MILTON'S PHILOSOPHY

If one should wish to characterise Milton, it would be difficult indeed to find a name that would better express the impression which his personality and life make on us than that of the hero of one of his great poems, *Samson Agonistes*. Samson, the lonely giant. Samson, the Champion. The Champion of a great cause, seemingly doomed to ruin, but too vital, too essentially necessary for mankind, to die.

A lonely champion he was. No matter whether one asks: Who was Milton? Or: What was Milton? The answer is always and only: Milton. And if you inquire: Who was standing by him in the great struggle of his life? the answer is: nobody; it was only Milton, just Milton. Of him can be said what we read of the son of Hagar: his hand was against everybody and everybody's hand was against him.

But what party, what school, what church, what current of thought, can now claim him as their own, now that the fumes of faction and of strife around him have lifted? The answer must once more be: nobody—though, of course, his views are more closely related to one current of thought than to another.

Nor has the strife around him wholly ceased. For, though Milton's own struggle has been over long since, there is still a struggle going on about him, over him so to say, and lately new oil was poured into the flames of this controversy.

For it is remarkable indeed, how this great figure has attracted people's attention like a magnet, throughout the centuries. He is sitting in majesty on the summit of the English Helicon, sometimes veiled by clouds, sometimes displaying all the glory of his dazzling countenance—and then some say: he belongs to us, and others: no, he is of our kin; but there are also those who grimly turn their backs on him and growl: Let him be; he only belongs to himself, or at best he is one of the relics of a time and faith that has no longer any message for us. Let him be.

However, the number of these grumblers is continually decreasing in our days, and you and I are not among them. Yet, we do not want to claim him as our own, but to understand him better, this giant who strides over the tops of Parnassus in superhuman splendour.

For two reasons I should like to say a few words about him. The first is, that I was repeatedly struck by the fact that in some writers there is a tendency to put several of the repugnant qualities they blame him for, on to Calvinism, and yet to hold, on the other hand, that he is not really a Calvinist at all.

And the second is, that criticism has been very busy about him of late and has endeavoured to place him in a new light, so that Professor Denis Saurat of Bordeaux even feels himself entitled to speak of a " nouvelle école " in Miltonic studies.

The first question that presents itself is: Was Milton a Calvinist, yes or no ? And the answer must so unreservedly be in the negative, that one is inclined to wonder how it is possible that the legend of Milton being the Calvinistic poet *par excellence* should have been able to hold its own notwithstanding all the outstanding facts that prove the contrary. In my opinion we must look for the cause of this in the words *Calvinist* and *Puritan* being often interchanged, though their meanings are widely different.

Now, if a man falls into that error, it is easy to explain that he is unstable in the application of the name of Calvinist to Milton, because Milton was undoubtedly a Puritan but as undoubtedly no Calvinist.

Even if one does not take the word Puritan in its historical sense, that is in the meaning it conveyed in the heroic age of Puritanism in England in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, even then it will not do to treat the terms *Puritan* and *Calvinist* as if they were synonyms.

For if one takes the word Puritan in its present popular sense, denoting a man of stern views who has forsworn what he considers to be the idle pleasures of the world, if, I say, one takes the word Puritan in that meaning, it does not only apply to Calvinists, but also, for example, to orthodox Baptists and Quakers. Floyd Dell even calls Upton Sinclair a Puritan.

And as to the *historical* meaning of the word Puritan—for which we must turn to the England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—I tried to give a brief outline of that in my *Butler, the Author of Hudibras*, 1923 (pp. 113-131). I can only say a few words about it here.

As you all know, the word Puritan means properly speaking something like " Purifier ": the Puritans were people who wanted to purify the Church of England from what, in their

opinion, savoured too much of the Church of Rome. Some of them remained in the Anglican Church; others left it or were ousted from it, and formed different groups: Presbyterians, Independents or Congregationalists, Millenarians, Quakers, etc. All these were Puritans—but only the Presbyterians and, to a certain extent, the Independents or Congregationalists proper, might be called Calvinists.

