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John Milton – A Noble Nonconformity

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John Milton, born exactly four hundred years ago, preferred the quiet life of scholarship and poetry; but circumstances and his seriousness and strong sense of duty plunged him into the maelstrom of political life in one of the most turbulent periods of English history. This article traces his chequered career as poet and champion of intellectual and political liberty and assesses his importance and significance as a poet, political activist and, not least, as a Christian.

KEYWORDS

Censorship, Commonwealth, heresy, metanarrative, Milton, Puritanism

The Reformer John Calvin (1509–64) has been unfairly branded as the dictator of Geneva – a cold-hearted monster with the blood of Servetus on his hands.¹ The English Puritans, in many ways his spiritual heirs, have fared little better. They are still popularly associated with lurid, hell-fire sermons and the sort of killjoy Christianity that led to theatre-closures and the banning of Christmas.

Now whilst it is true that almost every renewal movement has its extremes and its cranks, it is fairer to think of the Puritans, as someone once described them, as ‘Protestants of the hotter sort’ – a characterization that reflects the derivation of the term.² The term encompasses a fairly wide range of theological and ecclesiological views and also embraces quite different personalities. Among these were George Fox, the Quaker pioneer, John Bunyan, the author of the immortal *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Oliver Cromwell, military genius and Lord Protector, the theologians Thomas Watson and John Owen and, of course, John Milton, though he, in particular, does not by any means fit the stereotypical image. The

novelist, jobbing journalist and pamphleteer Daniel Defoe is regarded by some as the last in the Puritan lineage.³ We should not, of course, forget to mention the Separatists who became the founding fathers of the American colonies.

Early Days

John Milton, the son of a well-to-do scrivener, was born in Cheapside, London, in December 1608, early in the reign of James I. It was a time when Puritan hopes were high. They expected the new king, brought up in Calvinistic Scotland, to make the Church of England more definitely Protestant. The so-called Millenary Petition, presented even before the coronation of the new king, stated their objections to the sign of the cross, bowing or genuflecting at the name of Jesus, the rite of confirmation, and a number of other things they regarded as ‘Romish’ customs and practices. Reflecting the Genevan system, they increasingly began to call for the abolition of the episcopacy and its replacement by pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. They were disappointed; and the new Stuart dynasty, within a couple of decades, turned the clash of ideologies and different views of churchmanship into a bloody civil war.

John was enrolled at St Paul’s school, perhaps as early as his eleventh year. He often read till midnight

³ He wrote a little-known *History of the Devil*. His racy novel *Moll Flanders* is something of a morality tale.

¹ See, for example, Stefan Zweig, *Castellio contre Calvin ou Conscience contre Violence*, Editions Grasset, 1946 (French trans. from the German by Alzir Hella). Its English title is *The Right to Heresy*.

² Puritan, of course, means ‘the pure’ and ultimately derives from the Greek word for fire. Cf. Purgatory, a place of purification by fire.

– perhaps the cause of later problems with his eyesight – and became fluent in Greek, Latin, French, Italian and a smattering of Hebrew. As a model pupil with a sponge-like ability to grasp almost anything, he was happy at school. But his later undergraduate studies at Christ's College, Cambridge, were not so happy. He clashed with his tutor, felt there was too much emphasis on rote learning and was none too popular with his fellow students. Nevertheless he left Cambridge with the reputation of being one of its brightest alumni.

From childhood, with the support and encouragement of his parents, Milton had been intending to become a priest. But the newly graduated Milton felt a growing attraction to poetry, though the two vocations were by no means incompatible. Many a clergyman wrote poetry, John Donne being a prime example. Surprising as it may seem, his rather indulgent father⁴ raised no protest at the possibility of this financially precarious vocation, though it has to be said that Milton did not immediately abandoned his intention to enter the priesthood.

The poem *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, written when Milton was twenty-one, marks the beginning of his maturity as a poet. A section of it is some-times featured in traditional Christmas services. It significantly, in the light of later doctrinal controversy, speaks of Christ as sitting 'in midst of Trinal Unity' and calls upon 'the Heavenly Muse', the Holy Spirit, to inspire the poet's tribute to Christ, 'the Infant God'.⁵

Civil and Domestic Strife

The attempt by Charles I to rule without Parliament, together with the High Church reforms of his archbishop, William Laud, provoked serious opposition from the Puritans.⁶ They suspected that the king was a closet Roman Catholic. These conflicts eventually led, as we have said, to civil war. And Milton, having become 'revolted by the rampant abuse and

self-interest at all levels in the Church'⁷ abandoned all lingering thoughts of ever entering the priesthood and, additionally, set aside the preferred option of poetry to throw in his lot as a pamphleteer and propagandist in the Puritan and Parliamentary camp. This service in the Parliamentary cause he never regarded as a mere duty. He increasingly saw himself as having taken up the prophetic mantle in the inextricably linked twin struggles for freedom of religion, speech and conscience – firstly against the threat of Romanism and then of Presbyterianism – and national redemption.

