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Applied Accepted

Eser Geçmişi / Article Past: 21/09/2022 02/12/2022

Araştırma Makalesi

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21551/jhf.1178210>

Research Paper

Orjinal Makale / Original Paper

Arianism and Pelagianism: Two Great Heresies of the
Fourth and Fifth CenturiesArianizm ve Pelagianizm: Dördüncü ve Beşinci Yüzyılların İki
Büyük Sapkınlığı

Abstract

At a time in Western civilization when differing religious theologies were at odds with each another, opposing schools of thought attempted to reformulate and rationalize some of the most fundamental teachings at the heart of early Christianity. As the founders of these schools were branded as radicals and heretics for defying the orthodoxy and authority of the Roman Empire and at the same time, of the Roman Catholic Church, these teachers were soon ostracized and harshly punished for their flawed and erroneous beliefs. Focusing on the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era specifically, this paper will introduce two great *heresies* that belonged to those historical periods namely, Arianism and Pelagianism, and the highly influential, yet controversial thinkers behind them. Formulated by the *Cyrenaic* (modern-day Libya) presbyter, Arius (256-336 CE) and the British monk and theologian, Pelagius (390-418 CE), these two religious figures whose nonconformist theological positions are still being debated today, dared in their own defiant ways to challenge the firmly established rules and doctrines of Crown and Church.

Keywords: Arianism, Pelagianism, heresy, Roman Empire, Roman Catholic Church

Öz

Batı medeniyetinde, farklı dini teolojilerin birbiriyle çeliştiği bir zamanda, karşıt düşünce okulları, erken Hıristiyanlığın kalbindeki en temel öğretilerden bazılarını yeniden formüle etmeye ve rasyonalize etmeye çalıştı. Bu okulların kurucuları, Roma İmparatorluğu'nun ve aynı zamanda Roma Katolik Kilisesi'nin ortodoksluğuna ve otoritesine meydan okudukları için radikaller ve sapkınlar olarak damgalandıklarından, bu öğretmenler kısa sürede dışlandı ve kusurlu ve hatalı inançları nedeniyle sert bir şekilde cezalandırıldı. Özellikle milattan sonra dördüncü ve beşinci yüzyıllara odaklanan bu makale, bu tarihsel dönemlere ait iki büyük sapkınlığı, Arianizm ve Pelagianizm'i ve bunların arkasındaki oldukça etkili, ancak tartışmalı düşünürleri tanıtacaktır. Kirene (günümüz Libya'sı) papazı Arius (MS 256-336) ve İngiliz keşiş ve ilahiyatçı Pelagius (MS 390-418) tarafından formüle edilen ve konformist olmayan teolojik görüşleri bugün hâlâ tartışılan bu iki dini şahsiyet, Kraliyet ve Kilise'nin kesin olarak belirlenmiş kurallarına ve doktrinlerine meydan okumaya cesaret ettiler

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arianizm, Pelagianizm, sapkınlık, Roma İmparatorluğu, Roma Katolik Kilisesi**ATIF:** BERGERON Sylvain, "Arianizm ve Pelagianizm: Dördüncü ve Beşinci Yüzyılların İki Büyük Sapkınlığı", *Tarih ve Gelecek Dergisi*, 8/4 (Aralık 2022), s. (1172-1178)**CITE:** BERGERON Sylvain, "Arianism and Pelagianism: Two Great Heresies of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries", *Journal of History and Future*, 8/4 (December 2022), pp. (1172-1178)

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Introduction

“Heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same.”¹

Defined in a firm and morally imperative tone in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (authoritative and voluminous treatise, which systematically presents the traditional teachings and instructions held most sacred by the Roman Catholic Church), *heresy* is described in the quotation above as an act of deliberate disobedience of irrefutably established religious beliefs. Considered a direct assault on the orthodoxy and the authority of the Catholic Church, this paper will attempt to shed light on two of the most controversial and challenging religious theologies of the fourth and fifth centuries respectively: Arianism and Pelagianism. In addition to providing the reader with a clearer understanding of what each heresy consisted of, this paper will provide a description of their origin, doctrine, influence, and final demise under the powerful and dominating control of the Roman Catholic Church.