All were Puritans, for all maintained that the Bible was their *only* guide for their faith and their lives, thus opposing subjection to the priesthood and to ecclesiastical authority, all the while laying more stress on ethics than on dogma,[1] which, I think, is characteristically English: historically Puritanism is a typical English phenomenon! But by no means were all of them Calvinists, that is adherents of the doctrine of the election of sinners to eternal life by the free grace of God, this in connection with the doctrine of the fundamental and unmitigated sinfulness of human nature in *all* men before their regeneration, and the perseverance of redeemed man in grace.

And among all these we also find John Milton. Doubtless a genuine Puritan, not only in the sense indicated above, but also in the *political* sense of the word, as he belonged to the party that defended the rights and the liberties of the people against the encroachments made on them by the crown, especially by Charles I.

However much the Puritans might differ, there was one mental attitude which was characteristic of them all: absolute subjection to the Word of God on the one hand, and a strong desire for liberty, a strong impatience of all arbitrary bonds laid on them by man, on the other.

And that is also John Milton's attitude: "The rule and canon of faith, therefore, is Scripture alone," he says in his *De Doctrina Christiana*[2]; and his whole life has been one great struggle for liberty, personal, religious and civil liberty, the liberty of speech and of printing, and what not.

So it is quite sure that Milton was a Puritan. But as certain it is that he was not a Calvinist. He could not even agree with the Nicene Creed. For he had decidedly Arian principles. Speaking of the relation between God the Father and the Son

[1] See especially the "conduct-books" of the Puritans, on which *Schücking* rightly lays so much stress in his *Die Familie im Puritanismus* (1929).

[2] *De Doctrina Christiana* in Bohn's Standard Library, IV., p. 445.

of God, he says: "(God) was properly the Father of the Son made of His own substance. Yet it does not follow from hence that the Son is co-essential with the Father, for then the title of Son would be least of all applicable to Him, since He Who is properly the Son is not coeval with the Father, much less of the same numerical essence; otherwise the Father and the Son would be one person."[1] And further: "If God be one God, and that one God the Father, and if notwithstanding the Son be also called God, the Son must have received the name and nature of Deity from God the Father, in conformity with His decree and will."[2]

Thus Milton expresses himself in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. And *Paradise Lost* is in accordance with this. For that matter, we can generally say that the views which Milton expounds more systematically in his Latin treatise on the Christian Doctrine, also make themselves felt, but in the manner of the poet now, of course, in his three great poems: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The limited range of this paper does not allow me to point this out in detail. That it should be so, is not to be wondered at, as all the works mentioned took existence in Milton's last, mature period.

In his youth he was much more orthodox. In that splendid hymn *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, which he wrote when he was twenty-one, he sings of the new-born King:

> That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
> And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
> Wherwith he wont at Heav'ns high Councel-Table
> To sit *the midst of Trinal Unity*,
> He laid aside;

so then he still believes in the Trinity, whereas afterwards, as we saw, he considered Christ's godhead only as conferred on Him by decree of the Father. And to the Holy Ghost, I would add now, he assigns an even more inferior place: "The Holy Spirit," he says in *De Doctrina Christiana*, "inasmuch as he is a minister of God, and therefore a creature, was created or produced of the substance of God, not by a natural necessity, but by the free will of the agent, probably before the foundations of the world were laid, but later than the Son, and far inferior to Him."[3]

[1] *De Doctrina Christiana* in Bohn's Standard Library, IV., p. 83.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

The evolution in Milton's views in this matter is typical of the whole complex of his thoughts. This strong individualist, who said, "The rule and canon of faith is Scripture alone," but added, "every man is to decide for himself through its aid, under the guidance of the Spirit of God," built up for himself a personal philosophy, which was entirely and exclusively his own, and for which there is only one suitable name: Miltonism.[1]

I therefore want to make it understood that, unless I expressly state the opposite, I take Milton as he is in his mature, later period, after the terrible downfall of the Puritans.

I said that Milton was no Calvinist. That he was not even, on the whole, orthodox in the ordinary acceptation of the word. Witness his denial of the doctrine of the Trinity.