On the domestic scene, the studious poet and private tutor, had met and was enchanted by the beautiful sixteen-year-old Mary Powell, daughter of a staunch Royalist family. Despite being twice her age – he was thirty-three and she a teenager – he married her in June, 1642. It didn't last and she soon returned home to her parents. In the years of separation Milton eloquently argued the case for divorce, mainly on the grounds of incompatibility and – very controversially – that marriage was not a divine institution but an invention of the priesthood. With the help and support of friends, John and Mary were eventually reconciled and three children were born to the couple. The poet was devastated when she died in 1652, though it did not prevent him marrying twice more.⁸

During the Commonwealth period, when Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector, Milton served as Latin Secretary. His duties were time consuming and arduous – mainly translating foreign dispatches into Latin. He did, however, draft the letters of protest to a number of heads-of-state after the Duke of Savoy's troops massacred over 1,500 Vaudois Christians.⁹ The massacre prompted Milton to write the sonnet which furiously begins 'Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints ...'

⁷ J. S. Hill, *John Milton: Poet, Priest and Prophet* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 41.

⁸ Critics cannot agree as to whom his tender Sonnet XIX beginning 'Me thought I saw my late espoused saint/Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave ...' was dedicated.

⁹ For a full account of the massacre and its aftermath see Giorgio Toum, *The Valaisians – the First Eight Hundred Years* (Torino: Claudiana, 1980), pp. 125ff. Toum reproduces the complete poem. Maurice Pécet, *L'Épopée des Vaudois*, Editions Seghers, 1976, surprisingly makes no mention of it. It was not the first nor last persecution of these members of what is a Protestant Church tracing its origins to Pierre Valdez in the late twelfth century, 'Valdesi' in Italian.

⁴ He also financed his son's Grand Tour during which he met, among others, the aged Galileo and the poet Tasso. The growing political crisis meant that he felt he must return to England earlier than planned.

⁵ Stanzas II and III respectively.

⁶ In Scotland the reaction to the announced 'reforms' was furious and led to the Bishops' Wars. The incident where Jenny Geddes threw her stool at the unfortunate cleric announcing the changes was only one minor manifestation of the anger provoked north of the border.

Whilst devotedly serving Cromwell, whom he described as 'our chief of men', tragedy struck. His eyes, weakened by years of close study, finally gave out. Glaucoma has been suggested as the cause. From then on it was 'Dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon'. But he courageously continued his work at the palace of Whitehall, for fifteen shillings a day, with the help of a scribe.

The great hopes Milton had entertained for the future of the Commonwealth ended in ruins. When Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, worn out by years of campaigning and controversy, his son and successor, Richard Cromwell – he was a notorious drunkard they nicknamed Tumbledown Dick – proved to be hopelessly inadequate. Plans were soon afoot to invite the executed king's son to return from exile on the Continent.

The Restoration: the Mature Masterpieces

With the return of Charles Stuart, as King Charles II, Milton's career in politics was over. As a servant of the Commonwealth, and one who had approved of the execution of Charles I, he was now a marked man and something of a fugitive. But he could now go back uninterruptedly to his first love. The next fourteen years, from 1660 to his death in 1674, saw the composition – these dictated to his devoted daughters – of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Many critics regard this last as his finest. Like the blinded Samson, imprisoned under Philistine rule, Milton groaned under the new regime with its loose morals, its bawdy plays and, worst of all, the expulsion of some of the best men from the pulpits of the national Church in the Great Ejection.

Milton, by almost universal consent,¹⁰ deserves his place in Poet's Corner. He perhaps has an over-fondness for exotic names, sometimes obscure classical allusions, and hugely long sentences. The opening lines of *Paradise Lost* contain nearly forty words before we get to the main, imperative verb. And perhaps only Gerard Manley Hopkins's masterpiece *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is more daunting to the new reader in the canon of great poetry. All that said and acknowledged, his poetic achievement is spectacular. But a substantial shadow has lingered for some time over his reputation, not as a poet, but as an orthodox or mainstream Christian.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot was a notable dissenter.

Milton began, probably in 1655, a handbook of Christian doctrine. It was never published in his lifetime. When it did eventually see the light of day, in 1825, it confirmed the suspicion that Milton was an Arian – the ancient heresy which denied the full deity of Christ but which was condemned both at the Council of Nicaea (325) and later at Constantinople (381). A further criticism sometimes levelled at him is that he tends to treat the 'facts' of the Christian faith as meaningful narratives after the manner of classical mythology – surprisingly modern and, for the times, daringly radical and decidedly risky.