Condemning the Arian Position

“Is God one or three?”² Enquired by the Alexandrian presbyter Arius to his bishop Athanasius, this seemingly inoffensive query initiated what became one of the longest (lasting 75 years)³ and most disputed arguments regarding the threefold nature of God. Under the influence of the great Alexandrian philosopher Origen,⁴ Arius arrived at his own formulation to describe the Trinitarian nature of God. According to Arius, the Godhead was equated with the Father who in turn, through the creative essence of the *Logos* (Greek: “the Word”) was responsible for the conception of the Son.⁵ In comparison, the *Gospel of John* tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁶

From a canonical perspective the nuance of this New Testament passage presents the Word as being very much “one and the same with God” unlike Arius who depicted the Word as interdependent yet of a separate quality to God. This assumption gave a devastating blow to the Church’s traditional and firmly established doctrine as it subordinated the Son to the Father while negating his divinity. The following syllogism clearly exemplifies the Arian position:

Christ is the *Logos* incarnate,

Christ is capable of change and suffering

Therefore, the *Logos* is capable of change and not equal to God⁷

1 Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” last modified November 4, 2003, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7C.HTM.

2 J.W.C. Wand, *The Four Great Heresies* (New York: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1957), 40.

3 Wand, *Heresies*, 38.

4 Wand, *Heresies*, 40.

5 Wand, *Heresies*, 43.

6 John 1:14

7 J.W.C. Wand, *The Four Great Heresies* (New York: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1957), 41.

As a consequence of the confusion and division that threatened the unity of Christians throughout the Roman Empire, Emperor Constantine was forced to summons an urgent conference of bishops to arrive at a harmonious and unified resolution. Arriving from all corners of Christendom, 250 bishops assembled in the ancient city of Nicaea (located in present-day Turkey) to take part in the very first ecumenical council in 325 CE.⁸

According to religious scholar Richard Rubenstein, the Arian controversy, which was based on the question of Christ's subordination to the Father, only represented a fraction of the problem that needed to be addressed during the ecumenical council. In fact, Rubenstein made a persuasive allusion to an ideologically motivated desire on the part of the anti-Arian camp which involved the urgent need to break away from their centuries' old [pagan] tradition of worshipping false and ineffective gods. As the Arians and their philosophy was a reminder of the past, opponents of Arius supported by Constantine felt that the time had come to initiate a new religious era. Therefore, with the eradication of Arianism, the successful establishment of an ideologically unified state religion was made easier by placing Christianity as the newest and strongest faith, and the religion of choice for Constantine's "New Rome" (Constantinople).⁹

In the end, a majority of antipathetic bishops fiercely condemned the Arian position¹⁰ by fervently defending the notion that the Word or Son is not created but rather begotten from the Father, and "identical in substance" to the Father (Greek: *homoousios*).¹¹ In addition to being used to describe the nature of God and his unique relationship to the Son, the term *homoousios* was also used to help identify whether one's belief system was authentically apostolic or Nicene.¹² In addition, Constantine authoritatively approved a proclamation of faith known as the "Nicene Creed" which affirmed the council's majority's belief in one *Trinitarian God* (God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit) and symbolized the unity of all Christians throughout the Roman Empire.¹³ As a continuing and enduring legacy of the council, the Nicene Creed has endured over time to become an integral part of modern-day Catholic liturgy when every Sunday millions of faithful followers around the world recite it in chorus.

As a result of long standing discontentment with the adoption of *homoousios*, a term which had been strongly suggested by an obliging Constantine, opposition from Eastern bishops who favored the use of the term "*homoiosios*" ("of a substance like the Father") led to further division within the Church.¹⁴ This split between the two groups known as the "Homoousions" and the "Homoiousions" was finally resolved through the diplomatic efforts of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria who declared that although separate, the two natures were reciprocally "one and the same as the Son was conceived by the Father and so like him."¹⁵ Meanwhile, as a controversy over

8 Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 75.

9 Rubenstein, *Jesus*, 73-74.

10 Robert R. Williams, *A Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 174.

11 Thomas Bokenkotter, *The Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 51.

12 Robert R. Williams, *A Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 197.

13 Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 78.

