

MILTON'S THEOLOGY

BY EVANGELIN LAWSON

THE theological beliefs held by Milton in his later life are to be found chiefly in *Paradise Lost* and in his *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*. The latter was not published until about a hundred and fifty years after his death. Daniel Skinner, the nephew of his old friend, Cyrus Skinner, was serving as his amanuensis in writing out a fair copy, but Milton died before one-third of the corrections were made, and the whole remained in Daniel Skinner's hands after Milton's death in 1674.

Daniel Skinner held a position in Trinity College which, very likely, he would have lost if the treatise had appeared in London, so he sent the manuscript to Amsterdam. The English government learned of the proposed publication of the foreign correspondence of Parliament and the Protectorate, and pressure was brought to bear upon Skinner through the Master of Trinity, Isaac Barrow. Skinner gave up to the Secretary of State, not only the Latin letters, but the manuscript of the theological treatise. Nothing was known of the manuscript until 1823, when it was disinterred from one of the presses of the old State Paper Office. Sir Joseph Williamson, when he retired from office in 1628, instead of taking away his correspondence as had been the custom, left it behind him. It is for this reason that Milton's *Treatise of Christian Doctrine* was published so long after his death. Milton was accused by his contemporaries of being a Papist; but, if the *Treatise of Christian Doctrine* could have been published during his life-time, there would have been no ground whatsoever for such an accusation, for the treatise abounds in teachings contrary to those of the Papists, and he frequently mentions the Papists as teaching contrary to the scriptures.

Milton's grandfather was a Papist, his father was disinherited for becoming a Puritan; but, later in life, he drifted toward the extreme Independents. He is classed by most of his biographers as an Arian, but his beliefs were not altogether those held by the Arians. On the one side, his beliefs inclined to that of the Semi-Arians who believed in the unlikeness of the essences of God and of Christ. His views descended, in a measure, toward that of the lower Arians who made Christ out to be a creature produced in time. On the other side, he swung toward the pantheistic conception which made Christ out to be a creature not produced in time. On the whole, however, it is perhaps best to classify him as an Arian.

Possibly, the most adequate way to set forth Milton's theological views would be to examine his *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*, and to compare this work with his *Paradise Lost*. The *Treatise of Christian Doctrine* is divided into two books—Book I: Of the Knowledge of God; and Book II: Of the Service of God. We shall be concerned chiefly with the doctrines set forth in Book I.

Milton starts out by saying: "The Christian Doctrine is that divine revelation disclosed to all ages by Christ (though he was not known under that name in the beginning) concerning the nature and worship of Deity, for the promotion of the glory of God and the salvation of mankind." Under the definition of *Christ* he also comprehended Moses and the prophets, who were his forerunners, and the apostles whom he sent. He states that the Christian doctrine is not to be obtained from the schools of the philosophers, nor from the laws of man, but from the holy scriptures alone, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; therefore, each individual has the right to interpret the scriptures according to the light which he himself has.

Furthermore, he says that Christian doctrine is comprehended under two divisions: Faith, or the knowledge of God; and Love, or the worship of God. "These two divisions, though they are distinct in their own nature, and put asunder for the convenience of teaching, cannot be separated in practice. . . . Faith does not mean the habit of believing, but the things to be habitually believed." Moreover, no one can have right thoughts of God with nature or reason alone as his guide, independent of the word or message of God. This is also set forth clearly in *Paradise Lost*, XII. 513:

Left only in those written Records pure,
Though not but by the Spirit understood.

The idea of God set forth in the scriptures is the idea that God intended man to have of him; therefore, man must be content with it. Milton sets down nine attributes which describe the nature of God, and these are proved by quotations from the Bible, as are all the doctrines set forth in the treatise. The attributes which show the inherent nature of God are as follows:

1. Truth.
2. Spirit.
3. Immensity and Infinity.
4. Immutability.
5. Incorruptability.
6. Eternity.
7. Omnipresence, which arises from the Infinity of God.
8. Omnipotence.
9. All the preceding attributes may be regarded as necessary causes of the ninth attribute—the Unity of God.

The Vitality, Intelligence and Will of God show the divine power and excellence of the Deity. These also have to do with the nature of God; and the knowledge of God may also be derived from his efficiency, which is either internal or external. The internal efficiency of God is manifested through his decrees, which may be either general or special. God's general decree is that whereby he has decreed from all eternity of his most free and wise and holy purpose, whatever he willed, or whatever he was himself about to do. God decreed nothing absolutely which he left in the power of free agents. In *Paradise Lost* we find Milton expressing the view that God made men free and that man ordained his own fall. The following quotation illustrates his doctrines on the divine decrees and on predestination:

. . . . So will fall
He and his faithless progeny. Whose fault?
Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me
All he could have; I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.

