

# Religion and divine justice in the work of Andrew Marvell

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October 2019

## **“What course and opinion he thinks the safest”**

I wrote my doctoral thesis about the theme of justice in Andrew Marvell’s works. That topic was suggested to me by reading a slim but stimulating book, John Klause’s *The Unfortunate Fall*.<sup>1</sup> Klause’s argument is that Marvell’s imagination was exercised by questions of divine justice and that he was temperamentally uninclined to find comfort in paradoxical notions like “the fortunate fall”: the idea that the disobedience of Adam and Eve was really a good thing because it gave humans an occasion to exercise our resilience, fortitude and similar virtues in the face of adversity, and created the conditions for God to show forgiveness and mercy towards his creation and to bestow grace on us.

In some ways, Klause’s argument seems surprising, even perverse. Marvell is a writer who clearly loves paradox and self-contradiction. He is the poet who suggests that eyes and tears take on each other’s properties, that subject and object are somehow the same, or difficult to distinguish from each other. I’ve suggested that he’s attracted to the idea that genders may refuse to remain distinct but instead blend into each other. Surely this is a writer who is comfortable with paradox? What attracted me was Klause’s claim that Marvell liked superficial paradoxes, ones that could ultimately be resolved. A paradox that was indicative of a fundamental contradiction

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<sup>1</sup>John Klause, *The Unfortunate Fall: Theodicy and the Moral Imagination of Andrew Marvell* (Archon Books, 1983).

in the nature of reality, on the other hand, was something that perturbed rather than stimulated him. Yes, this was the Marvell I thought I recognized.

Klause's book is concerned specifically with *theodicy*, that is with the defence of divine justice. I thought that Klause's exploration of Marvell's work revealed a concern with a broader and more abstract idea of justice. That was to be my thesis topic. A few weeks before I submitted my thesis, I realized with dismay that (because Nisus Writer Pro, which I was using to put together the final version, omits footnotes from the word count) my document was some 16,000 words over the maximum permissible length. I immediately cut the chapter on divine justice, reducing by half the overshoot of the target word count.

I was happy to lose that chapter because, in the course of writing it, I'd become convinced that where Marvell appeared to be writing directly on the subject of divine justice he was really concerned with something else. In *Remarks Upon a Late Disingenuous Discourse* (1678), which Klause describes as his "brief, informal theodicy" (Klause, p. 13), Marvell is not so much attempting to argue the merits of the doctrinal position advanced by John Howe (who wrote that it is possible to reconcile God's omniscience with his sincerity and benevolence) as to discourage Calvinist attacks on "middle way" thinkers like Howe and Richard Baxter. The views on divine justice expressed by Marvell in the *Remarks* are incidental, conventional and not in themselves very interesting. I took the view that his interventions in controversies about church government were certainly worth examining but that the place for such an examination was not in a thesis about the part played by justice in his works.

One of the examiners of my thesis felt very strongly that in leaving out the question of religion I'd made a big mistake. (Not big enough to prevent me from getting my doctorate, I'm relieved to say.) I said at the time that I intended to revise and publish my chapter on religion, separately from the thesis. It's taken me seven years to do so, but here it finally is.

Marvell's *Remarks Upon a Late Disingenuous Discourse* begins with a warning against being "tempted into Enquiries too curious after those things which the Wisdom of God hath left impervious to Humane Understanding, further than they are revealed" (*Prose Works*, 2:415). This is no mere rhetorical disparagement of the writer's capacity for the task in hand. Marvell adverts to a danger he seems to have taken seriously. He is also echoing, among other writers, Jean Calvin, of whom Brian G. Armstrong writes "if there is a persistent theme in Calvin it is that God's ways and thoughts are

incomprehensible to man without special revelation”.<sup>2</sup> In this “brief, informal theodicy”, Marvell was intervening in an argument between John Howe and Thomas Danson, both of whom were nonconformist ministers. Danson was a strict Calvinist, while Howe held beliefs similar to those of Richard Baxter, who variously spoke of reconciling Calvinism and Arminianism, and of having found a middle way between the two.<sup>3</sup> In intervening in this dispute, Marvell claimed to be motivated by nothing more than the desire “to hinder one Divine from offering violence to another” (*Prose Works*, 2:482).

That his theodicy is his final work, written in the last year of his life, does not tell us anything about the importance he attached to the subject. Marvell was in his mid-fifties and not, so far as we know, in bad health. There is no reason to suppose that he believed that this would be his last opportunity to write. Of more significance is the fact that it was an *incidental* theodicy: like all of his controversial works, it is an intervention in a quarrel already under way and was evidently not written with the aim of expounding general principles. Not only that, but for much of the work’s length, Marvell seems to be more concerned with the manner in which the controversy is conducted than with its matter: as N H Keeble makes clear, “he ‘intermeddles’ ‘not as an Opinionist either way’ (p. 433). He commits himself no further than to say that he is (like Howe) for taking the commonsensical line and for restraining intellectual speculation” (*Prose Works*, 2:397–8). He is highly critical of Danson’s style of argument, his lack of decorum and his failure to attain “that Gravity, Humility, Meekness, Piety or Charity” (*Prose Works*, 2:474) that would be appropriate in a defence of “the cause of God”. For the most part, he does not reveal a disagreement from Danson on what might be called doctrinal grounds; this suggests that those points at which he does so deserve close scrutiny.

