



THANKS
but NO THANKS

Free
to
BELIEVE

BRIEFING
Spring 2017

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Ideas and people we might have been better without

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<http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk>*

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Radical orthodoxy

Martin Camroux

When I went to read theology in Oxford in 1969 one of the wonderful discoveries was the theology books at Blackwell's. Downstairs in the Norrington Room was a vast selection of serious theology, much of it reflecting the tumultuous debate centred on John Robinson's *Honest to God*. Today the number of theology books in Blackwell has very visibly shrunk. No doubt there is a commercial logic to this but it also accurately reflects a decline in theological creativity and confidence.

Today the most important recent theological movement is what is known as 'Radical Orthodoxy.' Deservedly this is nothing like as widely known or read as *Honest to God*. Much of the writing is obtuse. As one radical orthodox writer, Stephen Long, admits, "Radical orthodoxy's labyrinthine prose tempts some to read it only as an academic parlour game used for inconsequential power struggles in high-brow university religion and philosophy departments." None the less it does illustrate the malaise of much British theology.

The movement was founded by John Milbank and takes its name from a collection of essays, *Radical Orthodoxy, A New Theology*, edited by



John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Loughlin. It sets itself head-on against modernity and sees the liberalism of the 1960s as “a deformation of theology which capitulates to the modern spirit and leads inevitably to nihilism.” In its way it has interesting similarities with post-modernism. Both consider that rational thought cannot establish truth. Millbank argues that neither secularism nor Christian Orthodoxy are rationally justifiable and “The book can, therefore, be read as an exercise in sceptical relativism”. Where radical orthodoxy differs from post-modernism is that the latter revels in the fact that there is no general truth whereas radical orthodoxy has a way out of the dilemma. The Christian story and it alone, is true and can be accepted in faith. The Church is thus the only way that civilization can be saved from despair.

For reasons of space I will limit myself to three critical comments. Firstly this part of a wider critique of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the “Enlightenment project.” The Enlightenment set the tone for modernity. It championed critical thinking, free inquiry and tolerance and is best summed up by Kant’s phrase *Sapere Aude!* – dare to think. For radical orthodoxy this is where the rot set in. Alister McGrath, for example, alleges the Enlightenment was “an intellectually dubious movement which has given rise to the Nazi holocaust and Stalinist purges”. Liberal Christianity got trapped by the corroding effect of the Enlightenment not understanding that its stress on the reasoning power of the individual always ends in a corrosive moral scepticism and violence. Stanley Hauerwas, an American fellow traveller with radical orthodoxy, argues that the Liberal Church’s accommodation to secular culture has led to tragedies like the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

This is an extraordinarily one-sided rewriting of history. Before we seek to recover a pre-Enlightenment golden age it might be wise to remember the positive role of the Enlightenment idea of tolerance and freedom of inquiry in combating the rabid strain of intolerance which had been part of Christian history throughout the Middle Ages and before. Pre-Enlightened religion included the Inquisition and witch burning – was that really that wonderful? Many of key Enlightenment thinkers were Christians and it was a time of spiritual awakening as well as criticism and doubt. Positively, it was a major factor in the spread of democracy,

religious freedom and modern science, to say nothing of modern theology and biblical scholarship. As most Enlightenment philosophers knew, reason is only part of life but it is not wise to disparage it, otherwise you may end up with creationism, Isis, homophobia and Donald J Trump.

Secondly, at the core of radical orthodoxy is the conviction that that truth and virtue is a Christian preserve. Millbank writes, “Only Christianity, once it has arrived, really appears ethical at all”. James K. A. Smith denies that there is any possibility of any secular virtue: “Virtue is possible only for the community of the redeemed... What appear to be instances of mercy or compassion or justice outside the body are Christ are merely semblances of virtue.” Such arrogance is morally intolerable and blind in equal measure. What of other faiths, what of those who devote lives to Oxfam or Save the Children or caring for those they love. Is this only “a semblance of virtue?”