And in his views of the origin of things he is doubtless influenced by Neo-Platonic and Pantheistic notions as they had got embedded in the Renaissance. In his chapter on Creation in *De Doctrina Christiana* it becomes clear that he thinks the orthodox notion of Creation—that God should have produced matter, forms, bodies, out of nothing—quite absurd. Equally impossible it seems to him that matter should have existed from eternity, coeval with God Himself. So in his opinion there is only one possibility left: everything has emanated from God. And "since therefore," he concludes, "it has been satisfactorily proved, under the guidance of Scripture, that God did not produce everything out of nothing, but of Himself, I proceed to consider the necessary consequence of this doctrine, namely, that if all things are not only from God, but of God, no created thing can be finally annihilated."[2]

Another consequence of this theory is, according to Milton, that "the original matter of which we speak, is not to be looked upon as an evil or trivial thing, but as intrinsically good, and the chief productive stock of every subsequent good."[3] Which is, of course, decidedly *anti*-Neo-Platonic.

This point of view involves that there could not be any essential difference between spirit and matter. And it was bound to lead Milton to the denial of an essential distinction between soul and body. When he has pointed to the words of

[1] See also Paul Chauvet, *La Religion de Milton*, Paris, 1909.

[2] *De Doctrina Christiana* in B. IV., 181.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

the Bible telling us that "man became a living soul," he goes on by saying: "Hence it may be inferred, that man is a living being, intrinsically and properly one and individual, not compound or separable, not, according to the common opinion, made up and framed of two distinct and different natures, as of soul and body—but that the whole man is soul and the soul man, that is to say, a body, or substance individual, animated, sensitive, and rational."[1]

Consequently Milton rejected the orthodox doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which had so emphatically been maintained by his older contemporary, Descartes, with whom he on the other hand agrees in laying much stress on *reason* as the guiding principle of man, as abundantly appears from his great poems and from *De Doctrina Christiana*, passim, and was also drawn attention to by Mr. Denis Saurat in his *Pensée de Milton*.

Milton, then, rejects the orthodox doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Or had we better say that he *proclaims* the immortality of the body? This is not quite a paradox, as he sees no essential difference between body and soul. It is true Milton uses the terms "body" and "soul," but then he understands by "soul" rather, as he puts it, "an inspiration of some divine virtue fitted for the exercise of life and reason, and infused into the organic body."[2]

It goes without saying that, according to Milton, body and soul die together. That manifestation of the unity "man" which we call soul, falls asleep at death, and awakes again when in the day of resurrection the body rises from the grave. Milton, therefore, was in his later years a Mortalist or "Soulsleeper" as these people were then called.

It is remarkable that Milton in his definition of man, quoted above, literally uses the words of another contemporary of his, John Hobbes, the great prophet of Materialism, who also calls man "a body or substance individual, animated, sensitive and rational." Indeed, in his cosmological conceptions and their consequences he doubtless got on materialistic lines, however great the difference may be between Milton's general train of thought and that of Hobbes, seeing that Milton started from a purely Theistic Spiritualism and treated matter only as something secondary.

[1] *De Doctrina Christiana* in B. IV., p. 188.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

All this is sufficient to prove that Milton was not even orthodox in the accepted sense of the word.[1] And from the Calvinists he differed in particular by his denial of the doctrine of predestination and his recognition (to a certain extent) of free will in man.

"I allow that future events which God has foreseen, will happen certainly, but not of necessity," he says in his *De Doctrina Christiana*.[2] And further: "It seems, then, that there is no *particular* predestination or election, but only *general*—or in other words, that the privilege belongs to all who heartily believe, and continue in their belief—that none are predestinated or elected irrespectively, e.g. that Peter is not elected as Peter, or John as John, but inasmuch as they are believers and continue in their belief."[3]

"It is much better," Milton maintains, "to allow to man some portion of free will in respect of good works, or at least of good endeavours"; this is much better "ad asserendam justitiam Dei," which expression reminds us at once of the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, where he even introduces a Latinism apparently derived from it, namely *assert* in the sense of *vindicate*:

> That to the height of this great argument
> I may *assert* eternal Providence
> And justify the ways of God to men.