14 Rubenstein, *Jesus*, 78-81.

15 Thomas Bokenkotter, *The Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 52.

the nature of the Holy Spirit erupted, Athanasius had to once again resort to his diplomatic genius to arrive at a definition of the *Holy Spirit* that would be acceptable to all sides. Holding fast to his conviction that the Holy Spirit was one and the same with the Father and the Son, all eventually agreed to the notion that “the Son is generated but the [Holy] Spirit proceeds.”¹⁶

Through his relentless efforts, Athanasius had defended and reaffirmed the Nicene faith which had been under threat by factions still loyal to the Arian doctrine, and by the closure of the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, the bishop of Alexandria had brought to an end the ripple effect caused by his presbyter’s momentous, yet earth-shattering inquiry.¹⁷ As a result, in addition to the condemnation of Arius and his supporters, which had taken place in Nicaea a little more than fifty years earlier, the question on the nature of the Trinity was finally resolved in the form familiar to all Christians today – the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Although the Church had scored a theological victory over the Arian “heretics” this did nothing to put a stop to doctrinal challenges against the orthodoxy.

Condemning the Pelagian Position

Known as Pelagianism, after the British monk and theologian Pelagius,¹⁸ this controversial system of belief and practice defied the Church’s teachings on principles such as free will, grace, and original sin.¹⁹ Although they did not belong to any organized religious order, Pelagius and his followers were strict aestheticians who deplored the low moral standards of their fellow Roman Christians.²⁰ According to their rule, because a man was in full control of his moral destiny, he had to assume responsibility for all of his actions rather than holding God accountable for his own shortcomings. In this way, Pelagianism endorsed a high level of spiritual maturity and personal accountability.²¹

Rather than living life as a seemingly helpless child dependent on the Father, Pelagius advocated a way of life where one entered into a full co-creative relationship with God. Pelagius denied that man had inherited original sin from the moment of Adam’s fall from the Garden of Eden. Moreover, according to Pelagius, Adam’s sin was a personal experience that did not affect those who came after him. And so, as there is no original sin, Pelagians did not consider baptism a necessary sacrament to ensure salvation.²²

According to Pelagius, man could out of his own power or free will, consciously choose to do good over evil regardless of the severity of Adam’s original sin.²³ Taken one step further, Pelagius rejected the notion that man ultimately inherited righteousness as a result of Jesus’ death

16 Bokenkotter, *Concise*, 52.

17 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 19.

18 B.R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), xiv.

19 John N. Hrtizu, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works V. 53* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 223-225.

20 B.R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), xi-1.

21 John Ferguson, *Pelagius. A Historical and Theological Study*. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 160.

22 Liguori G. Muller (Rev), *The De Haerisibus of Saint Augustine: A Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1956), 210.

23 John N. Hrtizu, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works V. 53* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 223-224.

on the cross. For Pelagius, all man had to do to become [personally] righteous was to live a life that emulated Christ's own.²⁴ As for God's grace, it was believed that because man is of a morally neutral nature, he could achieve heaven under his own power. Under this presumption, God's grace is not entirely necessary. On the other hand, if man received God's grace, then the difficult task of attaining heaven would be made easier. As God's grace was considered an external rather than an internal experience, Pelagius believed that the amount of grace bestowed upon a man was measured in accordance with his level of personal merit.²⁵

To Pelagius's great disadvantage, two of his strongest opponents were none other than Jerome (345-420 CE) and Augustine (354-430 CE) - two great theologians whose contributions to the Catholic faith would posthumously earn them the title of "Doctor of the Church."²⁶ Jerome was so incensed by Pelagius's controversial views that in his *Dialogue against the Pelagians* (415 CE), Jerome strongly criticized the Pelagian doctrine on grace, free will, and original sin.²⁷ Augustine, who like Jerome found Pelagius's views scandalous and heretical, became one of Pelagius's most enduring theological adversaries. Initiated by Pelagius, the enduring feud between the two men originally began when Pelagius turned against Augustine's teachings on the inability of man to avoid sin on his own, and that only with God's grace could man ever hope to overcome it.²⁸

According to the English Classics scholar John Ferguson, Augustine's strongest criticism of Pelagius was his tendency to highly overestimate the power of man to achieve righteousness and salvation on his own. As Augustine was completely dependent on Christ for his own righteousness and salvation, he critically interpreted Pelagius' individual effort as a deliberate attempt to distance himself from Christ, the Church, and the community. In other words, willingly removing himself from a Christ-centered (or Christocentric) way of life.²⁹ Unlike Pelagius, Augustine was convinced that man's fall was closely connected to Adam, and because of Adam's original sin, man equally shared in his guilt and shame. Furthermore, as a consequence of Adam's ejection from the Garden of Eden, man was made to live a life that was destined for illness, death, ignorance, and sin.³⁰