Thirdly there is an absurdly unrealistic idealization of the church. For Millbank truth must be expressed in a community. He argues that Christianity alone has this concept. The Church is the means that the truth of Christ is present. “Unless the textual and ecclesial representation of Jesus is in some sense perfect, how could Jesus’s perfection be at all conveyed to us” (Millbank). Christianity is not a finished system. New truths are vital. But above all it must be for the Church to judge what new truth is and what is not. How does the reality match the rhetoric? In Radical Orthodoxy’s own analysis, the Church has for centuries largely compromised away its integrity in face of the secular world. Christian history is full of failure, corruption, division and self-seeking. Many moral insights held by Christians today not only originated outside the church but were at first vigorously opposed by it. Which church is it then, which is in “some sense perfect.” Gavin D’Costa sums up the essential issue when he writes that Radical Orthodoxy “is a church theology with no accountability to any real church”.

Radical Orthodoxy is theology in retreat. It is a theology that has lost its nerve, doubted its ability to make a rational case for its own gospel, and seeks to escape from the challenges of a frightening world to the safety of a church ghetto. It is desperately ungenerous to others and unwilling to engage with reality, preferring its own fantasies. □



Ebb and flow – the rhythm of Life

Free to Believe Retreat

Launde Abbey, Leicestershire

4th to 7th September 2017

Led by: Alison Reed Richards and Peter Varney

Launde Abbey is medieval but with comfortable accommodation in the adjacent stable block. It has formal and walled gardens and sits in a quiet fold of the Leicestershire Wolds. There are rich deciduous woodlands, wildflowers, a variety of birds and animal life, and glorious hilltop views. It can be a place where we may become aware of the deep connection to the natural cycles of the seasons; dark & light; day & night; ebb & flow of life energy; the breath of wind echoed in our own breathing.

Our retreat will give the opportunity to be inspired by the colours and landscape, the abbey, the gardens, the forces of nature. We'll suggest creative ways to respond, and we will have the use of a dedicated space for art and other creative work. We'll have the opportunity to experience creativity, stillness, silence, meditative practices, and different ways of worship, reflection and sharing.

Alison Reed Richards is a counsellor with a deep, abiding interest in developing our individual spirituality and nurturing the resonance of our connection with the natural world and rhythm of living. She works at present with the bereavement support team at St Margaret's Hospice, Somerset and as an Associate Counsellor with Taunton Counselling Service (a not-for-profit Agency).

Peter Varney has led retreats in Britain and abroad, for Quakers and for the Creative Arts Retreat Movement. He enjoys exploring the connection between spirituality and creativity and aims to explore the steps we make along our individual creative journeys. He welcomes the inclusivity of Free to Believe and hopes all will feel welcome on this retreat. He is a member of the Religious Society of Friends and a retired Anglican priest.

If you would like further information, please contact Peter by e-mail on: varney@waitrose.com

All accommodation is ensuite. Cost is £295 per person from Monday mid-afternoon to Thursday lunch.

**Please access the booking form on: www.freetobelieve.org.uk
or send an e-mail to Tim Richards: richardstim@hotmail.com**

Thomas Hooker and the wrath of God

Michael Powell

In the 1620's the Town Lecturer in my home city of Chelmsford, Essex, UK was the leading Cambridge Puritan Thomas Hooker (1586-1647) who subsequently moved to America and won the accolade, 'Father of American Democracy'.

Undoubtedly Thomas Hooker was a very strong-minded character. In a recent book on Hartford [USA] Puritanism, Baird Timpson quotes Hooker on the condemnation of sinners, particularly in relation to the wrath of God:

Now when a poore damned creature seeth that the sentence is gone and seeth the good will of God pass'd upon him, and the power of his wrath now to be exprest to the full against him, and he apprehends the will of God now fulfilled never to be crost more, and he seeth the gates of hell now sealed upon him, and that the Lord had cast upon him the tombstone of his wrath, and that he is buried under the power of the second death, and now he seeth that the time is gone and the justice of God can never be satisfieth more and the power of the Lord's wrath can never be removed: Oh the time was that I had the word and the power of it to quicken me, and to informe me, and the Spirit of God to strive with me, and there was some hope, but now the decree of God is made unrevokable, and this wrath I shall never beare nor never remove. There is now no word, no praying, no hearing, no conference, no mercy nor salvation to be hoped for, and so the soule looks no more for any good, because the Lord hath so peremptorily set downe his decree, thus the soule breaks under the wrath of God, and is not able to satisfye, and the wrath of God can never be removed, the fire will ever burne, and the worm will ever gnawe, and now the soule casts off all hope. (My underlining)

Baird Timpson comments: 'However this message may sound to 21st century ears, it continued to draw eager audiences to Hooker's Chelmsford lectures'. I can picture that today as I walk from St Mary's Church



(now the Cathedral) into the High Street and market area.¹

Some in today's Chelmsford URC and other congregations are keen on the contemporary song 'In Christ alone', in many ways a good hymn musically and theologically. However I bridle at the controversial lines:

*Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.*

Because of this reference to wrath I never choose this hymn myself but when it is specially requested by someone who finds it deeply moving and is not really concerned with the finer points of wording, one's own views have to give way.

