

Second letter from Arthur to Mary Prior, 29 April, 1945¹

Letter 132²

Sun 29/4/45
NZ 421486
ACI Prior (N.V)
No. 5 Squadron
NZAPO 361.

Darling da,

I gave you in my last an account of the Jesuit antecedent of Edward's theory of the will. I mentioned in the course of it that even before Edwards some Calvinists sided with the Jesuits, & it's worth noting who they were. Barth points out in his *Dogmatic II/I* (the first half of the volume "Of God" – not the half about Predestination, but the previous half about God's "attributes", in which he has quite a long historical discussion of the "scientia media" theory when discussing God's "Constancy & Omnipotence")³ that the "Jesuit Calvinists" included Gomarus the early 17th century Dutch supralapsarian who horrified Arminius into abandoning Calvinism altogether. Supralapsarianism is the doctrine that God not only decided to permit the fall & then to make what He could of a fallen world, but permitted the fall in order to have a fallen world & do what He had decided to do in any case (save some men by His mercy & damn others by His justice) – the theory that He not only preferred to work with a fallen world, but deliberately engineered a fallen world. The inner connection between this theory & Molinism is not [2] easy to establish; but it is plain that supralapsarianism hinges on the belief that God could not exercise His mercy & His punitive justice unless the world was fallen, & so had to have a fall once He had decided to exercise these attributes – God's hands are in some sense tied by the outward connections of things, as they are in Molinism. And supralapsarianism is obviously one form of the theory that this world with all its evil, &c, is still the best one that God could have made, because if there hadn't been evil He wouldn't have been able to show us His mercy, &c.; & another form of the same theory is the doctrine that it would have been a poor world without free will, so it's a good job God took the risk involved in that, & once again we can see how it may be the best He could have done. Both theories are forms Leibnitzian (or as Witherspoon would say Beltistian) "optimism." And both suggest, as "optimism" always does, that poor old God couldn't do any better because His hands are tied by unnamed forces which seem sometimes to be more powerful than He is. There are plenty of hints of this in Melville too. – We may note that Arminius in this matter continued to be a "Gomarist"⁴ after he left the Calvinist ranks altogether; he ran right into the arms of the very thing [3] he thought he was running away from. That's the kind of trick of fate Melville delighted in telling us about.

Edward's other "antecedent" (though once again I'm pretty sure there was no actual indebtedness) was John Cameron. Cameron held that God did not indulge in "direct action" on our wills, but only on our intellects – He allowed men to see just as much as He wanted them to see, & then the will automatically acted accordingly. I've noted this theory here because of the "intellectualism" of it, which I think Edwards shares, but Melville doesn't – Melville knows that the will doesn't always follow the suggestions of the

¹ Editors' note: This letter has been edited by David Jakobsen. It is part of the Ann Prior Collection, kept at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 12.558-4, folder 3, April, item 130. The letter is written on standard writing paper from 'National Patriotic Fund Board for New Zealand'.

² Editor's note: Arthur Prior has numbered his letters to Mary and uses these numbers for reference.

³ Editor's note: Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics*, II.1 pp. 569-586.

⁴ Editor's note: A follower of the Dutch theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) who was a supralapsarian and was a strong opponent of Arminians.

reason, even the “reason” in Edward’s sense of the calculation of what course of action will be most profitable. The Jesuits, I should say, knew as Cameron & Edwards did not, that human nature has other strings which a skilfull & unscrupulous man can play upon; & Melville knew that too.⁵ – It’s worth [4] noting also that one of Edwards’s followers, Samuel Hopkins, produced a very shallow hedonistic version of Christianity, technically orthodox, but all resting on the view that everybody from God downwards seeks a maximum of “happiness”, & Christianity is to be commended as a great design for “happiness.” He was another of these guys who deny that the “instinct of self-destruction” is as “natural” to human beings as the “instinct of self-preservation” (to use the terms of Dostoievsky’s “The Idiot”)*⁶. There is an obvious continuity between the school of Edwards & the school of Emerson – Hopkins is the connecting link. Melville here was more Calvinistic than Edwards as well as than Emerson; & healthily so.