What is at issue in the dispute between Howe and Danson is the extent to which, and the manner in which, God *determines* the actions of his creatures; the controversy is couched in terms such as “Immediate Concourse”, “leading Concurrence” and “Predetermining Influence” (*Prose Works*, 2:457 and 2:469). (As the title of Howe’s *Letter* indicates, it was written to show

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<sup>2</sup>Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup>N. H. Keeble, “Introduction” to the *Remarks* in *Prose Works*, 2:388–90: “reconcilers”; and William Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium: Protestant Imperialism and the English Revolution* (Croom Helm, 1979), p. 128: “Baxter ... claimed to have steered a middle course between both extremes”.

that God's foreknowledge of human sins could be reconciled with his sincerity and wisdom in declaring his will that all should be saved. Howe published his *Post-script* because the *Letter* had been "mis-understood and misrepresented" and Danson's answer to both of Howe's publications focused on the particular issue of predetermination.)<sup>4</sup>

Danson takes the strict Calvinist view that God predetermines all our actions, including the most wicked, and that to hold otherwise is to deny his omnipotence. Howe is an adherent of the "middle way" advocated by, among others, Baxter and Amyraut. As has been mentioned, the middle way sought to steer a course between, or to reconcile, Arminianism and Calvinism. The Arminians, who had been defeated at the Synod of Dort, held that nobody was predestined either to salvation or damnation: although they recognized the importance of divine grace, they believed that it was both resistible and available to everybody. They thus stressed the importance of the individual's free will in determining whether that individual sinned or obeyed the law, repented and believed. This was unacceptable to Calvinists, in that it seemed to ascribe more efficacy to the will of individual sinners than to that of God. They, in contrast to the Arminians, believed that efficacious grace was given only to the elect and that it was irresistible. A common charge against the Calvinists was that their doctrine would make God the author of sin, since the sinner would have no freedom to act in any way other than that determined by God. Danson denied that he believed that God was the author of sin but, to maintain that position, he needed to insist on an apparently sophistical distinction between the act itself (which is predetermined) and its sinfulness.<sup>5</sup>

The first point at which Marvell touches on matters of belief, as distinct from Danson's aggressive manner of disputing, is where he objects to Danson's charge that, in rejecting universal predetermination, Howe is effectively embracing Roman Catholicism (*Prose Works* 2:475 et seq.). In an echo of his criticisms, two years earlier, of "creeds and impositions", Marvell rejects the implication that belief in "the Predeterminative Con-course" is required of Protestants: "this matter has been left entire to every man's

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<sup>4</sup>[John Howe,] *The Reconcilableness of God's Prescience of the Sins of Men with the Wisdom and Sincerity of His Counsels, Exhortations, and Whatsoever Other Means He Uses to Prevent Them* (1677); John Howe, *A Post-script to the Late Letter of the Reconcilableness of God's Prescience* (1677), p. 1; and T[homas] D[anson], *De Causa Dei, or, A vindication of the common doctrine of Protestant divines concerning predetermination* (1678).

<sup>5</sup>Keeble, "Introduction", *Prose Work*, 2:395.

best Judgment, and one Party is as much Papist in it as the others” (*Prose Works* 2:478). To Danson’s allegations that Howe was trampling “upon the venerable dust” (p. 478) of Zwingli, Calvin, Beza and, among others, Bishop Davenant, Marvell had the following riposte:

Of these, whom *The Discourse* enumerates, Calvin and Beza, have been reproachfully charged by Bellarmine and other Romanists, as making God the Author of Sin: but yet there is not to be found in all their works an assertion of God’s Determinative Concurrence. (*Prose Works* 2:479)

The insistence on the compatibility of Howe’s views with the thinking of Calvin and Beza serves to distance Howe from Arminius as well as from Cardinal Bellarmine. Marvell goes on to cite Bishop Davenant’s Latin, which he translates as:

God, acting according to his Decree of Predestination, works these things in the first place, (to wit, Faith, Holiness and Perseverance) by the influence of his Efficacious Grace: but according to his Decree of Reprobation he acts nothing by which the Reprobate should be made worse. (*Prose Works* 2:479; original emphasis omitted)

God did not make the reprobate any worse (and did not exercise a determinative concurrence over their sinful actions) and so could not be said to be the author of sin. However, for Davenant, as apparently for Amyraut, it did not follow that the reprobate were in any better position as a result of their not being predestined to sin. It was possible to hold this belief and yet insist that nobody but the elect — who have received irresistible grace that is efficacious to ensure their salvation, which is therefore predestined — would be saved. As Lamont explains:

The crucial distinction for Davenant — as it was for Baxter — was between *sufficient* and *efficient* Grace. Thanks to *sufficient* Grace *all men* get the chance to be saved (which sounds Arminian); the fact that they will not take it up is a consequence of their human frailties without redeeming *efficient* Grace (which sounds Calvinist). The hypothetical nature of this universalism means

not only that it is not Arminianism; it is not even full “covenant” theology.<sup>6</sup>

The grace which is termed “sufficient” is sufficient to salvation only on a condition that will never in fact be fulfilled by any but the elect (whose satisfaction of the condition is predetermined). Lamont, who has made an extensive study of Baxter’s writings, tells us that Baxter similarly believed that “All men are redeemed in the sense that they live under the new law of Grace in virtue of Christ’s death, but only the Elect believe *and are saved*. The gift of faith is a fruit of election, not redemption . . .” (Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, p. 137).

Baxter distinguished between God’s roles as *rector* (Lamont uses the phrase “God’s judicial capacity”), in which he dealt fairly and equally with all humankind according to his law, and as “Benefactor” or *dominus*, in which he did not treat persons equally (and in which justice did not require him to do so; p. 241). If, as *dominus*, God gave some specially chosen people the assistance necessary to enable them to believe and repent, those who did not benefit from that assistance had no cause of complaint, because they were not thereby deprived of anything to which they had an entitlement. Without that special assistance, *nobody* would repent, not because God had predetermined us to obduracy, but because our own depravity leaves us without the ability to have faith or even to wish for our own repentance. If this was the Baxterian position, it was distinguishable from a more thoroughgoing Calvinism in only one significant respect: Baxter maintained that Christ died to atone for the sins of everybody; Calvinists insisted that he died only for the elect. According to hypothetical universalism, Christ’s atonement acquired for everybody the right to be saved on condition of faith and repentance but, in the event, nobody except the elect would meet this condition. This left all but the elect in the desperate situation of deserving condemnation for their own sinfulness, yet being quite unable to extract themselves from this state. It was because of this that Thomas Good described Baxter’s doctrine as “rigide Calvinism in a softer dresse”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, p. 129. When the terms “sufficient” and “efficient” (or “efficacious”) are used below with reference to grace, they are intended in the sense ascribed to Davenant by Lamont. The view that, although “sufficient” grace is afforded to everybody, only the elect will in fact be saved, is occasionally referred to below as “hypothetical universalism”.