As far as the issue of sin was concerned when applied to Adam's descendants, Augustine was convinced that this was an undeniable and irreversible condition that will continue to be "passed on from generation to generation,"³¹ and only through Christ can man be saved. In support of Augustine, this scriptural passage from Paul fittingly summarizes his attitude: "So it is written: The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam (Christ) a life-giving spirit."³² In contrast to Pelagius, Augustine was unbending on the benevolent influence of God's grace in the life of man. According to Augustine, man cannot avoid sin without it, and as an inner experience of pure joy

24 John Ferguson, *Pelagius A Historical and Theological Study*. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 164.

25 Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 172-174.

26 Thomas Bokenkotter, *The Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 64.

27 Eugene F. Rice, Jr. *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 20.

28 John Ferguson, *Pelagius. A Historical and Theological Study*. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 159.

29 Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 69.

30 Thomas Bokenkotter, *The Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 82.

31 Robert R. Williams, *A Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 197.

32 1 Corinthians 15:45.

and ecstasy, it is this divine (inner) force that inspires him to choose good over evil. However, it must be said that similar to Pelagius, Augustine was not entirely free of controversy. For example, on the issue of grace, Augustine was convinced that only those fortunate to have been elected by God were bestowed with the gift of grace. Known as his theory of predestination, this idea was considered an extremely offensive notion as it doomed all others to a fate of eternal damnation.³³

As for the ultimate fate of Pelagianism, a great council was held at Ephesus in 431 CE. With Cyril of Alexandria as its legate, two hundred bishops were in attendance to deliberate over the accusations directed against Pelagius and his followers' teachings.³⁴ Pelagius was ultimately accused of being a heretic and excommunicated from the Catholic Church. As for his final days, it is believed that Pelagius died in the Holy Land in *circa* 440 CE.³⁵

In defense of Pelagius, the eighteenth-century English clergyman and theologian John Wesley (1703-1791 CE) declared that Pelagius was wrongfully accused of being a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church. In his own words, Wesley exclaimed that "If a heretic is one who emphasizes one truth to the exclusion of others, it would at any rate appear that he was no more a heretic than Augustine."³⁶ In contrast, a critique of Pelagius and his doctrine was presented by the English scholar J.B. Mozley who argued that "The philosophical fault of Pelagianism was that it went upon ideas without considering facts."³⁷ As a riposte to Mozley's comment, John Ferguson (above-mentioned) was quick to point out that Pelagius outdid Augustine by maintaining a strong belief with regard to personal responsibility. Rather than completely relying on God for the forgiveness of sins as Augustine believed, Ferguson saw in Pelagianism an opportunity to acquire self-knowledge, maturity, and spiritual growth.³⁸

Conclusion

Branded heretical doctrines under the wary and watchful eye of the Roman Catholic Church, Arianism and Pelagianism have in their own unconventional and defiant ways brought about great theological debates regarding the nature and divinity of the Triune God and his relationship to man and the natural world. As one compares the two *heretical* doctrines, one notices that with great risk, a challenge was launched against the political and theological orthodoxy of a newly formed and increasingly powerful Church. Where Arianism questioned the intermutual relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son, Pelagianism tested the limits of man's human and spiritual potential with regard to living a non-dependent, responsible, and co-creative relationship with God the Father. As they attempted to formulate a rational albeit controversial religio-spiritual interpretation of the world in which they lived, Arius and Pelagius' unorthodox beliefs, teachings, and practice brought upon them the wrath of those most threatened by their disobedient and destabilizing ways. By bringing into question and doubt firmly held interpretations of scripture,

33 Thomas Bokenkotter, *The Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 82-83.

34 John Ferguson, *Pelagius. A Historical and Theological Study*. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 115.

35 Robert R. Williams, *A Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 159.

36 John Ferguson, *Pelagius. A Historical and Theological Study*. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1956), 182.

37 Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 182.

38 Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 182.

the divine nature of God, and the interdependent relationship that exists between God and man, Arius and Pelagius were ultimately condemned, censured, and banished for their *heretical* views, and for having dared to challenge the authority of the Roman Empire and the orthodoxy of the one and only Church.

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