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In praise of Pelagius

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In the 1600th-anniversary year of his condemnation as a heretic, rehabilitation is long overdue, argues Ali Bonner

DOES it matter to Christians now if our understanding of the history of Christian doctrine is changed radically? Does it matter if, in academic circles, doctrine is coming to be seen as the product of individual and group self-interest?

I think sometimes it might, if the new view of the formation of Christian doctrine is significantly different from the old, and if it sets up a dissonance between what is taught in faculties of history and sociology in universities and the general understanding of Christians outside academia.

A new account of Pelagius and his teaching, and what took place when Pelagius was condemned for heresy, challenges conventional wisdom about him, but it also raises questions about religion and its functions within society.

Pelagius wrote about how to be a Christian in the early fifth century as the Western Roman Empire started to disintegrate, and is the first known British author. He was condemned as a heretic in 418 for teaching a collection of ideas almost all of which he did not, in fact, teach.

In reality, he was labelled a heretic for his defence of free will and the goodness of human nature against three intertwined doctrines that were being promulgated as orthodox doctrine at the time: original sin, an absolutist account of prevenient grace, and predestination interpreted as preordainment.

Unlike the case of many Christian writers labelled heretics, a number of Pelagius's works survive, travelling under false attributions, usually to St Jerome or St Augustine of Hippo. This means that we can see the gulf between the tenets attributed to Pelagius and what he actually wrote.

In addition, many texts written by other Christians, also promoting an ascetic approach to Christianity, survive. Comparison of these with Pelagius's works reveals that Pelagius wrote nothing new at all: everything he wrote had

been written before by other ascetic propagandists such as Jerome, or St Athanasius of Alexandria, in his *Life of Antony*. A very strong case can be made — indeed, in my view, the evidence is overwhelming — that the account of human nature and the access to salvation which was proposed by Pelagius was mainstream within Christian thought at the time. It follows that Pelagius did not invent a “new heresy”, as was asserted by his most influential opponent, Augustine.

FOR 1600 years, Pelagius’s name has been synonymous with a heresy that attributed free will to man to the exclusion of all divine influence on human decision-making. He has been seen as the embodiment of self-righteous arrogance. Yet there is no evidence that Pelagius taught that God played no part in human decisions. He defended two ideas common in ascetic Christian literature at the time: that human nature was inclined to goodness, and that man had free will.

Controversy arose with the propagation of ideas seen by their advocates as incompatible with these two principles, and an attempt was made to impose a binary analysis of the relationship between God’s grace and human free will. Pelagius’s opponents presented their hearers and readers with an either/or choice between God’s grace and human free will, and they placed Pelagius on the free-will side of this choice, constructing a fictitious “Pelagianism”, which they attributed to Pelagius.

Their proposed binary was a false one, as was pointed out by St John Cassian of Marseilles, a man who brought Eastern ascetic traditions to the West and whose writings St Benedict of Nursia commended. In the ensuing battle to determine fundamental elements of Christianity’s message, Pelagius’s excommunication accomplished his defeat, but the debate continued.

Research reveals an extensive manuscript tradition of Pelagius’s writings, and a study of the reception of his works reveals him to have been a highly influential Christian writer throughout the medieval period. Textual and manuscript research reveals that two different accounts of human nature and of how humans achieved salvation were widely available within Christian literature during the Middle Ages. Indeed, the question whether God or man, or a combination of the two, determines human salvation has never been resolved in a transparent authoritative formula accepted by all Christians.

IT IS long overdue that the misleading account of Pelagius and the formation of Christian doctrine during late antiquity be set aside. But the longevity of this misleading portrayal of Pelagius raises larger issues. One of these is why the narrative about Pelagius created by proponents of the three-fold doctrine (original sin, an absolutist account of prevenient grace, and predestination interpreted as preordainment) gained traction at the time, and has done so in the 1600 years since.

The discomfort engendered by the disruption of religious beliefs with their associated emotional attachments seems likely to be one factor, suggesting, perhaps, a systemic conflict between historical truth and religious belief.