<sup>7</sup>Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, p. 138, cites Good’s correspondence with Baxter.

In choosing to employ Davenant in particular in his defence of Howe against Danson, while asserting the compatibility of Howe's principles with those of Calvin and Beza, Marvell may be said to minimize the distance between Howe and the main stream of Calvinism, as Howe himself sought to do in his *A Post-script to the Late Letter of the Reconcilableness of God's Pre-science*, pp.38–8. A similarly minimalist approach to Howe's defence may be found in the other instance in which Marvell attacks Danson on doctrinal grounds. He is scathing about Danson's assertion that God determined "Innocent Adam's Will to the choice of eating the fruit that was forbidden him" (*Prose Works* 2:469). Danson had compared this predetermination to "a Writing Master's directing his scholar's hand". Marvell is affronted by the idea "that God should make an innocent Creature in this manner do a forbidden Act, for which so dreaded a vengeance was to issue upon him and his posterity". From this it is clear that Marvell firmly rejects the idea of "supralapsarian" predetermination, the claim that, even before he first sinned, Adam was incapable of acting except as God had determined. Adam was free to obey God's prohibition or not as he chose — and Marvell is indignant at the idea that God would have overborne that freedom and compelled him to disobey.

According to Bryan G. Armstrong, Beza believed in supralapsarian predetermination, though Amyraut took the view that Calvin had not done so. It is certainly a major point of controversy but Marvell's statement of it leaves open the possibility that all of Adam's progeny were constrained from choosing salvation, without the assistance of efficacious grace, in a way that Adam himself was not. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve may have been the only truly "innocent" people ever to have existed, and the only ones to have had a truly free "Will". The constraint operating on their descendants was not predetermination to wicked actions but rather a depravity and weakness, consequent on the sin of Adam and Eve, that rendered us unable to choose repentance and faith. This seems to have been Davenant's belief, and Lamont tells us that Baxter too believed that those who did not benefit from election, though not predestined to damnation, lacked the ability to avail of the atonement that Christ had made for all. Amyraut expressed a similar opinion. Benjamin Myers tells us that according to Amyraut "the grace of salvation is 'universal to all men' but becomes effective only if human beings fulfill the condition of responding to Christ in faith . . . — and only the elect

members of the human race can in fact fulfill this condition.”<sup>8</sup>

If these statements are correct, the “middle way” seems less concerned to ameliorate the bleakness of the Calvinist view of the human condition than to argue, on frankly legalistic grounds, that one can admit the bleakness of the condition without thereby impugning God’s justice. In Chapter 3 of my thesis I suggested that the effect of Marvell’s Hastings elegy was ultimately to demonstrate that confidence in divine justice was far from being a comforting belief. The Amyraldian idea of the “hypothetical” nature of universal atonement seems to lead to a similar conclusion.

Are we to conclude from Marvell’s alignment with Howe, and from his employment against Danson of arguments that minimized the distance between Howe’s position and mainstream Calvinism, that he too was an adherent of Calvinism in the “softer dresse” of hypothetical universalism? The evidence certainly tends to point to Marvell’s closeness to Richard Baxter’s doctrinal position. The first to have noticed the similarity seems to have been Caroline Robbins.<sup>9</sup> William Lamont has argued the case less tentatively than Robbins on the basis of Marvell’s late prose works, *Mr. Smirke*, the *Short Historical Essay* and the *Remarks*.<sup>10</sup>

Before we label Marvell a hypothetical universalist, however, two caveats should be borne in mind. First, it is debatable whether Baxter himself was as close to Calvinism as Lamont takes him to have been. Baxter’s statements that faith and repentance are unattainable without the aid of efficacious grace are mitigated by his emphasis on the importance of free will. This

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<sup>8</sup>Benjamin Myers, “Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*”, *Milton Quarterly* 40 (2006), pp. 20–36 at p. 25. Caution is necessary when referring to Amyraut’s pronouncements on predestination and related topics. Armstrong stresses that Amyraut “taught that predestination ought not to appear in theology before the whole of the doctrine of grace is expounded . . . for Amyraut predestination is only permissible in theology as an *ex post facto* explanation of why some have believed and others have not”: Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup>Caroline Robbins, “Marvell’s Religion: Was He a New Methodist?” *JHI* 23 (1962), pp. 268–72. “New Methodist” was a term applied by Theophilus Gale, one of Howe’s opponents in print, to those who held beliefs similar to Amyraut’s: Robbins, “Marvell’s Religion”, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup>William Lamont, “The Religion of Andrew Marvell: Locating the ‘Bloody Horse’”, in *The Political Identity of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Conal Condren and A.D. Cousins (Scolar Press, 1990), pp. 135–56. See also, William Lamont, “Arminianism: the Controversy That Never Was”, in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 45–66.



leads to an apparent contradiction in his thought.<sup>11</sup> Baxter was very clear that free will is something we all exercise and that because of that our sins are voluntary. There is no doubt that he believed there were some — the elect — who received grace that was both effectual and irresistible. Such people would inevitably be saved. The converse that the rest (see *Paradise Lost* III, 185) will contingently yet infallibly be lost, does not follow logically, nor is it easy to reconcile with any ordinary understanding of free will. A will which is constrained by the depravity of its exerciser from choosing faith can hardly be said to be free in any worthwhile sense. There is also something surprising in finding Baxter apparently claiming to be able to predict (in the absence of revelation) that *nobody* who had been denied the aid of effective grace (but who, of course, had that of sufficient grace) would ever choose faith.

