

The Roots of Arminianism

Most students are aware that the ancient historical seedplot of Arminianism is the error of Pelagianism. This in turn is founded upon the longstanding platform of an elevation of man and a downgrading of the sovereignty of God, which in turn was part of the original temptation of Adam and Eve, *'You will be as God'*. However, what is less well known is that the inroads made in England and the Continent by the teachings of Jacob Arminius, were based upon a specific strategy by the Roman Catholic Church. The contrivers in this scheme were none other than the Jesuits. Persecution and torture had only strengthened the Reformed faith, so they decided to weaken the movement by corruption from within.

What evidence is there for this? Well I will attempt to reveal it in this study. What is frightening is that the majority of Evangelical believers are in ignorant practice, if not in active pursuit, of an Arminian concept of God, man and the Gospel. It is of no surprise that the rising tide of an Arminian Gospel this century, especially since the 1950's, has seen in its train the development of the Charismatic movement, the Signs and Wonders movement and an ecumenical approach to evangelism that have all brought English Christians closer to the Roman church. Many of the specific influences leading to today's theological wasteland have arisen in America and then imported over here. The Billy Graham Crusades and organisations like Campus Crusade for Christ (*Agape* in the UK) have been particularly significant in breaking down the defensive walls.

The situation upon us is a gradual take-over or infiltration by Rome of many institutions. Already many organisations are compromised by quiet involvement with papal representatives. We have even seen Charismatic conferences (e.g. in Brighton led by NFI) where specific seminars were led by Catholic priests and monks in habits occupied many highly visible seats. In the streets, the 'March for Jesus' has seen priests carrying statues (idols) of Mary, which no one thought offensive to the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. None of this would have taken place but for the degeneration of theology caused by Arminianism - and this is how it started.

Semi-Pelagianism

'Arminianism came from Rome, and leads thither again.'

So says none other than Augustus Toplady (1740-78), the Christian preacher and hymn writer. He explains, in his works, that Julian (the bishop of Eclana) was a contemporary and disciple of Pelagius who endeavoured to ameliorate his heretical doctrines to make them more acceptable. This became known much later as Semi-Pelagianism. What key items does this scheme include?

- Election and reprobation are consequent upon human actions.
- These are foreseen by God in eternity past.

What is significant to this study is that:

*'On these last two propositions, the Jesuits found their whole system of grace and free-will; agreeing with the Semipelagians, against the Jansenists and St. Augustine.'*¹

¹ Bower's *History of the Popes* Vol 1, p350

Semi-Pelagianism arose in about 430 AD as an attempt to bridge orthodoxy (the Augustinian position) and heresy (Pelagianism). In essence, it sought to elevate the ability of man in initiating salvation. Augustine declares that man can contribute nothing to salvation and that conversion (repentance and faith) is all of God; divine grace takes the initiative in salvation. This equates to later Calvinism and the Reformed Faith. Pelagius essentially suggested that man can save himself. The middle position is that man co-operates with God, who only establishes a potential atonement which man either grasps or rejects. Like the Pelagians they believed that man's will is free and produces the beginnings of faith, goodness and conversion.

The key leaders of the movement were Cassian, a student of Chrysostom, Faustus, Honoratus (bishop of Marseilles) and others. They did not call themselves 'Semi-Pelagians'. Rather, they considered themselves as Semi-Augustinians since they rejected Pelagius and respected Augustine, but could not agree with the logical outcome of his theology. This was because they saw the seriousness of sin and feared that the doctrine of predestination would produce complacency in behaviour. Therefore, their key element was that original sin had not eradicated free will; grace is necessary for salvation, but it does not precede human choice. The will takes the initiative in a move towards God, not God making the first move towards man. Grace and free will work together. Closely connected is the idea that God wills the salvation of everyone and predestination must, necessarily, only be God's foreknowledge.

The movement was formally defeated by the Synod of Orange in 529 AD, but the full Augustinian position was not maintained. Although Semi-Augustinianism was outlawed by the Pope in 531 AD, the issue of the priority of free will over grace did not disappear.

The Jesuit Connection²

Throughout its history, Romanism had modified its views on salvation from the Pelagian viewpoint through centuries of scholasticism and labyrinthine discussions. Erasmus set forth the argument for free will in 1524, which was supported by the pope, only to be totally destroyed by Luther's work, *'Bondage of the Will'*. The formative period for the Jesuits was the middle of the 16th century, just before Arminius began to teach his heretical ideas.