Googling just now, I have read with interest that the Presbyterian Church (USA) wanted to add this song to their new hymnal, *Glory to God*. But in doing so, the committee requested permission from the song's writers, Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, to print an altered version of the hymn's lyrics, changing "Till on that cross as Jesus died/the wrath of God was satisfied" to "Till on that cross as Jesus died/the love of God was magnified." The songwriters rejected the proposed change, and as a result the hymn committee voted to bar the hymn.²

As, I suppose, a modern liberal and having taken Thomas Hooker to task on this particular concept of the wrath of God, I want to say with equal conviction that there is much in him that I admire and respect, not least his passionate outspokenness on the social and economic issues of the Chelmsford market place and the ways in which people were, and sometimes still are, treated there. Taking a broad view, I would not say we would have been better off without him. But we do have to stand up to him and to contemporary hymn-writers and others, however otherwise excellent their work, who continue to promulgate teachings that do not ring true, at least to us.

The big challenge today is creating informed and critically articulate congregations without reducing their enjoyment of modern materials! Local church history can sometimes provide a way in to the necessary discussions. □

1) Timpson, Baird (2015) *Hartford Puritanism: Thomas Hooker, Samuel Stone and Their Terrifying God* Oxford University Press pp193-4

2) www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/keith-getty-on-what-makes-in-christ-alone-beloved-and-contested

John Calvin

Marian Tomlinson

It might seem ungrateful of a member of the URC to wish that our 'founder' theologian had not been John Calvin. After all, his mighty work 'The Institutes of the Christian Religion' was responsible for the success of Protestantism as an organised and truly reformed expression of Christianity. Luther had made the break with the Roman Catholic Church, but Lutheranism was but a halfway house between Catholicism and Reformed Christianity.

Calvin's portraits show a stern, cold personality and I've read nothing to suggest the artists have lied. In contrast, Luther's big peasant face suggests more than a hint of a man who could enjoy earthly pleasures. I have read that Calvin could take pleasure in the company of his men friends, with whom he had satisfying discussions. But I do not see a man who could be relaxed or jolly. I must try to understand why. He had a truly rigorous education, one that produced a serious-minded man convinced of the awfulness of missing out on salvation. He was a misogynist of course; there were ten, (or was it one hundred times?) more men than women in Calvin's heaven, But I don't take particular offence at that, since all men in his time were dismissive of women and Luther was no better.

I dislike him for not allowing Michael Servetus safe asylum in Geneva and insisting on the man's death. To be fair, he did not live in tolerant times and you could point to worse persecutors of heretics. Everyone then believed in everlasting damnation and he could not countenance heterodoxy. I do not like him for sneering at his fellow Protestants in France who did not put their heads over the parapet and become Protestant martyrs. Calvin lived in the safe haven of Geneva, where he could preach boldly without fear of arrest.

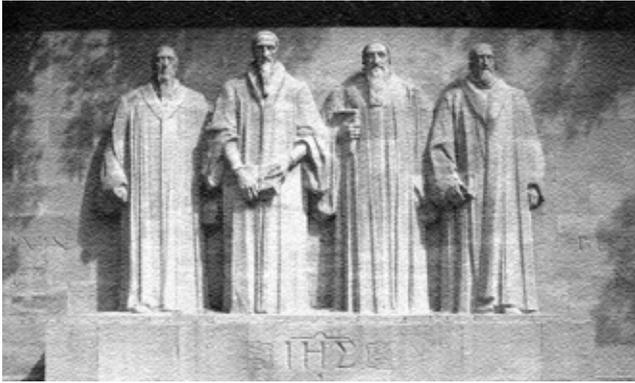
I deplore him most for two things; the teaching of double predestination, and his dark interpretation of human nature: he believed in the total depravity of man. I do not credit him with having invented the notion of double predestination, because St. Augustine of Hippo

thought of it long before he did, but the Catholic Church had decided not to preach it.