In any case, Baxter’s assertion of the importance of free will is clear and unequivocal. Having argued that a significant part of God’s glory is his “Sapiental Rule”, according to which he governs by rewarding justice and punishing wickedness, rather than by simply determining that things shall be so, Baxter continues:

Accordingly I think, that God made man a free self-determining agent, that he might be capable of such Sapiental Rule: And that it is a great Honour to God, to make so noble a *Nature*, as hath a Power to determine its own elections: And though such are not of the highest rank of Creatures, they are far above the lowest: And that God . . . doth delight in the Sapiental Moral Government of this free sort of Creatures: And though man be not Independent, yet to be so far like God himself, as to be a kind of first-determiner of many of his own Volitions and Nolitons, is part of Gods Natural Image on Man. (Baxter, *Catholick Theologie*, I, ii, 115)

These arguments are seconded by Howe, who points out that it was clearly within the power of an omnipotent God to create a being which was free to

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<sup>11</sup>For an example of Baxter sounding like a Calvinist, under the title “Of Universal Redemption” he says that there are “certain fruits of Christ’s death” which belong to the elect, the most important of which is “Grace eventually effectual working them to true *Faith*, *Repentance* and *Conversion*.” Of these fruits, “Christ hath made a *conditional* Deed of Gift to all the world. But only the Elect accept them, and *possess* them”: Richard Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (1675), I, ii, 52–3 (Wing B1209).

act of its own volition and in disobedience to the declared will of its creator, and that it implied no derogation from God's omnipotence to say that he had done so.

And except it were affirmed *impossibile* to God to have made such a Creature, (that is, that it imply'd a contradiction, which certainly can never be proved) there is no imaginable pretence why it should not be admitted he hath done it: Rather than so fatally expose the Wisdom, Goodnes, and Righteousnes of God, by supposing him to have made Lawes for his reasonable Creatures, impossible, thorough his own irresistible counter-action, to be observed: and afterwards to express himself displeas'd, and adjuge his Creatures to eternal punishment for not observing them. (Howe, *The Reconcileableness of God's Prescience*, pp. 37–8)

It is far from clear, therefore, that either Baxter or Howe believed that nobody who had merely sufficient grace, without the additional benefit of efficacious grace, would ever be saved.<sup>12</sup> Even if they did believe this, the importance they attached to free will went a long way towards mitigating the hopelessness and fatalism attendant on the conviction that one's own efforts could have no effect on one's eternal destiny. Even if the only ones who would be saved were the elect who were predestined to salvation — and the rest, though not predestined to anything, might as well be — nobody could be sure to which category he or she belonged. Baxter can have been in no

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<sup>12</sup>Baxter does not always seem to use the terms "sufficient" and "efficacious" grace in the senses ascribed by Lamont to Davenant, noted above. In his *Catholick Theologie*, I, iii, 131, cited in Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, p. 139, he equates effectual grace to grace that "cause[s] the act itself" (i.e. grace that is determinative) but says that sufficient grace "enableth men to act". He appears to assert that sufficient grace is sufficient in more than a purely hypothetical sense. See also his statement a few pages later that "every believing Protestant hath grace sufficient and effectual to give him a *present Right to Salvation*: Baxter, *Catholick Theologie*, I, iii, 133.

Lamont emphasizes that Baxter's aversion to strict Calvinism was based on his perception that it tended to lead to antinomianism — the belief that the elect, since they were incapable of falling from grace, need not concern themselves with obedience to the laws or the precepts of morality: Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, pp. 126–35; see also N. H. Keeble, "Baxter, Richard (1615–1691)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn. Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1734>, accessed 29 July 2008].

doubt that there were antinomians whose certitude of their own sainthood was all too likely to be delusional. Conversely, even if a person were to say “I cannot believe; I am damned”, there could be no absolute certainty that that person would not later undergo a change of heart.

The second caveat which should be borne in mind while attempting to deduce Marvell’s beliefs from his prose works of the 1670s is that none of these works appears to have been written in order to promote a particular doctrinal position. The first part of *The Rehearsal Transpros’d* was in large part an attempt to persuade the king to persist with his Declaration of Indulgence; *The Second Part* was Marvell’s defence of himself against, and rejoinder to, the attacks of Samuel Parker and others. *Mr. Smirke* and the *Short Historical Essay* were in part a defence of Herbert Croft, an Anglican bishop who wrote in favour of comprehension, and in part an extension of the argument for a comprehensive Church. Despite the appearance of the word “Popery” in the title, *An Account of the Growth of Popery* is the least concerned with religious doctrine among Marvell’s prose works and, as I argued in Chapter 4 of my thesis, shows a developing interest in constitutional questions.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this, it seems less likely that the aim of the *Remarks Upon a Late Disingenuous Discourse* was to expound Howe’s or Baxter’s views on election, predetermination and universal atonement than to illustrate the narrowness of the gap between mainstream Calvinism and Howe’s beliefs.

It is fair to say that the *Remarks Upon a Late Disingenuous Discourse* is a theodicy only incidentally. So far as we can tell, Marvell was less concerned to demonstrate or establish God’s justice than to persuade his readers that it would be possible for a national Church to include Calvinists and Amyraldians as well (I intend to argue) as Arminians, provided that none of these groups would erect unjustifiable barriers to conformity.

