17th century and the present day Arminian fundamentalists, sometimes referred to as essentialists.

II. THE AUGUSTINIAN SCHOOL

Augustine stands out as a mountain peak in the closing period of the Graeco-Roman civilization. It is to be doubted whether any other man in the Christian era has done more thinking for the centuries than he. His view of human nature was decidedly pessimistic. The very center of his thought is his doctrine of God, in which the sovereignty of God is over-pressed and the ability of man is minimized to the vanishing point. "Nothing is done unless the Omnipotent wills it to be done, either by permitting it or Himself doing it." He magnified the absolute power of God, denying that His will is ever thwarted, yet he denied that God is the cause of evil or that the sins of men can be traced back to Him.

His followers of the 16th century were not so timid about accepting the logical conclusions of Augustine's philosophy. Calvin elaborated his principles in such state-

ments as these: "God not only foresaw the fall and ruin of man, but He arranged it all by the determination of His own will." "It would have been better if man had been incapable of sinning, but God willed otherwise." Zwingli likewise declared that all deeds of men, wicked as well as good, are done by God, the only real cause in the universe.

The doctrine of sin and grace grow naturally out of these positions. The federal headship of Adam and the solidarity of human nature are maintained. "In Adam, we sinned all." Human nature was on probation in the garden of Eden, but that probation was ended with the fall. Henceforth the will of man is resolutely set against God, and all are immoral. Calvin follows the same reasoning, teaching that man is not born human but devilish. He could, therefore, say that there are infants in hell a span long. Human nature is born sinful, guilty and punishable. The soul of man is morally dead.

The theory of salvation is wholly monergistic, i.e., one way action from God to man. God bestows His grace freely and quite without regard to human want either actual or foreseen. "He goes before the unwilling that he may will; He follows the willing that he may not will in vain." This grace is irresistible. Those whom He wills to save cannot prevent Him even if they wish to do so. "For even with the very wills of men He does what He will, when He will."

That some are saved and others not is wholly due to God's secret will which we are quite unable to fathom. To those whom God predestinates to eternal life He gives the gift of perseverance that they may endure to the end; none of the elect can permanently fall away and be lost.

Many features of Calvinism have been radically changed in more recent times. The following statement of Dryer is significant, "The Calvinism which the Remonstrants (Arminians) rejected is dead in English-speaking lands, while most of the New Calvinists go far beyond the Remonstrants in what they reject of the Geneva Reformer's opinions. The significance of Arminius

is that of Columbus and Luther; he broke the way which the modern world was to follow."¹ This other word is also to the point: "And yet all progress in religious thought or in philanthropic enterprise has been possible only through the overthrow and destruction of the essential elements of Calvin's system."²

The modern successors of Augustine and Calvin are the Calvinistic fundamentalists. Many of the harsher features of predestination and the total disability of man are repudiated. They hold the satisfaction theory of atonement, implying limited grace, they teach the fixed number of the elect, the perseverance of the saints, and many hold an elaborate system of Premillennialism which is based upon a very pessimistic view of this world-age. The definition of sin is very broad, including all weakness, infirmity and ignorance. From such a viewpoint, it is little less than sacrilege or profanation to claim to be able to live without sin.

The "higher life" movement in this school is the Keswick movement, otherwise known as the "victorious life" movement. The emphasis is upon the baptism with the Holy Spirit which empowers for service. Since man is sinful in body, soul and spirit, inherently and inescapably so, divine grace effects the suppression rather than the eradication of carnal tendencies. Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer rather than imparted. The tendency is to emphasize the positive aspects of the Spirit-filled life and neglect the negative, while in the corresponding movement in the Arminian school the tendency is oftentimes to stress the negative aspects at the expense of the positive.

III. THE PELAGIAN SCHOOL

At the opposite pole from Augustine stood Pelagius, a British monk. He was profoundly interested in Christian conduct, and devoted himself to the task of improving moral conditions in the local communi-

ty. The low tone of morals so prevalent were due, according to his viewpoint, not to depravation and moral inability of man, but to lack of a vivid sense of personal responsibility. He felt that the doctrine of moral inability destroyed belief in human freedom without which virtue was impossible. The result was that Christians depended too much upon God and the church, and too little on their own efforts.