Calvin's admirers tell me that he wrote such a lot about other things and that his teaching about predestination occupied a comparatively small part of his writings. Maybe, but if you read about the squabbles over doctrine in the reformed churches after his time, you will find predes-



tinuation looms large and anyone who denied it was excluded pretty swiftly. It became a touchstone of Calvinistic orthodoxy. We can blame his possibly more extreme successors, but he must carry the can for having taught it. Double predestination declares that God had predestined the vast majority of humankind to be damned for all eternity. This was not unfair in his view, because all people were basically evil and it was very merciful of God to spare a few of them. Calvin was apparently his father's favourite child. Like all favourites, I suggest he could see nothing wrong with this. Such favoured members of families do not understand



why other siblings should resent them! A Calvinist can never be sure that he is one of the elect, so he lives an anxious life hoping to display signs of grace in his virtuous actions.

Calvin's belief in the total depravity of mankind meant that you could not appreciate good or kind deeds if they were not performed by believers. Although good deeds could not secure salvation, a Calvinist must perform them. Geneva had high standards and harsh rules. Strange how 'pure' religious states like Winthrop's Massachusetts or Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, established with the cry of freedom, turn out to be the most tyrannical and repressive societies. God forbid that one should be condemned to live in a theocratic state, and God help the children brought up in Calvinistic homes, taught from the cradle to take care of their souls. Reading about life in Puritan communities, we observe high anxiety about a believer's election. Doesn't life contain enough pain, anxiety and fear without adding to our troubles with a cheerless religion threatening an eternal perpetuation of our woes?

Our churches officially dropped predestination in the nineteenth century but it is a long time dying. Evangelical preachers still try to scare us into thinking that we must believe in a cruel God who will damn us to eternity. Calvin's doctrine of grace has a harsh flip side. I believe Calvin was a man who lacked warmth and that his glacial heart made for a gloomy religion. If the URC is not a cold and judgmental form of Christianity this is due to its jettisoning Calvinism and prioritising Jesus instead. And this was the real trouble with Calvin; he was not sufficiently attentive to Jesus. ☐

Penecostalism

Geoff Newton

Considering the many movements within Christianity which have been positive and progressive, a movement which still dominates many parts of Christendom without which we might have been better off is Pentecostalism.

In my personal life, as well as when I was a Baptist Minister some 57 years ago now, and renewed 8 years ago when I trawled Bude in Cornwall to research the state of Christianity in this seaside town, I have found Pentecostalism to be a considerable force within the Christian Church.

In my personal life I witnessed, as a young married man, my father and mother-in-law's experience of Pentecostalism. My father-in-law became a devotee of the local Pentecostal church in the town in which he lived



and, unknown to my mother in law, started to tithe his income as directed by the church. When he died the church contacted his widow, asking for the continuation of the tithe. This was the first she knew about it, along with revelation that he had donated large sums in addition to the Church. She was considerably upset, both by the deception and diminution of their relatively small income.

When I was first married my father-in-law persuaded us to attend some Pentecostal services and rallies and we witnessed the extreme emotion generated at them. One particular event sticks in my mind. We attended a mission service with my sister and brother in law and after experiencing some extremely emotional and juvenile behaviour, my brother-in-law and myself left and went instead to the local cinema to see Tommy Steele in *Half a Sixpence* which we greatly enjoyed. I don't think my father-in-law ever forgot it or forgave us.

Emotion can certainly sway the mind especially when it is experienced in a crowd where mass hysteria can take over. This can be a force for good undoubtedly but can also be a force for negative attitudes. In African counties it can be associated with Black Magic. My impression of the Bude Pentecostal meeting, which was by far the largest Christian congregation in the town, was favourable. Their social work was impressive and the welcome warm and friendly. The service was very long and contained very emotional episodes but was of a quiet emotion rather than vociferous. As a result, I believe that the movement is probably evolving into a quieter more middle of the road eruption within the religion.