On the evidence of the *Short Historical Essay* Marvell probably would not have excluded Arians from the kind of comprehensive Church he favoured: he says that he does not criticize the victorious party at Nicea for “their censure of Arianism, or the declaring of their opinion in a controverted point to the best of their understanding, (wherein to the smalness of mine, they appear to have light upon the truth, had they likewise on the measure,)” but rather for “their imposition of a new Article or Creed upon the Christian

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<sup>13</sup>Nicholas von Maltzahn describes as a “mistake in emphasis” the idea that the *Account* was “a work written chiefly against ‘popery’”: *Prose Works*, 2:181.

world, not being contained in express words of Scripture” (*Prose Works*, 2:143). In other words, the Athenasians were probably right to say that the Son is “of one substance” with the Father but, right or not, they are not justified in requiring that all Christians believe this.

One would be tempted to conclude that Marvell believed both that the task of *justifying* God was beyond human capacities and that to attempt it would be an otiose impertinence, were it not for the fact that in 1674 he published a poem that can most easily be read as an enthusiastic endorsement of just such an attempt.

The first part of “*On Paradise Lost*” explores three possible categories of objection to Milton’s undertaking. Of these, the one that concerns us is the second. Having first briefly entertained suspicions of the epic poet’s motives (“misdoubting his intent”, l. 6), Marvell decides that, after all, “I liked his project, the success did fear” (l. 12). His concerns as to Milton’s intentions have been superseded by a more serious worry: that the task may be beyond even Milton’s ability:

Through that wide field how he his way should find  
O’er which lame Faith leads Understanding blind;  
Lest he perplexed the things he would explain,  
And what was easy he should render vain. (ll. 13–16)

As Elsie Duncan-Jones has pointed out, “The apprehension that the ‘bold’ poet might not ruin the sacred truths ‘to fable and old song’ is surely not one that Marvell in his own person could have entertained for a moment.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the third objection (that “some less skilful hand” might be inclined to turn Milton’s epic poem into a play in heroic couplets) is probably merely a jibe at Dryden.<sup>15</sup> The second objection, however, is both more substantial and more plausible and, while Marvell might not personally have felt that there was anything to worry about on that account, he took it seriously enough to give this potential objection a much more thorough answer than the other two seemed to require. “Understanding blind” can be taken as

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<sup>14</sup>Elsie Duncan-Jones, “Marvell: A Great Master of Words”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 41 (1975), pp. 267–90 at p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>Henry F. Lippincott, “Marvell’s ‘*On Paradise Lost*’” *ELN* 9 (1972), pp. 265–72, questions whether Marvell would “stoop to an incidental *Ad hominem* attack on Dryden” in a poem of praise to Milton. The poem’s final verse paragraph devotes ten lines to Marvell’s defence of Milton’s eschewal of rhyme; however, he does not directly answer the objection he raised in lines 17–22.

referring to the incapacity of the human intelligence to grasp God's reasons and intentions, while faith is lame because, although it is needed to help the intelligence and avoid going astray, it itself is in need of the support of grace.

Milton had proclaimed prominently at the end of his epic's first verse paragraph that his purpose was to "justify the ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost*, I, 26). Marvell airs a doubt that any human, however great his intelligence or his ability as a poet, is capable of achieving this aim. However, having read *Paradise Lost*, he declares himself satisfied that Milton has succeeded:

Pardon me, mighty poet, nor despise  
My causeless, yet not impious, surmise  
But I am now convinced, and none will dare  
Within thy labours to pretend a share.  
Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit,  
And all that was improper dost omit:  
So that no room is here for writers left,  
But to detect their ignorance or theft.

That majesty which through thy work doth reign  
Draws the devout, deterring the profane.  
And things divine thou treatst of in such state  
As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.

...

Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?  
Whence furnish such a vast expanse of mind?  
Just heaven thee like Tiresias to requite,  
Rewards with prophecy thy loss of sight. (ll. 23–34, 41–4)

Marvell's surmise, though it turns out to have been unfounded, was not impious, precisely because it was prompted by the desire to avoid the impiety that it liable to arise from "Enquiries too curious after those things which the Wisdom of God hath left impervious to Humane Understanding, further than they are revealed." It is by not violating "things divine" that Milton preserves himself likewise inviolate. Had not "Just heaven" endowed him with "prophecy", he could not have hoped to accomplish this. The gift of prophecy is a *reward*: it goes beyond simple compensation for his blindness. This being the case, "On *Paradise Lost*" amounts — among other things, ad-

mittedly — to a statement that Marvell does not find anything doctrinally objectionable in Milton’s great poem.

Whether one considers *Paradise Lost* to be the work of an Arminian or an adherent of the “middle way” depends on whether one thinks that the universalism of the “middle way” was always entirely hypothetical, never actual. Milton did not place any restrictions on the universality of Christ’s atonement. In Book III, he has “the great Creator” say:

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace  
Elect above the rest; so is my will:  
The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned  
Their sinful state, and to appease betimes  
Th’incensèd Deity, while offered grace  
Invites; for I will clear their senses dark,  
What may suffice, and soften stony hearts  
To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.  
To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,  
Though but endeavoured with sincere intent,  
Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.  
And I will place within them as a guide  
My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear,  
Light after light well-used they shall attain,  
And to the end persisting, safe arrive.  
This my long sufferance and my day of grace  
They who neglect and scorn shall never taste,  
But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,  
That they may stumble on, and deeper fall,  
And none but such from mercy I exclude. (III, 183–202)

When the Father talks about softening stony hearts and clearing senses dark, the hearts and senses he refers to are not those of the elect but of *the rest*. Only those who “neglect and scorn” the offered grace will be excluded from mercy, and the changes that are worked on their hearts and senses “may suffice” to bring to repentance those who do not resist. This contradicts the notion that *only* those “chosen of peculiar grace” will ever be saved. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton is closer to Arminianism than to hypothetical universalism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>On whether Milton was a follower of the middle way, see in particular N. H. Keeble,

Unless Marvell interpreted *Paradise Lost* very differently, the fact that he endorses Milton's poem specifically on the ground that it preserves "things divine . . . inviolate" suggest that he saw no obstacle to the inclusion of Armenians in a comprehensive Church.

