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MILTON A PRECURSOR OF RELIGIOUS AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

The mid-seventeenth century in England was pulsing with new democratic ideas of civil rights, marital freedom, religious liberty, differences between church and state. It was time of religious awakening across Western Europe and it shook the British from its slumber. John Milton was among the most radical and articulate advocate of these ideas, which he has given in his prose works. The present paper will bring out Milton as a precursor, with a reformist agenda and bring to light his ideas on Christian and classical traditions. It also documents individual freedom, rights and liberties, thoughts and sentiments of the age,

Keywords: Religious Liberty, Individual Liberty, Free Will, Free Exercise Of Religion, Church and State, Marriage, Divorce, Reformation, English Revolution.

Introduction

The mid-seventeenth century was the time of great social and cultural turmoil in England. It was a time of intense social unrest and disorder in all areas of life specially religious, scientific, political and domestic relations and culture. During this period church as rigid-master dominated the throne, and for centuries there was no improvement in lives of the people. The English Revolution was waged intermittently between Parliamentarians and the Royalists from 1642-1651. In 1649, after years of various political manoeuvres and fighting King Charles I was deposed and for a decade England had no monarch, therefore a commonwealth was formed and Oliver Cromwell became the Lord Protector. With the change of the guards, a movement was lead for the disseverance of the civil government of England from the controlling spiritual power of Rome. Milton was writing in the throes of the English Revolution and he formulated a revolutionary account of law, religion, and human rights grounded in the Calvinist theory of human nature and human society. He believed that each individual is created in the image of God and is a fallen and fallible creature in perpetual need of divine grace and forgiveness which is given freely to all who ask for it.

In Milton's times, the impact of orthodox Christianity was unshaken and people still followed the biblical principles. In the backdrop of this any departure from the established norms and traditions were to become a subject of criticism. The rise of scientific method in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth century about theology and state of nature greatly influenced Milton's thought and argument. But his ideal about god, nature, man and the universe always retained the peculiarity of his mind and temperament, his rational mind, christian faith and protestant character. At such a time Milton brought forward the theory of rights and liberties that must prevail in a commonwealth sincerely. He developed his theory in three phases and his first major concern was

religious liberty. He wanted to protect the individual's liberty of conscience and freedom of worship. *De Doctrina Christiana* was intended to be a complete statement of theological beliefs of Milton. Christopher Hill explains that *De Doctrina Christiana* is Milton's testament to humanity and "the theological foundation on which *Paradise Lost* rests." In both he is determined to "justify the ways of God to men." (233) Milton advocated that each individual must work out his own *religious* opinion. He regarded religious liberty as a God-given and God-directed natural gift. He said that the individual and his conscience was a much more powerful tool in interpreting the world of God and he is created in the image of God, each individual has something of the "image of the mind of God" within him, a conscience of right reason that gives him access to divine truth and direction and will and capacity to act on that knowledge. Milton's emphasis on the individual conscience was in complete contrast to Anglican concern with tradition and ritual. In all his religious works, he called more loudly for freedom of conscience and exercise, separation of church and state, open tolerance for all peaceable biblical religions and disestablishment of religion. Milton believed that each person has the law of God written into his or her own conscience, heart or mind. He knows what is right or wrong, good or bad, as he has been created with a natural freedom to choose how to act on the knowledge taught by his conscience. Milton wrote that God "trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser." (CPW 2:514) He says that "A kind of gleam or glimmering" of the natural law remains even in the most evil of men and it provides them with some light to shine even in their darkest darkness. (CPW 6:516)

Milton's other concern was individual or private liberty, that he defends in his marriage and Divorce tracts. He believes that the purpose of forming a marriage was to foster love, create community, deter lust, and procreate children. He writes that "Marriage is a covenant, the very being whereof consists, not in forced cohabitation, and counterfeit performance, but unfeigned love and peace ... and sweet and gladsome society." (CPW 2:254) He calls marriage as the union of soul, spirit and mind, between husband and wife and it is reflected in the perfect love of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Milton gave the argument that God created "the religious society" of marriage as "the highest and most excellent" as it dealt with the essential matters of the soul, the spirit, and the the mind." But Milton came under scrutiny and criticism when he talked about the annulment of marriage on the grounds of incompatibility of mind and soul. He felt that the unity of mind is greater than the union of bodies and a marriage without soul love is dead. Milton found it to be "preposterous ignorance and iniquity" that the law of the day should provide remedies "for the rights of the body in marriage but nothing for the wrong and grievances of the mind." (CPW 2:248) Milton, thus advocated divorce if either the the religious or the carnal purposes of marriage were frustrated. His idea of individual liberty can be understood through *Paradise Lost*, where Adam could not abide isolation, even in the perfection of Paradise, as no person can abide it in the vale of tears. He feels that a person trapped in a marriage with "mute and spiritless mate" is even lonelier than the unmarried person." (CPW 2:251)

Milton addressed the idea of genuine liberty or freedom against the self-indulgence that he sometimes called 'licence'. His understanding of licence included the idea of abusing freedom whereas the concept of genuine liberty focuses on the freedom for an individual to live a virtuous life and pursue his goals under the strictures of his own conscience inspite of the temptations and trials. Milton follows the Christian ideal of genuine liberty and emphasises the need for virtuous self-government to characterise the truly free individual. Although he does not always use the terms 'liberty' or 'licence' these concepts and the idea of self-government can be seen in all his published writings. The contrast between liberty and licence can be seen when he began writing a series of tracts advocating the freedom to divorce for reasons of incompatibility. Although Milton was accused by his contemporaries of advocating the license as he was deserted by his wife Mary, a month after their marriage in 1642. Bur Milton has forcefully asserted in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* that he is in fact advocating the proper his advocacy biblical hermeneutic of charity, promoting liberty against the tyranny of erroneous church custom.