The Theological Cauldron

It goes without saying that the mid-seventeenth century was a time of political upheaval and turmoil. It is equally true to say that not only were political and religious institutions the subject of much scrutiny and questioning, but also what might be called the assured bedrock or pillars of Protestant orthodoxy. The Socinians rejected the Augustinian notion of the necessity of grace and the Quakers and Ranters the supreme authority of Scripture.¹¹ More surprisingly, at the very heart of the Commonwealth, Universalism – the opposite theological pole to the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement – lurked. Both Jeremiah White and Peter Sterry – they were chaplains to Oliver Cromwell – were thorough-going devotees of the doctrine, going back to Origen, of *Apokatastasis*. White wrote a treatise entitled *The Restitution of All Things*.¹² So it is perhaps fairer to judge Milton against this background of theological reappraisal and flux rather than according to the rigid tenets of the Westminster Confession.

One final point needs to be made regarding heresy or heterodoxy. Majella Franzmann has claimed, with some justification, that the heterodox have

¹¹ The Ranters regarded the Bible as the source of all division and religious wars, the Quakers as of lesser authority than their 'inner light'. The later Primitive Methodists were also popularly known as Ranters, though they had little or nothing in common with the antinomians of the seventeenth century.

¹² Even during Calvin's second and successful residence in Geneva there were those – notably the physician Jerome Bolsec – who denied, for example, the doctrine of double predestination and claimed it made God into a tyrant no better than the pagan gods. There is a copy of White's treatise in Dr Williams' Library, Gordon Square, London. Sterry, one of the Cambridge Platonists, was severely reprimanded by Parliament for a eulogy on Cromwell which compared his arrival in heaven to that of the post-Ascension Christ!

often been unfairly treated in the standard histories of mainstream Christianity – and also by more recent scholarship. Though she mainly focuses on the treatment of Gnosticism in the early Church, her remarks surely hold good for any period where an establishment or well-established orthodoxy confronts those it perceives as a threat. In addition to pleading for fairer treatment of the heterodox she argues that we must never assume that the ‘heretic’ has no meaningful relationship with God. In the attacks on the Gnostics and Manichaeans by the orthodox, she finds ‘no appreciation ... that heretics may actually have a valid spiritual life centred on Jesus’.¹³

Ever since the publication of *De Doctrina Christiana*, scholars and theologians have subjected Milton’s two great epics to close examination to find some evidence of Arianism – but with little success.¹⁴ And a number of things stand in the poet’s favour here: firstly, he acknowledges in the book the possible unorthodoxy of his views – and so withheld it from publication – and secondly, his mature poetic masterpieces, though they bring out the authentic humanity of Christ, show little or no trace of the heresy. Here it is worth noting that, in recent years, Arius has been to some extent de-demonized;¹⁵ and it could be argued that, perhaps too crudely for Alexandrian sensibilities, Milton was seeking to stress the real humanity of Christ which could, in the fourth century, in defence of the *homoousios*,¹⁶ could too easily drop out of the picture. Apollinarius and Eutyches, both champions of the full deity of Christ, admittedly in very different ways, are examples of the sort of over-emphasis that led them into underestimating Christ’s humanity at best and teetering on the brink of monophysitism at worst. Milton, to his credit, in the offending book, emerges as someone who takes the authority of the Bible seriously – his poems are full of biblical references – and who robustly defends the doctrine of free-

will against the strict Calvinists. Christologically speaking – this is one of the main points at issue – he is arguably a proto-kenoticist,¹⁷ rather than a full-blown Arian and, indeed, a Semi-Pelagian, rather than a Socinian.¹⁸

At the heart of what we might term mainstream Puritanism, from Bunyan the tinker of Bedford to substantial theologians such as Owen or Baxter, stands the Cross and Calvin’s doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement.¹⁹ The motif of penal substitution is not strong in Milton. It is, above all, ‘the selfless patience and obedience to the Father’²⁰ that achieves both the defeat of Satan and the salvation of mankind – the Cross being the final act of obedience and submission to the will of the Father. This approach to the atonement can be traced back to Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 202). There is no Miltonic equivalent of Schutz’s *Seven Last Words of the Saviour from the Cross* or Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, though Samson, his arms outstretched to tear down the supporting pillars of Dagon’s temple, may be a type of the crucified Christ achieving, like the Israelite hero, more in death than in his lifetime.