It is then, as I said, according to Milton better to allow some portion of good will to man "ad asserendam justitiam Dei," for, he observes, "if He (=God) inclines the will of man to moral good or evil according to His own pleasure, and then rewards the good and punishes the wicked, the course of equity seems to be disturbed."[4]

Milton's attitude towards predestination and free will, of course, has its necessary consequences for his standpoint as to the perseverance of man in grace, and other matters of which I cannot treat here at any length. It is evident that in these things Milton took sides with the Arminians, whose great advocate in England, the famous Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, he had formerly attacked so fiercely.

[1] Orthodox in religion is "holding correct or the currently accepted opinions on religious doctrine, not heretical or independent-minded or original; generally accepted as right or true, in harmony with what is authoritatively established, approved, conventional." (C.O.D.)

[2] B. IV., p. 41.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

In his views of Baptism Milton is a Baptist[1]; by setting, in practice, more value on the "inner light" than on Scripture (though he declares to accept only the lead of the latter) and also by rejecting a regular clergy he joins hands with the Quakers[2]; in his looking forward to the Millennium he proves himself a Millenarian; in his notions of church-rule he is more independent than the Independents, more individualistic than the greatest Individualists.[3]

Indeed, did I say too much when I maintained that Milton cannot be included in any special school of thought, in any definitely labelled religious persuasion? If we want to indulge our passion for labelling, we had better put his philosophy all by itself, and call it Miltonism—with one adherent: John Milton.

John Milton was a Puritan among the Puritans, but certainly no Calvinist. There can be no doubt about this. And yet it is the confusion of these two names with reference to him which is, in my opinion, greatly responsible for the frequent misunderstanding of Milton's position in the currents of thought of his time.

Of course, Milton's thought was not without any connection with Calvinism. For some ten years (±1636—±1646) he had even been considered to take his stand with the Presbyterians, who were certainly as Calvinistic in their views as any among the Puritans. And afterwards, in his last, great, mature period, the period of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*, he was not quite severed from that past. But more we cannot say for his Calvinism.

The Swede Liljegren, one of the most talented Miltonic scholars of the "New School," also confuses Puritanism and Calvinism. In his *Studies in Milton* he says in the introduction, after first giving a sketch of Calvinism as he sees it: "An examination of Milton's Works must undoubtedly start from the point of view offered. An individualist, self-respecting even to the point of self-complacency, deeply contemptuous of disagreeable fellow-beings, active, an innovator, revolutionary, caste-hating, facing the future, he exhibits the features pointed out,"[4] that is, of Calvinism.

[1] *De Doctrina Christiana* in B. IV., pp. 404-5.
[2] *Ibid.*, 448-9, 432-6.
[3] *Ibid.*, 452-470.
[4] S. Liljegren, Studies in Milton (1918), Introduction, p. xix.

And then he adds in a note: "Of course, this does not affect his position as advanced *beyond* Puritanism." Here, too, the terms Calvinism and Puritanism are evidently interchanged. I can only observe in passing that Liljegren entertains strangely distorted views of Calvin and Calvinism, which display an almost childish ignorance as far as this important part of his subject is concerned.[1]

And then it further comes to this, that the many disagreeable characteristics which Liljegren thinks he sees in Milton, such as his strong ego-centric tendencies, his pride, his untrustworthiness, his Machiavelism, are all characteristic features of Calvinism, or at least fully reconcilable with it; so that if we allowed ourselves to be impressed by Liljegren's reasoning we should think that Milton was a man of many vices, and that these vices were largely to be imputed to Calvinism.

Now some years ago, I already tried to point out how distorted Professor Liljegren's notions of Calvinism are.[2] And moreover, Milton is not a Calvinist at all, as I think I have proved. So that Dr. Liljegren's argumentation in this matter does not hold good. This seems to me a cardinal mistake in his treatment of Milton, however clever a piece of work his book on Milton may be in many other respects.