The term 'Semi-Pelagianism' was only coined in 1577 in the Lutheran Formula of Concord, but it quickly became associated with the theology of the Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina (1535-1600). He wrote a book on the freedom of the will (*Concordia*) in 1588 which was well received by the Jesuits (and was later popular amongst Arminians in Archbishop Laud's party), which attempted to paper over the cracks between Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism. What is interesting is that careful comparison reveals that Arminius copied Molina's ideas. Molina taught a *scientia media* ('middle knowledge') in connection with God's foreknowledge.³ This doctrine became the focus of hot debate in the 17th

² The Jesuits (or the Society of Jesus - S.J.) was a Roman Catholic order of religious men, founded by Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish soldier. It was the principal agent of the Counter-Reformation and later a leading force in modernising the church. In 1539 Ignatius drafted the first outline of the order's organisation, which Pope Paul III approved on 27 Sept 1540. The Jesuits have always been a controversial group, regarded by some Catholics as a society to be feared and condemned and by others as the most laudable and esteemed religious order in the Catholic Church.

³ *Scientia media* (middle knowledge) is a Jesuit idea to reconcile God's foreknowledge with man's free will. It seeks to solve the supposed problem that if God infallibly knows all the future acts of men he must have

century between Reformed theologians and the Remonstrants (followers of Arminius).

Professor Richard A. Muller, of Fuller Seminary, explains that Arminius' doctrine of *scientia media* is Molinist.⁴ In fact, Molina's work was in Arminius' library, alongside many other Jesuit books. This idea is that there is a middle knowledge in between God's intuitive knowledge and his decretal foreknowledge (what he decrees will happen). This middle knowledge rest upon the acts of his creatures. There is no determination of God here. God's prescience regarding a creature's future acts, enables him to act accordingly and establish the right conditions. Muller shows that this not only affects human freedom in salvation, but destroys God's sovereignty in the whole created order, which runs outside of God.⁵

Arminius was also accused of recommending to his students many Romanist works and emphasising a Jesuit theology, particularly Molina and Suarez. In his printed works, Arminius refers to these Jesuit influences, but does not reference them! Deceit or what!

In this way, Jesuit ideas were introduced into the Dutch Reformed Churches and so Arminianism/Semi-Pelagianism began in earnest.

The great Puritan scholar, John Owen, writing in his *Display of Arminianism* (1642), shows awareness of the Jesuit connection: '*How do they (the Arminians) and their fellows, the Jesuits ...*'⁶

Arminius' Contacts

There have been two proposed sources of inspiration for Arminius' ideas:

- The Jesuits as a result of his trip to Rome.
From 1586 to 1587 Arminius was in Rome and Padua (near Venice) where there were theological colleges. He had studied at Geneva, why is he now (presumably) studying in Papal colleges? How did he survive the inquisition? High Williams asks the question - was he already a Jesuit recruit? Certainly there were rumours that he kissed the Pope's toe in homage. Furthermore, Williams points out that his friend and biographer, Petrus Bertius, became a Catholic after Arminius' death.⁷
- The Socinians in Poland with whom he was in close and intimate contact.

decreed them, thus men are not free to choose. It teaches that there are three types of knowledge in God: 1) simple intelligence or intuitive knowledge (by which God knows all things, actual and possible; omniscience); 2) vision (God's knowledge of what actually happens) or decretal knowledge (what God willed) and 3) middle knowledge between the two (God's foresight of man's free choice – this choice is not predetermined by God; God knows what men will do but doesn't decree it). Thus much that comes to pass is the result of man's free will, not God's predestination. This was adopted by the Arminians, Socinians and Lutherans. This denies Biblical doctrine which states that God works all things according to his good pleasure (Acts 2:23; Rm 9:16; Eph 1:11; Phil 2:13). Molina's version of this was that God knows what a free man will do in any given situation; thus by creating these situations he can bring about his ends without affecting man's free will. However, arbitrary decisions of men are not knowable, even in prescribed conditions. People do surprising things. Thus human determinism excludes this divine middle knowledge. If there is any part of the universe that is independent of God's sovereign control, then God ceases to be God – he ceases to be the sovereign governor and ceases to be omniscient.

⁴ Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the thought of Jacob Arminius*; Baker, Grand rapids. 1991.

⁵ Muller, p165-6.

⁶ Owen, *Display of Arminianism*, Works Vol 10, p16.

⁷ Hugh Williams, Art. 'John Owen', *British Reformed Journal*, 18, p10.