Well, Edwards certainly didn’t deliberately set out to be a Jesuit or an Arminian or a follower of John Cameron or an ancestor of Emerson or any sort of “modernist”. Just how did he achieve it all the same? In the usual way – the Jesuit way. He thought he had set of stock positions to defend, & didn’t dream of departing from any of the positions themselves; but he thought he had discovered a new defence of them that made all previous defences superfluous. Gone are all [5] the old laborious attempts to prove that the Arminians are wrong; instead, we have a short & simple proof that nobody really is or can be an Arminian. Their own speech betrays them – they no more believe in free will, in any sense, inconsistent with predestination, than he does. And how does. And how successful he was here may be judged by Johnson’s fumbling “answer” to him in the conversation with Boswell. Johnson says that a man may have free will, & yet another may have a pretty fair idea of his character & so of what he will do in a given situation. But let “character” = “system of motives”, & Johnson is just saying the same as Edwards. An earlier Calvinist would have known the Arminians admit this much, & the Jesuits too; but what of it? – That’s not the argument.

But the reaction to Edwards is more surprising. Despite all this “moderation”, not to say betrayal, in Edwards’s Calvinism, he rapidly acquired the reputation of being the “worst” Calvinist of them all. Perhaps it is not really to be wondered at – there is something about his method that is very like his theory. He will not be content with externally compelling us to be Calvinists, but reaches inside us to claim that we are already his “accomplices” – he will be easy with us; he will let us go our own way; he will let us talk, & not [6] interrupt us with Scripture or tradition; we are as free in our relation to him & his arguments as we are in our relation to God; but he can afford to do all this because he is confident that when we have been going our own way” he will be able to show us, just whenever he likes, that we have really been going his way all the time. And this raises doubts about our freedom that we never had before – we thought we knew when we were being interfered with & when we were not, but from this sort of interference there is no escape. It is put forward as something more acceptable than “fatalism”, more acceptable than tyranny; but it is worse than fatalism, worse than tyranny. That is Melville’s constant reaction; & there’s a hint of it in Boswell. To be in chains is bad; but to be in chains where are hidden from us to be in chains even when we imagine we are free – that is the worst slavery of all, & gets beneath our skins properly. It is a great swindle on God’s part – it makes Him not only an absolute monarch in the universe, but a Machiavellian one into the bargain; He doesn’t even think us worth using His firm hand on all the Time – He can just sit back & let our own weaknesses do His work for Him; & then of course we will take the blame for His misrule (for how can we call it His misrule? – we are talking about the things He has left us free to do ourselves), [7] & so will be more bound to Him than ever, bound by our own free decision, like Starbuck to Ahab. “Rebellion” against

⁵ Editor’s note: Written and crossed out: “Well, Edwards certainly wasn’t consciously being a Jesuit or an Arminian or a disciple of John Cameron or any sort of “modernist”. How did he get himself into such a position without knowing it? In the usual way – the Jesuit way. He thought he

⁶ Written in the margin: ”In England the classic discussion of this point is Butler v. Hobbes, Butler pointing out that, despite Mr. Hobbes’s emphasis on our “selfishness”, men in general aren’t “selfish” enough.

Him now is rebellion against ourselves. It is as in Germany – “There are no innocents among the German people.” (Himmler). That is the picture which the theology of Edwards evokes in Melville.

There is one addition I can make to your list, in one of your letters, of “Gnostic” references in “Moby Dick”. This is the reference to the Oplites, in Ch. 40 (“Moby Dick”) – “That intangible malignity Which the ancient Oplites of the east revered in their statute devil.” And there is a fairly simple connection established between Gnosticism & Calvinism in Maurice’s “Theological Essays”, I think in the essay on “The Eternal Son”. The Gnostics made a sharp distinction between the “élite” who understood their mysteries, & the common herd who couldn’t be expected to get any further than ordinary Christianity. Maurice sees a touch of this in Calvinist language about “believers & unbelievers”; though less of it in the earlier Calvinist language about “the elect”, which refers all distinctions back to God, instead of focussing on the differences between people in themselves. I think I have underlined the passage in red ink. There is Gnosticism in Melville’s constant suggestion of universal [8] deception, as in “The Whiteness of the Whale”. And his unbelief is a kind of Gnosticism – it is the “Truth” to which ordinary mortals cannot penetrate, & which would terrify & destroy them if they could. This is a sort of Freudian Gnosticism.

At a spare moment today, when I was in the middle of this letter, I heard a familiar voice at the door behind me, speaking to someone else in the dorm. Without turning round, I answered in myself – “No, I don’t think so. Arnold.” It was old Arnold Grubb from Wiggy – the guy that used to read philosophy on the sly, & borrowed books like Moore’s “Ethics” from me. We didn’t have very long to talk, but it was pleasant seeing him again. He’s not posted here, but was just paying a Sunday call. I wish I could call on you like that! Never mind, though; it will be more than just calling on you some day.

Heaps & heaps of love

- Arthur

Kisses to Martin.⁷

⁷ Editor’s note: ‘A.N.P’ is written in the bottom right corner.