As against this argument, it may be countered that both *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* and *Mr. Smirke* contain fairly explicit statements of Marvell's rejection of Arminianism. He addresses the topic in *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* (*Prose Works* 1:189–90). Rather than criticize Arminian belief on doctrinal grounds, however, he suggests that the Laudian leadership of the Church of England in the decades before the civil war had adopted it not out of conviction — in Holland it had been "the *Republican Opinion*" and in order to introduce it into England the Laudians found it necessary "to accommodate it to Monarchy and Episcopacy" — but merely because of its unacceptability to the majority of nonconformists:

For, on the one hand, it was removed at so moderate a distance from Popery, that they should not disoblige Papists more than formerly, neither yet could the Puritans with justice reproach these men as Romish Catholics: and yet, on the other hand, they knew it was so contrary to the antient reformed Doctrine of the Church of England, that the Puritans would never imbrace it, and so they should gain the pretence further to keep up that convenient Quarrel against Non-conformity. (*Prose Works*, 1: 189–90)

According to this, Arminianism was distinguishable from, even if moderately close to, Roman Catholicism. Its attraction for Laudians, Marvell says, was that it functioned as an obstacle to conformity on the part of Calvinists. In attacking "Arminianism" as a barrier to Church unity, rather than as a dangerous or heretical belief, Marvell is not doing anything particularly unusual. As Johann Sommerville makes clear, Laud's contemporary critics tended to treat his Arminianism, his attachment to ceremonies, his authoritarian approach to government in general (including Church government) and his apparent openness to Roman Catholicism as all of a piece: all were to a greater or lesser degree indicative of his wish to impose on the Church

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"Milton and Puritanism", in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns, (Blackwell, 2001), pp. 124–40, at pp. 134–6.

Myers, "Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*, esp. pp. 28–9.

of England a system of religious practice which was perilously close to “popery”.<sup>17</sup>

In *Mr. Smirke*, however, Marvell comes close to stating his rejection of Arminianism *as a belief*. Discussing Turner’s attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum* of Croft’s argument that it is impossible to compel any person’s belief, he writes:

But I hope he [Turner] will not compel God too, but that he may dispense his saving and efficacious Influence (without which all that sufficient Proposal he speaks of will have been insufficient,) only to the minds of whom he pleases. (*Prose Works* 2:93)

Here he ascribes to Turner Arminian views according to which the requirements of justice would “compel” God to make grace available to all, rather than to bestow it selectively according to his will. Marvell’s dissent from that Arminian position is clearly implied and the parenthetical clause seems to place him firmly on the side of those who believe that only the elect, the recipients of efficacious grace, will be saved. There is a possibility, however, that the gnomic character of Marvell’s argument may lead us to conclude too much. What follows from his rejection of the proposition that grace must be distributed universally is that God *might* (without injustice) have left a large portion of his creation to wallow in its depravity, without any possibility of extracting itself. Whether God in fact *did* so is probably not a question on which Marvell thought that Christians were required to hold a belief one way or the other.

Marvell, then, was prepared to welcome Calvinists, Amyraldians and Arminians, as well as Arians and Athanasians.<sup>18</sup> His defence of Howe is part of this project of comprehension. Strictly speaking, the *Remarks* contain no more reliable documentary evidence that Marvell shared Howe’s doctrinal beliefs than does *The Rehearsal Transpros’d* that he shared John Owen’s. Nevertheless, there remain good reasons to think that Marvell was fairly close in his beliefs to Baxter. In the first place, there is his dictum in the *Short Historical Essay* that “Truth for the most part lyes in the middle, but

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<sup>17</sup>J P Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology in England 1603–1640*, (Longman, 1986) pp. 217–24.

<sup>18</sup>Marvell suggests that some of the “absurdities” attributed to Arius were not views he actually held or propounded but rather consequences that he said followed from an opponent’s arguments.



men ordinarily seek for it in the extremities” (*Prose Works*, 2:137). There is some reason to think that he may have been in agreement with Baxter on a number of other points, specifically the significance of Grotius and the relative importance of faith and works.

As I discussed in Chapter 4 of my thesis, Marvell’s *objective* in writing *The Rehearsal Transpros’d* seems to have been to defend the Declaration of Indulgence; its immediate *occasion*, however, was the publication of the apologia of John Bramhall, with Parker’s preface attached, under the title *Bishop Bramhalls Vindication of himself and the Episcopal Clergy, from the Presbyterian Charge of Popery, as it is managed by Mr. Baxter in his Treatise of the Grotian Religion Together with a Preface Shewing What Grounds there are of Fears and Jealousies of Popery*. In the Preface, Parker associates Bramhall with Grotius, characterizing them both as “learned enough to despise the Ignorance of the highest knowledge that he [i.e. Richard Baxter] or any of his brethren coul’d pretend to.”<sup>19</sup> This is Parker’s only express mention of Grotius in the preface. In the *Vindication* itself, however, Bramhall described Baxter’s “design” in the following terms:

His main scope is to show that Grotius under a pretence of reconciling the Protestant Churches with the Roman Church, hath acted the part of a Coy-duck, willingly or unwillingly to lead Protestants into Popery. And therefore he held himself obliged in duty to give warning to Protestants *to beware of Grotius his followers in England, who under the name of Episcopal Divines, do prosecute the design of Cassander and Grotius; to reconcile us to the Pope, Page 2. And being pressed by his adversary to name those Episcopal Divines (vir dolosus versatur in generalibus) he gives no instance of any one man throughout his Book, but of my self.*<sup>20</sup>

In Marvell’s first mention of Grotius in *The Rehearsal Transpros’d*, he says “in fact, that incomparable Person Grotius did yet make a Bridge for the Enemy to come over; or at least laid some of our most considerable Passes

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<sup>19</sup>[Samuel Parker.] “A Preface to the Reader” in *Bishop Bramhalls Vindication of himself and the Episcopal Clergy, from the Presbyterian Charge of Popery* (1672), A7v–A8r (Wing B4237).