Nonetheless, I feel that Christianity would have been better without the movement. It encapsulates a belief in Christian orthodoxy which includes substitutionary atonement, which is a crude and ridiculous expression of Christian fundamentals. In swamping the mind with emotion it tends to lead to intolerance and as a humanitarian agnostic/atheist I find the movement oppressive and claustrophobic. Its opposite would seem to be Quakerism, with its acceptance of silence as opposed to reiteration of beliefs in the form of hymns and sermons. The Quakers' focus on behaviour and the minimalisation of creeds, allied to absence of excessive emotion, is a welcome reaction both to Pentecostalism and the ritualisation in the other churches. □

Constantine the Great

Roger Wilson

Constantine is remembered as the Emperor who reunited Rome under one ruler in the early 4th century and who called the Council of Nicaea. The cause of 'faith' and the history of Christianity would have been vastly different if ... if only ... he had never got involved. Mark you, the same could be said about his mother, Helena – or St Helena, without whom the quantity of debris found in reliquaries around Europe would be far less. However, back to Constantine.

He became Emperor, or co-Emperor, when his father died. They were in York and the legions acclaimed him. He went on to defeat other claimants and his co-Emperor so that by 313CE he was alone at the head of the mature but increasingly sclerotic Empire. His mother was a follower of Christianity and clearly influenced him to favour this sect which now had significant numbers of followers across the Empire. So Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and despite a few short relapses it remained as such until the remnants of Empire finally died in 1453.

Christianity in 313CE however lacked a consistent message. The theology was constantly in controversy, argued over by priests, scholars, bishops and even the four ruling Patriarchs – of Rome, Byzantium, Antioch and Alexandria. The hottest topic was about the divinity of Jesus, was he man or god, or both, if god when did he become one, if both how do we distinguish between the roles – you can see how much fun they had with a question some of us today regard as of little matter.

Of course what we think today has been massively influenced by the concept of the Trinity and this is a side effect of Constantine's interference.

He called the Council of Nicaea in 325CE so that the church could give him a consistent statement of faith he could relate to and promote. He funded the travel but the number of takers from western Europe was small. Most of those who turned up were from the Middle East, Africa and Asia Minor. The Pope, the patriarch of Rome, did not come in person, he sent an envoy.

The debate was long and it appears quite intense. Mark you, putting a large number of theologians in a room together does not sound like a recipe for quick answers. One of the loudest voices came from a priest called Arius. He had been a vocal promoter of the view that Jesus was born a man and never claimed to be a god, therefore he was subservient to the almighty. Arius had been anathematised by the Patriarch of Alexandria and reinstated by the Patriarch of Antioch. His fiercest opponent was Athanasius, a priest of Alexandria. The Council deadlocked over the issue. The Emperor wanted answers so he instructed the Council to arrive at a conclusion and those who did not accept it would be banished.

The Council accepted the proposal of Hosius, a Spanish bishop, that it should develop a Creed. The result is the Nicene Creed, substantially the same today as it was then. The concept of a Trinity, which it affirmed, was probably as unexplainable then as it is today. It became an ongoing feast for theologians everywhere, whether amateur (like me) or professional.

Constantine was clearly pleased with the result. He had a statement of faith, he had a direction which he was confident the church could follow without further controversy. Anyone who questioned the Creed would be banished, as Arius was.

Like every good story there is a twist. Arius was a favourite of Helena, the Emperor's mother. He never went away. He died not long after the Council of Nicaea but he died knowing that the Emperor's family followed his thinking, not that of the Trinitarian Creed. When Constantine himself was close to death he chose to be baptised and the evidence is that his baptism was by a priest who followed Arius' line of thinking.

Did the Creed actually address Constantine's faith, or was it a political necessity? What if none of this had happened? Perhaps a multitude of churches would have evolved, with one belief in a simple set of shared principles which reflect the underlying truths of Jesus. The individual churches could have ranged from the magical and mystical, to the considered questioners, with a sprinkling of the weird and wacky in between. Sound familiar? □

SAVE THE DATE!

*The next Free to Believe national conference will be held
from 8th to 10th November 2018.*

Building on the successful joint event in Birmingham in May 2016 (with CRC, Modern Church and PCN), Diana Butler Bass has agreed to join us as our main speaker. The book she is currently working on will have been published in the Spring of that year. Diana has a useful website if you want to find out more, but the titles of her books might help to whet your appetite: *'Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution'* (2016); *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (2012); *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (2009); *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (2006); *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (2004); *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship* (2004); *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (2002).

