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## Pelagius And Pelagianism

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Pelagius was a spiritual adviser to Christian aristocrats in Rome around the turn of the fifth century CE. In a commentary on the Pauline epistles, a treatise *On Nature*, and other writings, he sought to bolster Christian asceticism by opposing Manichaean determinism and affirming human capacity to progress toward moral perfection. His moral character and theological insights attracted followers who defended and developed his teachings.

Opposition to Pelagius and his followers began to intensify after Alaric's sack of Rome forced them to emigrate. In 411 one of Pelagius's protégées, Caelestius, sought ordination to the priesthood in Carthage and instead was condemned for his views on the nature and effect of Adam's sin. In his defense, Caelestius appealed to the teachings of a priest named Rufinus, whom Caelestius had heard oppose the notion of inherited sin. Pelagius himself traveled quickly through North Africa to Palestine where his teaching aroused Jerome's ire. In 415 Pelagius was called to defend himself before the bishop of Jerusalem and again before an episcopal synod at Diospolis, both of which acquitted him.

Indignant at these acquittals, Augustine—who had already written several anti-Pelagian treatises—led the literary and ecclesiastical attack on Pelagianism. Following conciliar, papal, and imperial condemnations in 418, Pelagius and Caelestius largely disappear from the historical record. Nineteen Italian bishops refused to subscribe to the papal proscription; among them was Julian of Eclanum, who wrote several lengthy polemical treatises, fragments of which survive embedded in Augustine's refutations. The judgment that Pelagian teachings were heretical was upheld by the ecumenical council at Ephesus in 431.

Modern scholarship has emphasized the importance of distinguishing between Pelagianism as a historical movement and Pelagianism as a theological system, the latter caricaturing the former. From the viewpoint of Christian orthodoxy, Pelagianism has often been construed as the heretical mirror image of Augustine's theology. Whereas Augustine defended

established practices and doctrines such as infant baptism and original sin, Pelagianism controverted these and other traditions with novel heretical teachings that have been characterized as naturalistic, Stoic, and even godless. The theological tradition also canonized Augustine's characterization of Pelagians as *enemies of grace*, thereby implying that they deliberately denied grace, or at least reduced it to God's provision of the law and free will. Moreover, Pelagianism is accused of vainly overemphasizing the capacity of human free will. According to Augustine's full-blown predestinarian scheme, even the faith with which fallen human beings respond to God's gracious offer of salvation is itself a gift from God, given to some and withheld from others. As the opposite, Pelagianism implies an overconfidence that human nature is uncorrupt and possesses sufficient resources to attain moral perfection and eternal salvation solely by its own efforts without assistance from God's grace.

Like any caricature, this portrait of Pelagianism contains true features but distorts them by exaggerating some details and omitting others. The identification and subsequent scholarly analysis of additional Pelagian writings have revealed that Pelagian tenets are more nuanced than the prevailing stereotype suggests. Pelagius and his followers did not intentionally oppose Christian orthodoxy. Quite the contrary, they not only contrasted their teachings with the heresies of Arianism, Manichaeism, Origenism, and Jovinian, but also hurled countercharges of novelty and heterodoxy back at their opponents. As an historical movement, Pelagianism encompassed a diverse group of individuals who differed on a number of practical and theological issues but united in opposition to moral laxity and theological determinism. The defining characteristic of Pelagianism was not a negative denial of grace but, rather, the positive affirmation that it was possible (at least theoretically) for human beings to live sinlessly. If human beings *ought* to avoid sin—and most Pelagians considered this proposition a scriptural imperative—then human beings must be *able* to avoid sin.

Philosophical questions about freedom, responsibility, and justice were prominent in the Pelagian controversy but always in relation to theological concerns. For example, both Pelagius and Augustine strove to balance human free will and divine grace. Pelagius affirmed grace not only as God's creation of human free will and God's revelation through the law and through Christ, but also as the remission of sins in baptism and even as a constant help to free

will, although Augustine dismissed the sincerity of the latter conception. Conversely, Augustine affirmed free will but apart from grace limited its scope in fallen humanity to choosing among evils. While Augustine accused his opponents of emphasizing free will to the extent that they denied any role for God's active grace, the Pelagians argued that Augustine's understanding of grace amounted to a determinism that eliminated free will.

The Pelagians defined sin as an act of will, not a substantial defect of nature; hence sin must be avoidable, and conversely that which cannot be avoided cannot be sin. Thus, when human beings choose to sin, they bear moral responsibility for their own actions and cannot blame God, the Devil, or even a vitiated nature. Consequently, the Pelagians understood the effect of Adam's sin as imitation of sinful habits rather than inheritance of a sinful nature, and most of them affirmed infant baptism, denying only that its function was to cleanse the newborn of inherited sin. Moreover, they argued that the inevitability and substantiality of original sin made God responsible for evil. For Julian, Augustine's teaching that the guilt of Adam's sin was transmitted to each human being at conception also implied that marriage and reproduction were tainted by evil, therein betraying Augustine's lingering affinity with Manichaeism.

Finally, both sides in the Pelagian controversy refused to embrace theological positions that appeared to impugn divine justice. If sin were unavoidable, the Pelagians argued, it would be unjust for God to demand sinlessness and then to condemn human beings for sinning. Similarly, they saw injustice in the notion that God would condemn infants not for acts of their own volition but merely for inherited sin. Indeed, any god who would impute to one person the sins of another would be unjust. Augustine countered that a just God could not abide the suffering of infants unless these miseries were somehow deserved as a result of original sin, which rendered all humanity liable to God's just condemnation. Augustine posited that even God's sovereign choice to save some and not others, though an inscrutable mystery, could not be unjust.

***See also*** Arius and Arianism; Augustine, St.; Augustinianism; Determinism, Theological; Freedom; Justice; Mani and Manichaeism; Origen; Philosophy of Religion; Religion; Responsibility, Moral and Legal.

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