Speaking of Liljegren, I have come to what Denis Saurat calls the "Nouvelle école" in Miltonic studies. To this "New School" may be said to belong, among others, the Swede Liljegren, the Frenchman Denis Saurat, the German Mutschmann and some American critics like Hanford, Greenlaw, Thompson and Baldwin.

Of these the Americans and the Frenchman have done—or tried to do—the more *positive* work. Liljegren and Mutschmann have been the severest critics of Milton's person and character.

Dr. Saurat states in the *Revue germanique* that the Americans and he, though they have generally come to the same result, have worked quite independently of each other.

As to the standpoint of this American-French group, and what has led to it, I would venture to make some observations. I see Milton and their attitude towards him as follows:

Milton may on important points disagree with the current Orthodox notions, yet there is no doubt but he himself

[1] See, e.g., pp. xv., xvi., xvii., xviii., xix. of the same work.

[2] Neophilologus, 1924, pp. 281-3.

deliberately and decidedly wants to found himself on the Bible. In his poetry and in his prose-writings he generally takes the Bible as the basis of his thoughts, according to the strongly personal insight he has into it; he paraphrases the Bible; he argues from the Bible; he exults or thunders in the language of the Bible; in a word, as a genuine Puritan he feels and thinks and speaks in the spirit of the Bible, and that, after the fashion of the Puritans of his time, in an Old-Testamentic strain. But, in addition to this, he is also a man of culture, which then meant a child of the Renaissance. But mind, this is something additional; it is not the principal thing.

But this Milton, the Puritan, seems so very far removed from modern thought! The story which Milton took from the Bible and made the foundation of his *Paradise Lost* is according to Saurat, "une légende absurde et choquante pour le bon sens."[1] And Puritanism was considered to be necessarily "kulturfeindlich." Wrongly, as I tried to prove in my *Butler, the Author of Hudibras*, 1923 (pp. 117-122).

Consequently, for some time Milton seemed to have almost been mummified, and Sir Walter Raleigh called *Paradise Lost* "a monument to dead ideas."

But he was mistaken. It was no more than an apparent death. Milton's sublime epic in which he wants to "justifie the ways of God to men" is full of eternal truths which will never grow antiquated; full of what is truly human, seen in the light of eternity.

This was felt again in our time. As, however, Milton the Puritan seemed so ungenial to modern thought, but Milton the humanist was a kindred spirit, it was only natural that the child of the Renaissance in Milton should grow and grow in the estimation of modern minds, whereas the old Puritan should dwindle to shrivelled insignificance. "C'est véritablement le Zeitgeist qui's occupait de Milton," Saurat rightly observes.[2] Thus one has come to see the great Puritan, who was influenced by the Renaissance, as the incarnation of the spirit of the Renaissance in whom some vestiges of Christianity were left. As Saurat puts it in an article on "La Conception Nouvelle de Milton" in the *Revue germanique*: "Il ne faut pas oublier, dans la recherche de tant d'influences diverses, que, malgré tout,

[1] D. Saurat, *La Pensée de Milton*, p. 137.
[2] *Revue germanique*, 1923, p. 115.

au centre de la pensée de Milton, il reste une forme du christianisme, quelque évoluée qu'elle soit ; la théorie de la chute et de la régénération."[1] It is true, three years before (1920) the same Saurat had written in his *La Pensée de Milton* : " Après la crise passionnelle de son marriage et après ses expériences politiques, Milton's est tourné tout entier vers le christianisme,"[2] and " Le christianisme et la Bible out aidé sa pensée même à se former,"[2] but in the course of the same work from which I quote this, he had doubted if Milton himself really believed in the " mythology " of his *Paradise Lost*, and accordingly he says in 1923, that Milton as a man and as a philosopher is first of all a son of the Renaissance : " Au centre de la personnalité, comme de la pensée de Milton, il y a l'homme de la Renaissance avant tout : l'homme dont le but est la libre expansion du moi, et qui prend partout où il les trouve les arguments qui lui servent à se justifier. Le fond de la pensée de Milton, c'est donc le matérialisme panthéiste et l'individualisme de la Renaissance, que Milton a pris dans le milieu cultivé de son époque, et qui était l'expression naturelle de sa personalité."[3]

I need hardly repeat after what I have said, that I cannot agree with Saurat in his view of Milton as stated above, though I recognise a strong Renaissance influence on Milton. A careful and—as I hope—unbiassed perusal of Milton's work has led me to the conclusion that the web of his thought was a Puritan warp with partly a Renaissance woof, and not a humanistic texture with some stray Puritan threads.