Helping to ground our reflections with Diana, Trevor Dennis has agreed to interlace his engaging Bible Studies through our time together. We are sure many of you will already have attended events where Trevor has led Bible Study or have read some of his books, or used/heard some of his material in worship! We have certainly made them available at our previous events, through strong recommendations.

There will be the usual time to reflect together over meals and a group session, some time to ourselves, and we promise to seek copyright on a few hymns in good time!

Venue: The Hayes, Swanwick, Derbyshire

Price: to be confirmed! (but we will be keeping that to an absolute minimum as usual – and we have asked for a number of non-ensuite rooms to allow those who wish to help their budget)



The Fall

David Lawrence



Somewhere in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates, lay a garden called Eden, which means “flat land” in Sumerian. Here it was that the drama of human creation was played out in a conflict between the gods. Much of the story’s richness was lost in its adoption into the Hebrew scriptures but at the same time something was added which was to exercise a pernicious influence over both religious and secular thinking for generations to come.

Where the original story had seen human beings created to relieve the toil of the gods, in the Hebrew version that toil, together with sickness, suffering and all manner of evils, sprang not from the gods but from a moment of human disobedience. The manifest flaws in the world and in human character were the fault not of an omnipotent God – how could they be – but of humanity itself, inherited from Adam and Eve and renewed in each generation.

From that seed grew many twisted plants. From the subjugation of the daughters of the temptress Eve to the beating of sin out of young bodies, the doctrine of The Fall has been a gift to religious authoritarians in every generation, while the acceptance of the inevitability of ‘Origi-

nal Sin' has cast a pall of sullen apathy over the Christian centuries.

For many liberal Christians and secular people, the fatal flaw underlying the ideas of The Fall and Original Sin is that they contradict a more recent foundational myth that "underneath it all", people are nice, and that if only they are sufficiently affirmed and encouraged from their earliest days they will develop into generous and socially responsible individuals. In other words, the religious idea of a fall from original innocence must be rejected because it contradicts a secular idea of a fall from original innocence.

The shared misconception in both cases is that the necessary direction of travel for those who wish to live a moral life is to return to some imaginary state of moral purity before character was corrupted. This precisely and disastrously reverses the true direction of travel for those who wish to live a moral life and, more especially, those who wish to follow the life and teachings of Jesus.

Like all living beings we evolved in and through generations of a life and death competition for scarce resources. We, or rather our forebears on the evolutionary tree, were the winners. Countless others fell by the wayside and if they had not we would not be alive today.

So to say that competition and even conflict are built into our DNA is not a metaphor, it is the literal truth. We are amphibians hesitantly crawling out of a sea of moral ambiguity into a new medium that can only be breathed in short bursts. Just as corrosive oxygen is the unlikely fuel of biological life, so the love which animates the life to which Jesus calls us is dangerous in its pure form.

That Jesus understood the deep meaning behind all of this without the aid of Sunday Times best-sellers on popular genetics can scarcely be denied. His entire program was and is based on the reversal of what we might dryly call 'survival values'. Our first love is to be not ourselves but the other. And contrary to the promptings of the 'selfish gene', the 'other' whom Jesus specifies is the one who is not like us, the enemy, the one who hates us and seeks our harm. Such a program leaves us teetering on the edge of personal extinction, which should come as no surprise to those who have heard and shuddered

at the call to lose their life in order to find it.

So The Fall is fundamentally opposed to both to observed reality and, simultaneously, the message of Jesus. Not surprising then that it regularly results in the perversion of the gospel into a belief that the avoidance of sin, variously defined, is identical to virtue. Nor that Christian theology, especially in its liberal incarnations, is so irrelevant to people's lives.

Worst of all, the concept of the Fall perverts our understanding of God. Insofar as creation is a tenable idea, it is a creation which imposes – not simply allows – competition and cruelty in order to survive. No theology which does not take that fact seriously is worthy of discussion. If it is hard to take the path that Jesus took it is not because we have fallen, it is because that is the way the creator God has determined. □



This is what our American cousins call a shoestring. This is the shoestring on which the affairs of Free to Believe are run. It is rather frayed and always in danger of breaking even more if it is pulled too hard. And yet it is tied around something rather precious – the attempt to rediscover the energy of radical Christianity and to explore the contribution that the Reformed tradition might make to that.

If this shoestring were a little more robust, Free to Believe could do much more. Can you help? Could you send a gift to The Treasurer, Free to Believe, 145 Whitchurch Road, Tavistock, PL19 9DF or include Free to Believe in your will?