The following bit of dialectic serves to make clear his position: "Again it is to be inquired whether a man ought to be sinless. Without doubt he ought. If he ought he can; if he cannot he ought not. And if a man ought not to be sinless then he ought to be sinful, and that will not be sin which it is admitted he ought to do."³

Pelagius held the atomic view of human nature. He refused to believe that Adam's sin could have direct effect upon his posterity. He believed that divine justice demands that men be rewarded only for their own independent merits; that all be given equal opportunities, and special favor be shown to none. Thus he maintained that each is the Adam of his own soul. Men are born into the world innocent and free as Adam was before the fall; and each must choose for himself just as Adam did.

The idea of substitutionary atonement must be rejected by those who hold this theory. The position of the modern followers of Pelagius is correctly expressed in this argument which the writer heard from a professor in a great university as he railed at traditional Christianity: "We cannot accept that kind of morality. To assume that one may sidestep a life of evil deeds by simply believing on someone is too simple, too childish and puerile. Everyone must stand on his own merit. If he has merit it must be his own, and if he has demerit he must suffer for it."

Our textbooks reflect this same opinion. The following quotation is rather typical: "The Christian doctrine of forgiveness of sins possesses this evil influence because it disseminates the grossly erroneous no-

¹ Dryer, G. H., *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. III, p. 564.

² *Op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 341.

³ McGiffert, *History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 2, p. 128.

tion that repentance absolves a person from responsibility for immorality of his past conduct. It would be difficult to find a more anti-social and immoral religious doctrine."⁴

Pelagianism, with its 17th century counterpart, Socianism, and its newer representative, Modernism, regards Christianity as a moral system rather than a redemptive agency. There are only two kinds of religion: A religion of redemption and a religion of attainment. Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism are redemptive. To Augustine the divine activity is everything, to Pelagius, the human; to the one God was the center of interest, to the other, man. The present modernistic doctrine of "Salvation by character" is decidedly Pelagian.

Pelagius and his followers were condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A. D., and Pelagianism was officially a heresy both in the east and west after that. With the dominance of the evolutionary theory in the thinking of this age there has come a marked revival of this ancient heresy. Sociology, psychology, history and religious education are based entirely upon this theory of human nature. Such time-honored Christian doctrines as the high origin of man, his subsequent fall and depravation, and his absolute need of redemption find no possible place in this theory. It is utterly impossible to build upon a Pelagian psychology and anthropology a system of redemptive theology, although many are apparently trying to do it.

IV. THE SEMI-PELGIAN SCHOOL

To Augustine the dominating motive was religious; to Pelagius it was moral; but to Semi-Pelagians the dominating motives were both moral and religious. Their system was frankly synergistic, emphasizing at once the doctrine of divine sovereignty and of human ability. They accepted the doctrine of original sin, and agreed with Augustine that without divine grace men are wholly incapable of good, but they gave men some part in their own salvation instead of ascribing it all to God.

Semi-Pelagianism (which might legitimately be termed Semi-Augustinianism) embraced the following principles: All are sinners because of Adam's sin and no one is saved without being regenerated by divine grace; salvation is offered to all without exception, and every man decides whether he will accept offered grace and be saved or reject it and be lost. God helps the believer, but the act of faith is man's own, not God's. Predestination is based upon God's foreknowledge of one's faith and perseverance. The number of the elect is not fixed. Man's ability to take the first steps towards salvation is emphasized, and the church's responsibility in preaching and the care of souls is stressed.

Semi-Pelagianism represented the common sentiment of the western church before both Augustine and Pelagius, and to it the church reverted in the later Middle Ages. Unfortunately the term Semi-Pelagianism rather than Semi-Augustinianism, which is sometimes applied, was used, for this school has far more in common with Augustinianism than with Pelagianism. Both Semi-Pelagianism and Augustinianism are to be regarded as orthodox positions, while Pelagianism is always heterodox.

The present day successors of the Semi-Pelagians and Arminians may be called Arminian fundamentalists, or Arminian essentialists. The term seems to have come into more or less common use within the last fifteen or twenty years. It seems to be gaining some popular vogue, for a group of educators have recently styled themselves "essentialists." It obviously is intended to indicate a moderately conservative mode of thought, striking the golden mean between the extremes of ultra-conservatism and radicalism.