<sup>20</sup>Bramhall, *Vindication*, pp. 3–4.

open to them and unguarded”.<sup>21</sup> This sounds very much as if Marvell is taking Baxter’s side against Bramhall and Parker, and endorsing the argument that Grotius, though an “incomparable Person”, had laid open the way for the assimilation of Protestant Churches, including the Anglican one, into Catholicism.<sup>22</sup>

Marvell’s references to Grotius in *The Second Part* suggest that he was following the strategy that he described to Parker as the *argumentum ad hominem*:

You, that are a Duellist, know how great a bravery ’tis to gain an enemies Sword, and that there is no more home-thrust in disputation, than the *Argumentum ad hominem*. So that if your Adversary fell upon you with one of your own Fathers, it was gallantly done on his part; and no less wisely on yours, to fence in this manner, and use all your shifts to put it by. (*Prose Works*, 1:149)

So, when Marvell says of Grotius that he “is of great Reputation with all men, and ought with you to have more Authority than ordinary”, that “he ought to be of as much value with you as all the rest put together” and that “I chuse always to ply you with [him] above all other Authors”,<sup>23</sup> he implies that the Dutch author should have a particular appeal for Parker. In fact, Parker has little specific to say about Grotius. The reference in his Preface to Bramhall’s *Vindication*, quoted above, might be taken to imply that the Bishop was Grotius’s intellectual equal (and when he mentions him in the *Reproof* it is usually in association with Bramhall).<sup>24</sup> Two possible explanations, not mutually inconsistent, might be suggested for Marvell’s repeated invocation of Grotius in this context. In the first place, Marvell is probably taking a Baxterian view of Parker as (like Bramhall) a “Grotian” ecumenist who would reconcile and subordinate the more moderate Protestant sects

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<sup>21</sup>*Prose Works*, 1:63. I argued in Chapter 2 of my thesis that, in “The Character of Holland”, Marvell used Grotian arguments as to the freedom of the sea against the Dutch, without himself subscribing to those arguments. He was accusing them of hypocrisy, in failing to adhere to the principles they professed.

<sup>22</sup>For Baxter’s opinion of Grotius, see Lamont, “The Religion of Andrew Marvell”, pp. 144–5 and Lamont, “Arminianism: the Controversy That Never Was”, pp. 50–2 and 58–60.

<sup>23</sup>*Prose Works*, 1:361, 395 and 421.

<sup>24</sup>[Samuel Parker,] *A Reproof to The Rehearsal Transpros’d* (1673), pp. 100, 139, 140 and 147 (Wing P473).

to a form of Roman Catholicism in which general councils, rather than the Pope, would have the governing power. In the second, however, he may equally be implying that Parker has read no more of Grotius than he has of Richard Hooker, whose title he borrowed for his *Ecclesiastical Polity*.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, it seems likely that, in 1672 and 1673, Marvell had an opinion of Grotius that was similar to Baxter's. Lamont, referring to an anonymous contemporary correspondent, sums up Baxter as "a three-quarters Grotian whose refusal to run that final quarter's-worth-of-distance is what, in the final analysis, determined where he stood on the issues that tested the godly conscience in the second half of the seventeenth century." The best, though still tentative, conclusion that we may draw as to Marvell's opinion of Grotius is that he found much in his thought that was valuable but also a significant amount of which he thought it necessary to be suspicious, particularly his "Bridge for the Enemy to come over".

Another doctrinal point on which Marvell and Baxter seem to be in substantial agreement is the principle that, while justification is by faith alone, this fact does not absolve anybody from the duty to do "works". In Chapter 3 of my thesis, I discussed Marvell's poem, "The Coronet", in which a garland-maker learns the error of supposing that it is within our capabilities to "redress that wrong" (l. 4) that Christ has suffered as a result of our sins, or that "works" can earn us the right to salvation.

Many critics who have written about this poem have pointed out that garland-making is an analogy for the writing of poetry, so that "The Coronet" is, or represents, the coronet.<sup>26</sup> That being so, the poem's very existence is itself instructive. While it demonstrates that it is wrong to believe that one can merit salvation by "works", the fact that the poet has finished his poem and allowed it to exist implies that works should nevertheless be done: ineffectual though they may be, they remain the best we can do.

This emphasis on the importance of works — while acknowledging that faith is paramount — is consistent with Marvell's response to Samuel Parker

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<sup>25</sup>In *The Second Part*, Marvell says that he has a "Commission" to tell Parker that the latter admitted he had never had the patience to read Hooker's "long-winded Book". Marvell adds "And truly this is your usual practice and ingenuity as to other Authors": *Prose Works*, 1:365.