Arminius himself said that: *'they [Papists and others] assert that no fouler blasphemy against God can be thought or expressed, than is contained in the doctrine of predestination.'*⁸ This being the case, Arminius advised the reformed world to discard predestination in order to live in better harmony with Papists. A disciple of Arminius was the Englishman Samuel Hoord who took the same view.⁹

It is noteworthy that the first result of cries for toleration and brotherly love to those in error has usually been the development of unorthodox doctrine and a weakening of the Biblical position. Such was also the case with Amyraut and the spread of Amyraldism.

Process of Degeneration

As early as 1613 the Oxford theologian Walter Browne (an associate of Laud) had a library with no English Reformed writers, but contained 500 anti-Calvinist books, including the works of the leading Jesuits: Molina's *Concordia* and Leonardus Lessius' *De Gratia* as well as Arminius' works. Robert Shelford, of Cambridge University, produced *Five Pious and Learned Lectures* which was so Arminian that it was used by the Jesuits in Ireland. The English situation was so serious that Sir Walter Earle urged Parliament to make religion the most vital issue above all other domestic matters because, *'Popery and Arminianism [are] joining hand in hand.'*¹⁰

Vital testimony comes from the hand of the Archbishop Laud¹¹ himself, a professed Jesuit. After his death, a letter was found in his effects which was endorsed by him and dated March 1628. The endorsement reads: *'A Jesuit letter, sent to the Rector at Bruxels, about the ensuing Parliament.'* The letter gave the Superior of the Jesuits, then resident at Brussels, an account of church affairs in England. Part of it reads: *'Father Rector ...we have many strings to our bow. We have planted that soveraigne drugge Arminianisme, which we hope will purge the Protestants from their heresie; and it flourisheth and bears fruit in due season. For the better prevention of the Puritanes, the Arminians have already locked up the Duke's [of Buckingham]² ears; and we have those of our own religion, which stand continually at the Duke's chamber, to see who goes in and out ... Our foundation is Arminianisme. ... This we second and enforce by probable arguments.'*¹³

In describing the effects of this success, Tyndale described churches being adorned with images, altars, paintings etc but also: *The predestinarian doctrines were forbid ... and the Arminian sense of the Articles was encouraged and propogated.'*¹⁴ Under Laud, Calvinism

⁸ J. Arminius, *Oper.* p115 .

⁹ S. Hoord, quoted in Bishop Davenant's *Animadversions*, Cambridge 1641.

¹⁰ Nicholas Tyacke, *'Anti-Calvinists' the Rise of English Arminianism*, p135; quoted in Hugh Williams' article on *John Owen*, *British Reformed Journal* 16, p18. I am indebted to this series of articles for provoking much thought in this paper.

¹¹ William Laud (1573-1645) was archbishop of Canterbury (1633-45) and religious adviser to King Charles I of Great Britain. He sought to impose High Anglicanism, verging on Popery, in England (and in Scotland, causing war) using political means like the King's authority, and the courts of the Star Chamber and High Commission. His persecution of Puritans and other religious dissidents resulted in his trial and execution by the House of Commons during the Civil War.

¹² The Duke of Buckingham was the favourite of King Charles I (and the patron of Laud who was, at one time, his chaplain).

¹³ *The Hidden Works of Darkness*, p89-90, (1645). *The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady*, p55. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Tyndale, *Contin. of Rapin*, vol 3, 1758

became a heresy and treasonable. The fate of London lawyer, William Prynne, is typical of the time (1633). For publishing a book denouncing plays, dancing etc, he was arraigned before the Star Chamber. His sentence was to be barred from his profession, turned out of his society, fined £5000, pilloried at Westminster and Cheapside and at both places an ear was sawn off before being imprisoned for life. Such was the effects of the entrance of Arminianism into England.

Conclusion

What is clear is that the progress of Arminianism is not due to the attraction of the ideas alone, but that, especially in England, Jesuit activity has encouraged and developed its progress. It is bad enough that Arminius took Pelagian ideas and revamped them to make them more attractive to Christians and to blur the edges between Protestants and Catholics. His teachings dishonour God's sovereignty and cause people to shipwreck their faith. But for this to be part of a papist plot from the start shows the insidious and evil source of the whole issue.

Modern believers who knowingly or unknowingly cling to Arminian theology (as most do) should be aware of the real roots of this deception. Without doubt the progress of Arminianism in Puritan England had a Jesuit root.

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