The essentialists are to be distinguished from the main body of fundamentalists in the unwillingness of many to accept the theory of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, the fixed number of the elect, the eternal security of the saints, an extreme form of Premillenarianism which contains many strictly Calvinistic elements, and others.

⁴ Parmelee, *Criminology*, p. 109.

The "higher life" movement within the school is popularly known as the "holiness movement." It is based upon John Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification, otherwise known as Christian perfection. It should be noted that Wesley's rather circumscribed definition of sin is necessary, if one is to hold this theory: "Sin is a wilful transgression of a known law of God." It seems that much theological rancor of the past might have been saved, if Calvinists and Arminians had taken the trouble to discover each other's definition of sin. If the Arminian accepts the Calvinistic definition of sin, then, perforce, he must own that he sins every day in word, thought and deed.

This "movement" emphasizes the theory of the elimination of the carnal nature—the cleansing of the heart from sin. Here again it is necessary to note the sharp delimitation of the approved teaching. Speaking in terms of a trichotomy, this carnality which may be eradicated is not a property of the body (soma), or the mind or soul (psyche), but of the spirit (pneuma). It is the *sarx* (flesh in the bad ethical sense) of Scripture, the principal earmarks of which are: "conflict between the flesh and the spirit, ignorance of God, contempt of God, destitution of the fear of God and of trust in Him, hatred of the government of God, terror at the justice of God, anger against God, despair of God's favor, reliance upon things visible".⁵

This doctrine of perfection is narrowly defined, and the qualifying adjective Christian is always necessary. It is solely in the realm of the spirit (pneuma) and involves only the impulsive conscience, not the discriminative conscience.⁶ Thus perfection may only be predicated of motives, purpose, intention and never of action, performance or conduct. It is summed up in this passage: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with

all thy strength:—and—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Mark 12:30-31.

CONCLUSION

The following statement may well be put down as a virtual, self-evident truth: As is one's philosophy of human nature so will his entire scheme of theology be molded and his service and work be determined. He who builds upon the current variety of Pelagianism which dominates the textbooks and the schools—that which underlies our pedagogy and much of the religious education of the day—will largely have his work cut out for him. He will, if he is consistent, substitute Sociology for Theology; education for regeneration; a Kingdom of Man for the Kingdom of God; the Grace of Nature for the Grace of God; and social uplift for salvation by faith. This, in effect, is a religion of attainment taking the place of a religion of redemption.

The present modernistic vogue follows the cues of John Locke, Hume, Voltaire and, particularly, Rousseau. Rousseau is reputed to have had a vision on a hot, dusty road in France which has been compared to the vision of St. Paul on the Damascus road. In a vision or trance there burst upon him this realization: "Man is inherently good, and it is by his institutions that he is made wicked." This removes the problem of evil from the heart of man, where the Bible located it, and identifies it with the institutions of society. The natural corollary follows: Make the environment right and man will be right; if you would save the individual, you must first save the social order.

Irving Babbitt, late of Harvard University, asserts that America is more naïvely Rousseauistic than any other modern nation. He argues that progressivism in education and modernism in Protestantism, both of which are thoroughly permeated with Rousseauistic humanitarianism, are building upon a superficial and erroneous philosophy of human nature. With their emphasis upon self-realization and self-expression, and repudiation of the old

⁵ Shedd, W. T., *History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 154.

⁶ Steele, Daniel, *Milestone Papers*, p. 133.

Christian virtues of humility, renunciation and discipline, he fears that the very foundations of our society are imperilled.⁷ We are in danger of witnessing here the major cultural tragedy of the ages.

It seems clear that any adequate view of human nature must take into account a sinister, subversive factor. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it" (Jer. 17:9). If the old doctrine of original sin is rejected, something just about like it must be substituted. Even an anti-Christian philosopher like Bertrand Russell admits as much. He frankly says there is universal malice, ill-will and hatred. But he denies that these spring from any corruption of human nature. He rather makes the astounding assertion that this results from bad digestion and inadequate functioning of the ductless glands, caused by oppression and thwarting in our childhood.⁸ That is to say, our fathers disciplined us and our digestion and ductless glands were permanently disordered. The converse should therefore be true: Allow a generation to grow up without restraint or thwarting and

we should thereby end malevolence.