<sup>26</sup>Annabel Patterson describes the garland-maker's flowers as "a metaphor for the arts of language", while Larry Brunner comments that "The Coronet contains itself (the crown image of the poem) within itself: Patterson, "Bermudas and The Coronet: Marvell's Protestant Poetics", p. 491; Brunner, "'So Rich a Chaplet': An Interpretation of Marvell's The Coronet", p. 24.

in *The Rehearsall Transpros'd: The Second Part* (1673). Having rebuked the archdeacon for his “too high conceit of mens good Works”, and criticized him for attributing to the nonconformists in general the view that good works are in themselves dangerous to salvation, Marvell follows with a statement that, for him, seems unusually self-revelatory:

... whosoever shall, to the prejudice of our Saviours Merit, and debasing the operation of the Holy Ghost, attribute too much to his own natural vigour and performances, will be in some danger of finding his *Bona Opera perniciosa ad Salutem*. For mine own part I have, I confess, some reason, perhaps particular to my self, to be diffident of mine own Moral Accomplishments, and therefore may be the more inclinable to think I have a necessity of some extraordinary assistance to sway the weakness of my belief, *and to strengthen me in good Duties* [emphasis added]. If you be stronger, I am glad of it; and let every Man, after he has read and considered what we have of it in the Scripture, and what even in our Common-Prayer Book, take what course and opinion he thinks the safest. (*Prose Works*, 1:364)

It is not sinful or dangerous to strive for salvation; what is sinful is to imagine that one can achieve it without “extraordinary assistance”. In this context, that incidental phrase, “perhaps particular to myself”, is obviously ironic: it does not imply that Marvell thought that Parker or others could be saved by their own unaided efforts, but rather that each of us is responsible for our own salvation and that nobody can usefully concern him- or herself with that of anybody else, or with the means by which that might be attained.

Baxter expounds this principle in more detail. In *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), he explains *why* justification is by faith alone. God originally promised Adam that complete obedience to the law would earn him everlasting life. The sin of Adam and Eve disabled not just them but their entire progeny from complying with this condition. When Christ had atoned for our breaches of the law, he substituted a new covenant: since we remain incapable of complete obedience to the law, what is now required of us if we are to be justified is sincere faith and repentance. Although Christ made a new covenant, he did not repeal the old law. We cannot be saved by obedience to the law, since complete obedience is beyond our capability, but the law remains as an indication of Christ’s will (and has always been an indication of the Father’s will) as to how we should behave. So, if we genuinely

have faith and are repentant, we will endeavour to obey the law in so far as we can, so as not to repeat our former transgressions. Therefore, though only faith can justify us, faith actually entails “works”.

This is Baxter’s principal safeguard against antinomianism. In his *Catholick Theologie* (I, ii. 74), Baxter wrote: “He that is *no cause* of any good work, is *no Christian*, but a damnable wretch, and worse than any wicked man I know in the world.” According to Baxter, since Christ’s atonement for our sins is completely independent of us, something is required from us before we can benefit from it, hence the new covenant.<sup>27</sup> We are required to repent and have faith in Christ. Baxter of course accepts that we cannot do this without the assistance of grace (Thesis XXI) but that is not to say that our efforts are neither here nor there. Not only *can* we cooperate in our own salvation, we are required to do so.

Unless one takes supralapsarianism to be an indispensable element of Calvinism, Marvell wrote nothing that was clearly inconsistent with Calvinist doctrine. Notwithstanding his alignment with Baxter and Howe, he does not even specifically deny that the benefits of Christ’s atonement were limited to the elect. Yet he does not seem to have been a Calvinist. His closeness to Baxter on a number of points and his unreserved praise of Howe make it more likely that he was a middle way man than anything else, yet his *commendation of Paradise Lost* (including Milton’s theology) makes it unlikely that he was a hypothetical universalist in Bishop Davenant’s mould. When he criticizes the Arians it is not for their apparent doctrinal errors but for trying to impose their beliefs on the Church as a whole when given the opportunity by the emperor Constantius II, showing themselves to be in this respect no different from their opponents (*Prose Works*, 2:150–1).

As we have seen, Marvell concludes his remarks to Parker on the subjects of grace, faith and works with the advice: “let every Man, after he has read and considered what we have of it in the Scripture, and what even in our Common-Prayer Book, take what course and opinion he thinks the safest” (*Prose Works*, 1:364). In a matter as momentous as one’s eternal destiny, it may indeed make sense to seek out the safest course and follow it. The semantic connection between “salvation” and “safest” amounts to a pointer in this direction.

It may be that, if Marvell was indeed a hypothetical universalist, he

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<sup>27</sup>See, in particular, Theses X to XX in Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification, With their Explication Annexed* (1655), pp. 47–75 (Wing B1186).

adopted this belief not because he thought it was necessarily true but because this was the nearest thing he could find to a *safe* form of belief. It was the path that provided the best likelihood of avoiding the dangers of anti-nomianism on the one side and attributing “too much to his own natural vigour and performances” on the other. It at least had the merit of saving God’s justice, if it could only partly save his benevolence. Given that there were undoubtedly “things which the Wisdom of God hath left impervious to Humane Understanding”, Marvell may have felt it safer to adhere to a belief that steered clear of evident errors than to embark on a pedantic search for the precise truth. If, in the end, it turned out that God was more even-handed and more benevolent (without being any less just) than the belief led one to expect, little would have been lost.

So, notwithstanding William Lamont’s confidence that Marvell’s religion can be identified, Marvell’s position in matters of faith remains elusive. Nicholas von Maltzahn draws our attention to Hugh Trevor-Roper’s account of a tendency among Erasmian free-thinkers in that period to take refuge in the “armour” of Presbyterians and moderate Calvinists.<sup>28</sup> In von Maltzahn’s view, Marvell and his father might be seen as the “living embodiment” of this strategy. I have tried to show that Marvell argued in favour of as “broad” a national church as possible, with few obstacles to conformity. The two positions are clearly conciliable. At any rate, Marvell’s “theodicy”, informal though it might be, is not so much concerned with justifying God’s ways as with persuading men of the injustice of attempting to exercise control over the various potential paths to salvation that might be chosen by their fellows.

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<sup>28</sup>Nicholas von Maltzahn, “Milton, Marvell and Toleration”, in Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer, eds. *Milton and Toleration*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 86–104, especially at pp. 92–6).