A characteristic instance of the tendency to modernise Milton, I find on page 158 of Saurat's book. Milton says in *De Doctrina Christiana* that man's covenant with God is not put an end to by death. And then he adds that if there were no resurrection, the good would be the most miserable of all men, and the bad, who have the best of it in this life, would be the happiest.

Now Saurat calls this an " argument kantien de la raison pratique."

Well, if this is a " Kantian argument," it is only a proof how " modern " the Bible is, and more particularly St. Paul, for from him Milton has, of course, borrowed this thought, which

[1] *Revue germanique*, 1923, p. 130.
[2] Saurat, *La Pensée de Milton*, p. 279.
[3] *Revue germanique*, 1923, p. 130.

he expresses almost literally in the words of St. Paul himself, as everybody who will take the trouble to look up the fifteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians can ascertain.

Nor can I omit observing that the proposition which the French-American group of the "New School" lay so much stress on—Milton a son of the Renaissance—is not quite new after all. They emphasise it unduly. But Stopford Brooke already said of Milton: "He summed up in himself the learned and artistic influences of the English Renaissance, and handed them on to us."[1] He added, however: "He represents Puritan England, and the whole spirit of Puritanism, from its cradle to its grave."[2]

I cannot enter now into Milton's "mysticism," nor into the influence of the "Hermetic Philosophy," the Rosicrucians and the Cabala on Milton, nor into Liljegren's and Mutschmann's treatment of Milton either, because this lies outside the range of my paper.

This much is certain, that nobody who wants to make any serious study of Milton can henceforth neglect the work of Saurat and that of Liljegren; Mutschmann can hardly be taken seriously—I mean on Milton, of course. He is too fantastically fierce in his onslaught.

Of course it is interesting to compare the different conclusions at which these three scholars have arrived on special points. There is, for example, the influence of the Stoa on Milton. Saurat says: "Le stoïcisme, influence certaine, n'est cependant qu'un élément, qui, d'ailleurs, a pu aussi bien parvenir à Milton par le néoplatonisme ancien qui l'avait absorbé en partie, ou par la Renaissance"[3]; Liljegren proclaims him to be "less of a Christian than a disciple of Roman Stoicism"[4] and thinks that "Roman Stoicism (is) the chief foundation of his modes of thought and action"[5]; while Mutschmann throughout his strange book, *Der andere Milton*, treats Milton as a heathen Stoic, if not as a devil with Stoic tendencies.

No doubt Saurat is nearest the truth here,[6] and this is in accordance with our conclusion that Milton was a very

[1] Stopford Brooke, *English Literature from A.D. 670 to A.D. 1832*, p. 112.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[3] *Revue germanique*, 1923, p. 130.
[4] Liljegren, *Studies in Milton*, p. xl.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[6] *Paradise Lost*, XII, 98; "Virtue, which is reason."

individualistic Puritan, partly also because there was a strong humanistic strain in him; an independent thinker, though not "un penseur original de premier ordre," to use Saurat's words; no Calvinist; a lonely champion of liberty; a great man, with great defects no doubt, yet one of the best that were ever given to mankind, and in particular—as Milton himself would say[1]—to God's Englishmen.

The revendication of Milton's place as a teacher of mankind in his great poetry is partly due to the work of the "New School." Mr. Hanford, the American critic, proclaims *Paradise Lost* to be "richer in human truth than anything in English imaginative literature outside Shakespeare."[2] This is indeed a remarkable change for the better from Sir W. Raleigh's "monument to dead ideas," though it cannot be denied that some of the "New School" read their *own* ideas into Milton.

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[1] *Areopagitica*, ed. Dent. p. 54.
[2] *Revue germanique*, 1923, p. 115.