It is incumbent upon every Christian to be as realistic as possible in dealing with His world. Before he casts aside the Faith of the Fathers to build his philosophy and theology upon a Pelagian foundation he should ponder well the following statements from the most realistic book in the world and make very sure he can prove them false: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (Eccl. 9:3). "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it" (Jer. 17:9). "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7).

If these sobering statements be true, then man's greatest need is not social uplift, economic security, or education, but regeneration. A religion of redemption, rather than a religion of attainment, is the only cure for the gravest ills of the world.

⁷ *Living Philosophies*, p. 121.
⁸ *Living Philosophies*, p. 19.

THE CONFLICTING SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Comparisons and Contrasts

FIFTH CENTURY SCHOOLS

Augustinianism	Semi-Pelagianism	Pelagianism
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16TH, 17TH CENTURY RESTATEMENTS

Calvinism	Arminianism	Socinianism
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PRESENT-DAY SUCCESSORS

Calvinistic Fundamentalism	Arminian Fundamentalism (Essentialism)	Modernism
Emphasis upon Divine sovereignty. Human ability denied. Monergistic.	Emphasis upon both Divine sovereignty and human ability. Synergistic.	Human ability magnified. Easily becomes monergistic.

Adam created intelligent and elementarily moral. Had original righteousness in Eden.	Same	Evolutionism. Continuity between physical constitution of man and lower animals.
Solidarity of human nature. Federal headship of Adam.	Solidarity of human nature. Law of genetic transmission.	Atomistic view of human nature. Each is the Adam of his own soul.
Adamic perfection lost in first sin. Nature thus rendered abnormal through privation.	Same	Fall was from unconscious innocence to conscious guilt. This fall from innocence is in a sense a rise to a higher grade of being.
Adam's sin unique. His acquired modification transmitted to descendants.	Same	Negation
Man's soul is morally dead.	Man's soul is morally sick.	Man's soul is morally well.
Probation ended at fall. All human nature set against God.	Probation continued in this age.	Same
Traducian theory of origin of soul maintained.	Traducianism	Creationism
Every man comes into world with corrupt nature—inward disorder and abnormality.	Same	Every man enters world innocent and free as Adam was before the fall.
Original sin is original guilt. It is culpable and punishable.	Original sin is not guilt. It is a malady and not punishable.	Apparent imperfection is only inferior evolutionary development.
Will was free before fall and inclined to righteousness. Freedom to righteousness lost, will enslaved to evil, and can choose only civil righteousness.	Will is depraved, but it is still free to choose righteousness with the aid of cooperating grace.	Will is always free, equally capable of choosing good and evil.
Sin inheres in human nature, hence every man is necessarily a sinner from birth.	Sin is a wilful transgression of a known law of God.	Sin is survival or misuse of habits and tendencies that were incidental to earlier stage of development. Sinfulness lies in their anachronism.
Satisfaction theory of atonement. Limited grace.	Governmental theory of atonement. Universal grace.	Moral influence theory of atonement.
Election is eternal, absolute and unconditional.	Election is conditional. Emphasis upon election to service rather than election to salvation.	Same
Redeeming grace is irresistible in its operation on the elect. Without it man can neither repent nor believe.	Mixture of grace and free will. Two efficient agencies: the will itself and the Holy Spirit.	Grace is the natural endowment of the individual along with will, intellect, etc.
Eternal security of the saints.	There is the possibility of apostatizing.	Same

Remainder of apostate nature still exists in regenerate soul, in continual conflict with new man. The final and crowning act of grace results in entire cleansing of indwelling sin from soul. This grade of grace is never witnessed this side of the grave.

Emphasis upon suppression of carnal nature.

The primary concern of the church is the preaching of theology in order that irresistible grace may effect the regeneration of the elect.

In substantial agreement, save that the Wesleyan school teaches that the entire cleansing of indwelling sin from the soul may be experienced here and now.

Wesleyan school emphasizes eradication of carnal nature.

Theology holds the paramount place in order to effect the regeneration of the individual, yet sociology and the education of the individual are indispensable.

Original creation neither holy nor sinful. Original nature unchanged.

Negation

Sociology is substituted for theology, and education for regeneration.