If you can, our shoestring would be most grateful

Pelagius, Peregrines and Porridge

Graham Hellier

*This contribution to our 'favourite heretic' edition arrived a little late
but we thought you'd like to see it anyway...*

*"A scribbler vile, inflamed with hellish spite, against the great Augustine
dared to write"*

Prosper of Aquitaine, quoted approvingly by Bede.

Jerome, who first translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin, had already insulted this one-time friend of Augustine as a man 'made heavy by Scottish porridge'. That man was Pelagius — one of the numberless Christian thinkers who were vilified and persecuted as heretics..

So who was he and what did he believe? There is a difficulty in answering, because his writings are mostly lost to us and we know him chiefly through his critics. Therefore the following, like porridge, has to be taken with a small pinch of salt.

He was probably Irish (then known as Scots!) and his Celtic name was Morien or Morgan. He was said to be the son of Argad the Bard and came to live in Caerleon, not far from Cardiff, — an important Celtic centre of learning, which is why the Romans built their camp there.

There was much more coming and going between Britain and the Mediterranean in those days than we might imagine and Morien was one of the early 'peregrines' who went to Rome to study law. [A 'peregrine', as with the peregrine falcon, was one who travelled 'through the fields'. Our word 'pilgrim' derives from it.] He arrived in Rome in the year 382 or thereabouts and became well known as a scholar and leading theologian. Augustine of Hippo called him 'that most excellent Christian'. Like Augustine, he sought social reforms — he challenged the rich and privileged, condemned public executions, and encouraged women to read and interpret the scriptures. His massive Biblical commentary and

his Confession were in use for centuries after and the latter was used by Alcuin to instruct the Emperor Charlemagne.

Why then a heretic? Apparently because Morien opposed the growing authoritarianism of the Roman Church and because he and Augustine fell out over crucial matters of doctrine. The Roman Empire was disintegrating at this time. Christian leaders had to flee to North Africa when the Vandals took Rome in 410 AD. Church and state were desperately trying hold together against the forces of anarchy. Uniformity in politics and doctrine became the overriding aim and dissidents were subject to exile or persecution.

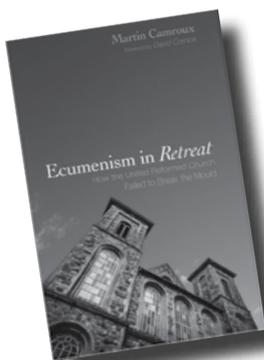


Augustine was developing his fierce theology of original sin, with no salvation outside the Church. The disobedience of Adam became ‘The Fall’ - infecting the whole human race, physically and spiritually, so that no one was born innocent. Free will was no more and all stood helpless and condemned before God. The one hope was that God would elect some to salvation, for which the Church and its sacraments were essential.

In contrast, perhaps reflecting his Celtic Christian background, Morien saw Adam only as an example of human sin. He insisted that every baby was born innocent and that infant baptism was not essential, even if de-

sirable. He upheld free will and the moral responsibility of each individual before God. The potential was there, at least, to live without sin. Even the pagan could come to salvation. He was not ‘opposed to the Augustinian primacy of God’s grace’ as is wearily asserted by many writers. He was opposed to those who spoke of grace as though it were a matter of arbitrary condescension, like the favour of the Roman Emperor. Morien stressed ‘prevenient’ grace — that we are created and sustained by the grace of God, that ‘comes before’ and inspires all that is good in us. All our ability, our willing and our doing, he taught, are ‘totally from God alone’. Our calling is to develop a four-way love — for God, for self, for our neighbour, and for our enemy.

His teaching was accepted by two church councils in the year 415. In 416, two further councils pronounced him ‘heretic’ i.e. non-orthodox. In 417, the pope exonerated him but in 418, he was again condemned. Nineteen bishops resigned because of that decision. A dark uniformity had prevailed over diversity. The Emperor exiled him. We don’t know whether he continued to live in North Africa or whether he returned to a cottage in the Marches to enjoy his porridge! Certainly Roman emissaries kept coming to Britain to root out this terrible heresy — widespread, no doubt, because it belonged to the traditions of Celtic Christianity. All Christians who have broken free from the darker aspects of Augustinian thought can surely honour him today as a great British theologian. □



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