Milton and the McDonaldization of the Church

John Drane in his challenging book *The McDonaldization of the Church*,²¹ complained about the kind of pre-packaged, standardized, bland and unimaginative sort of Christianity all too prevalent in today’s Church. I think Milton would have shared his views. And the Church surely needs men and women who, like him, do not readily fit into any pigeon-hole

¹³ Christ is ‘of the same substance’ as the Father. Pope Benedict XVI comments, ‘This philosophical term serves to safeguard the reliability of the biblical term’ (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 320).

¹⁴ This is vividly brought out in the confrontation with Satan at the beginning of *Paradise Regained*. Christ’s eventual triumph over the Devil in the wilderness is achieved not through inherent deity but through the Word and Spirit.

¹⁵ Milton has sometimes been accused of Socinianism also.

¹⁶ Criticism of the penal substitutionary approach by popular evangelical preacher and writer Steve Chalke provoked one of the biggest postbags to the Evangelical Alliance. See S. Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

¹⁷ J. S. Hill, op. cit., p. 192. Cf. *Paradise Lost* XII, lines 408, 409 where it is ‘... his obedience/Imputed becomes theirs by faith ...’.

¹⁸ John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

¹³ Majella Franzmann, ‘A Complete History of Early Christianity; Taking “Heretics” Seriously’, *Journal of Religious History*, June 2005.

¹⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 398, claims Milton ‘successfully concealed his Arianism’ in the epics.

¹⁵ Beginning with Maurice Wiles, ‘In Defence of Arius’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962). Like Arius, Milton sought to place the Father atop the heavenly hierarchy and so to avoid any hint of Sabellianism.

or classification, do not belong to any school, are creative, imaginative, have a vision which transcends denominational or sectarian strictures and structures, are unafraid of being politically incorrect, have an unswerving dedication to Christ and – this is equally unfashionable – to the nation.

To borrow the words of a later and arguably inferior poet,²² ‘Milton thou should’st be living at this hour’. That’s not possible, of course; but at least we do have those towering epics – the sort of overarching metanarratives John Drane so favours in opposition to the prevailing and highly subjective ‘pick and mix’ mentality of postmodernism – to assure us we are on the winning side, thanks to *Christus Victor* and to his servant the noble Nonconformist.

It is probably too much to hope that a whole new generation will ‘take up and read’; but Milton’s unmatched poetic achievement demonstrates that imagination allied to a remarkable erudition, when consecrated to the faith, can have a huge influence. And Drane believes that mime, music, dance, poetry and drama – and even clowning²³ – can be effective

²² William Wordsworth. The sonnet, however, is a fitting and eloquent tribute to Milton.

²³ Olive Fleming Drane, John Drane’s wife, became a ‘clown minister’ in the 1980s bringing clowning, under the pseudonym of ‘Valentine’, to a wide and varied audience.

means of propagating the Christian message in a non-literary, sound-bite and low-attention-span age.

And finally ...

Summing up is difficult when faced with a complex character such as Milton. He was that rare combination of poet and man of action; a scholar and poet of massive erudition but someone who successfully resisted the very real temptation to shut himself away with his books. And what made him politically active and, indeed, sacrificially devoted to the cause of liberty and the fledgling Republic, was his underlying conviction, which may be summed up particularly and pointedly in the Epistle General of James: ‘Faith without works is dead’ and ‘a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone’ (James 2:20, 24). For John Milton, *pietas* without *praxis* was anathema.

Whatever his failures and disappointments, he made a monumental contribution to poetry – without Milton English poetry would be like the New Testament without Paul – and a considerable one in the cause of liberty and democracy. Though something of a misfit as a Puritan – certainly when set against the stereotypical image – he is by any reckoning an outstanding figure in a movement which produced many noteworthy preachers, theologians, thinkers and politicians.

INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS LITERATURE

Kyle Keefer, *The New Testament as Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. £7.99. pp. 121. ISBN 978-0-19-530020-08)

This short introductory guide seeks to read the New Testament through the lens of literary study, as defined against religious or historical readings. It aims to highlight the aesthetic experience of the reader, rather than the devotional, theological or moral content of what is read. The relationship between the New Testament and the literary canon is considered, asking what counts as literature and in what ways the New Testament functions in literature. Individual chapters address the Gospels, Paul’s letters and Revelation as literary documents, by engaging with their form. Finally the New Testament is considered as a whole, and the metaphors of listening to music and looking at a photographic mosaic are used to explore the multivalent yet united nature of the canonical text.

The book achieves what it sets out to do, and that is to introduce literary ideas to the reading of the biblical text. An easy criticism to make is that many aspects of this new and expanding field are left out, but this is inevitable in such a short guidebook. However, it would have benefited from some discussion of aspects of literary criticism which are more challenging to textual stability.

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