Such I created all the Ethereal Powers
 And Spirits, both them who stood, and them who failed;
 Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell,
 Not free, what proof could they have given sincere
 Of true allegiance, constant faith, or love,
 Where only what they needs must do appeared,
 Not what they would? What praise could they receive,
 What pleasure I, from such obedience paid,
 When will and reason (reason also is choice)
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
 Made passive both, had served necessity,
 Not me? They, therefore, as to right belong'd,
 So were created, nor can justly accuse
 Their maker, or their making, or their fate,
 As if predestination over-rul'd
 Their will, dispos'd by absolute decree
 Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
 Their own revolt, not I; if I foreknew,
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
 Which had no less proved certain, unforeknown,
 etc.

Paradise Lost, III. 95

The external efficiency of God—whereby he carries into effect by external agency whatever decrees he has purposed within himself—are discussed under the heads of Generation, Creation, and the Government of the Universe. In the Arian system of theology an infinite chasm is fixed between God and man, and the consequence of this is that God in his relation to the world can create only indirectly through his agent. For this purpose is formed the Logos, which is called into existence at a period inconceivable to man, but yet within the boundaries of time. This is created from *nothing* and not from the Father's essence. However, Milton thought that the Son was created from the Father and that he was the first to be created. In the *Treatise of Christian Doctrine* Milton says: "For when the Son is said to be the first born of every creature, and the beginning of the creation of God, nothing can be more evident than that God of his own will created, or generated, or produced the Son before all things, endued with the divine nature,

as in the fulness of time he miraculously begat him in his human nature of the Virgin Mary." He believed that Christ taught that the attributes of divinity belong to the Father alone, to the exclusion even of himself. God has supreme dominion both in heaven and earth, with unlimited authority and full power of decreeing according to his own independent will.

Father eternal, thine is to decree,
 Mine, both in Heaven and Earth to do thy will
 Supreme.

Paradise Lost, X. 68.

In speaking of the Holy Spirit in the *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*, Milton says that although the Holy Spirit is not said anywhere in the scriptures to have taken upon himself any mediatorial functions, as is said of Christ, nor to be engaged by the obligations of a filial relation to pay obedience to the Father, yet he must evidently be considered as inferior to both the Father and the Son, inasmuch as he is represented and declared to be subservient and obedient in all things. From Milton's views on the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we see that he is decidedly antitrinitarian at the end of his life.

The whole of the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton tells the story of creation, is little more than a paraphrase of a few verses in Genesis; and we find that he has used the very words of scripture. In the *Treatise of Christian Doctrine* he says: "Creation is that act whereby God the Father produced every thing that exists by his word and spirit, that is, by his will, for the manifestation of the glory of his power and goodness." He then goes on to say that the original matter out of which God has created the universe was derivable from no other source than from the fountain of every substance; that is, from God himself, though it was at first confused and formless, and was later brought to order by the hand of God:

I saw when at his word the formless mass,
 This world's material mould came to heap:
 Confusion heard his voice, and wild uproar
 Stood rul'd, stood vast infinitude confin'd;
 Till at his second bidding darkness fled,
 Light shone, and order from disorder sprung;
 Swift to their sev'ral quarters hastened then

The cumbrous elements, earth, flood, air, fire.

Paradise Lost, III. 708.

In his treatment of the doctrine of the atonement and original sin, Milton is evangelical. He speaks of redemption as that act whereby Christ, being sent in the fulness of time, redeemed all believers at the price of his own blood, by his own voluntary act, conformably to the eternal council and grace of God the Father. Christ was sent to redeem those who should believe, but God had not previously ordained what particular persons should be believers, though some persons, by reason of their natures, would be inclined toward obedience to God. But, seeing each person possessed free-will, God could not be held responsible for the disobedience of anyone, although he knew that there were those who would fall. Milton says, again and again, that this foreknowledge of God did not mean that he had predestined anyone to be a believer or not to be a believer.

Milton believed in the second advent of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and in the general conflagration. He thought that the second advent of Christ would be sudden, and that the time of his coming was known only to God; but that there were general signs which would appear when his coming was near:

Truth shall retire

Be struck with sland'rous darts, and works of faith
 Rarely be found: so shall the world go on,
 To good malignant, to bad men benign,
 Under her own weight groaning: till the day
 Appear of respiration to the just,
 And vengeance to the wicked.

Paradise Lost, XII. 535.

The materiality and natural mortality of the soul, and the suspension of consciousness between death and the resurrection were other tenets of Milton's religious belief. When the body dies, the soul dies also, and will not come to life till the resurrection, when the soul and the body will both come to life, and the last judgment will take place. Following this, the saints will reign with Christ on this earth for a thousand years. At the expiration of the thousand years Satan will rage again, and assail the church at the head of an immense confederacy of its enemies: but he will be

overthrown by fire from heaven, and be condemned to everlasting punishment. Christ will then deliver up the kingdom to God, and this world itself will be consumed in a general conflagration.

Interwoven with Milton's theological beliefs are his toleration of polygamy, the rightness of which he has taken great pains to prove through the Old Testament scriptures; and his disbelief in the observance of the sabbath. Moreover, he was not an advocate of attendance at church if public worship was to be a substitute for spiritual religion. In conclusion, we see that, on the whole, he was rather broad in his beliefs, and that he proved anything he wanted to prove from the scriptures.