Another issue raised by the misrepresentation of Pelagius is the nature of the process of the formation of Christian doctrine. A significant determinant of the content of Christian doctrine is revealed by this episode to be human power. The self-interest of individuals and groups determined the outcome, as one group successfully lobbied the Western Emperor to put pressure on the Pope to set aside Pelagius's acquittal. A heresy was invented and attributed to Pelagius with the aim of relocating orthodoxy, and it seems that this process has been repeated during the formation of religious doctrine.

A revised understanding of the history of late antique Christianity highlights the enthusiasm and persuasive commitment of ascetic propagandists and how their moral exhortation in the form known as paraenesis was one of the reasons for the success of Christianity and its achievement of a monopoly on religious discourse in the medieval period.

The enthusiasm for asceticism which swept across Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries engendered an attempt to bring Christ's way of life to all Christians, and to find a way to live as Christ enjoined within society rather than only in withdrawal from it. Pelagius's condemnation resulted in a bifurcation of Christian experience and living, as a spiritual elite retreated from the wider community to try to live as Christ lived. They were separated from the rest of the Christian population, which was exhorted to Christian virtue but not expected to achieve a relationship with God of the sort envisioned by Jesus for everyone.

The attempt to create a society that lived according to Christ's injunctions was abandoned, his prescriptions deemed too hard for most people to fulfil. Augustine focused on the notion of perfection as a way to de-legitimise

Pelagius by asserting that Pelagius taught that it was possible for a person to be perfect in this life, and then accusing Pelagius of arrogance.

Professor Peter Brown, a notable scholar of late antiquity, has depicted a contrast between the exclusivist and divisive “icy Puritanism” of “Pelagianism”, and the inclusive mediocrity of Augustine’s Church, in which all were controlled by their original sin. This characterisation of the situation is wrong.

It is wrong, first, because Pelagius cannot be differentiated in doctrinal terms from the mass of other ascetic propagandists active from the fourth century onwards. It is wrong, second, because the notion of original sin and its partner, an absolute account of prevenient grace and predestination interpreted as pre-ordainment, simply postponed exclusivity to the next life. The notion of an elect is profoundly exclusivist: selected in advance by God’s pre-ordainment, only an elite few were predestined to salvation. The central objection expressed in the fifth century to Augustine’s triune doctrine was that it contradicted the universality of God’s salvific will. Ecclesiastics in southern Gaul based their rejection of Augustine’s account of predestination on the centrality of God’s universal salvific will to the Christian message.

TODAY, we still have not decided whether we are the sole determiners of our own destinies — whether we are totally in control of our actions. Alcoholics Anonymous suggests that relinquishing control to a higher power is the best way to conquer addiction. In contrast, proponents of what might broadly be described as “positive thinking” draw on research in psycho-neuro-immunology to argue that we can control our mind and autonomic system.

There are similarities between the programme set out by Athanasius’s Antony and these adherents of positive thinking. Similarities include the need to train one’s thoughts, and the need for effort to achieve this; and also the idea that emotions such as love, joy, and gratitude bring health and are necessary for the optimal functioning of the body. This implies that our bodies are designed for moral virtue. According to this model, a way of life based on unconditional love is the route to health and happiness, which seems similar to the life centred on love which was enjoined by Christ.

In the fifth century, an alleged binary choice between human free will and divine prevenient grace was proposed for polemical purposes, to introduce new Christian doctrines, but it was and remains a false binary. A synergistic

account of the relationship between human and divine influence on our decisions is more helpful. The surviving textual evidence suggests that Pelagius adhered to such a model.

Shakespeare, Dickens, and Abraham Lincoln all referred to our “better angels” to indicate co-operation between the divine and human spheres. There is no need to hold on to a misleading account of Pelagius. A historically accurate account of late antique Christianity abandons the term “Pelagianism”, and instead refers only to the ascetic movement, describing the many varied ideas that surfaced within this dynamic aspect of Christian history, which was so formative for the fundamental values of our culture.

Scholarship on several aspects of the history of Christianity as a social and cultural phenomenon has been moving forward at a pace recently, driven by academics around the world who are interested in late antiquity, the function of religion, and all aspects of identity. This research is bound to disrupt some longstanding perceived certainties about the history of Christianity, and is set only to increase.

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