Milton insisted that his advocacy of proper freedom to divorce serves to promote virtue because liberating unhappy married persons frees them from despair and to godliness. He is willing to accept the moral hazards of such a situation, which, he claims, are in line with God's view of Christian liberty. In his tracts he concludes by telling the English countrymen that "to be free is precisely the same as to be pious, wise, just, and

temperate, careful of one's property, aloof from another's, and thus finally be magnanimous and brave", moreover, "to be the opposite to these qualities is the same as to be a slave." Therefore, in a way he is trying to tell them that if they don't want to be slave they must "learn to obey right reason and to master yourselves." (*Defensio Secunda*, 684). Milton believed that liberty is first and foremost a theological matter, for true liberty comes from Christ, who gives his believers freedom from sin. He expresses this explicitly in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he states:

" Christian liberty means that Christ our liberator frees us from the slavery of sin and thus from the rule of the law and of men, as if we were emancipated slaves. He does this so that, being made sons instead of servants and grown men instead of boys, we may serve God in charity through the guidance of the spirit of truth."

This emphasises Milton's understanding of Christian liberty and the individual Christians ability to self-govern by exercising liberty of conscience. Therefore, at the heart of Milton's argument for domestic or individual liberty lies his liberal soul that calls for equal rights for men and women to enter marriage as to exit them through divorce. Milton's writings on individual liberty found instant readership but mostly of a very hostile sort. His arguments for the right to divorce on grounds of irreconcilable differences met with great criticism and his books were dismissed for holding the "most dangerous and damnable tenets."

The censorship of his books on divorce prompted Milton to widen his stand on liberty and included the freedom of speech and press in his agenda. These ideas were touched by Milton in the religious writings and were not entirely new. "Nothing is more sweet to man" than freedom of speaking and writing, he had written in 1641. (CPW 1:125) Milton laid out the argument in *Areopagatica* that book licensing and censorship were papal tools sharpened by the inquisition that had no place in Protestant England. He argued that ancient Greece and Rome had no such system of licensing and censorship and the early Church Fathers and Christian emperors held to this policy. It was the medieval Catholic periods that had introduced the censorship. He was of the view that no self-respecting English Protestant could think of adopting such binding system: "I am certain that a state governed by the rules of justice and fortitude, or a church built and founded upon the rock of faith and true knowledge, cannot be so pusillanimous." (CPW 2:541) Milton argued that the very nature of being protestant is to protest, to challenge, to reform and fight falsehood with truths. Therefore he believed that censorship denies the nature of human judgement. God created all as rational creatures, with a reason and conscience to choose virtuous life and with a promise of eternal reward for those who make wise choices. He says God "though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet powers out before us even to a profuseness all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and safety." (CPW 2:528) Milton expanded his vision of liberty on the firm belief that God's truth would triumph once freed from human errors and controls.

Milton touches an area of personal belief that mattered to him intensely when he says "Know that too be free is the same thing as to be pious, to be wise, to be temperate and just, to be frugal and abstinent, and lastly, to be magnanimous and brave." He was proposing something that for him was apparently an elementary truth. He was suggesting that all genuine values of life are not only compatible but also necessarily implied by one another. So it was perfectly natural for Milton to think that freedom should be thought of as a moral act. It seems natural to consider *Paradise Lost* in relation to what Milton means when he speaks of liberty and freedom as there is no other idea that means so much to Milton, or is as important for our understanding of him. Therefore, there is a need to explain the way the idea of liberty assume a central importance for the poem. When we talk about *Paradise Lost* in terms of freedom, the first thing that comes in mind is the notion of free will. The idea of free will is given to us to believe that the actions of intelligent beings, whether they are angels or men, are based on free will, and whatever actions they take is always considered to be those of moral agents, free too have chosen differently and responsible for what they have chosen. "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (III.99) Dr. Johnson has also once said that, "We know our will is free, and there's an end on't."

Milton believes that God gives to man the gift of reason as Adam in *Paradise Lost* says passionately 'Give me liberty to know, to utter and argue freely according to conscience above all liberties.' Diane Kelsey McColley too feels that "Free will allows subject to respond creatively to their calling for obedience and love and interpret

it in their personal way." In Book III of of Paradise Lost, before the fall, God speaks to the Son about reason and free will:

What Pleasure I From such obedience paid,
When will reason (reason also is a choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
Made passive both, had served necessity,
Not me. (107-110)

In this passage God explains the necessity of "will and reason" as "proof.../ Of true allegiance" (104-105) to Him; God would not receive pleasure from "obedience paid" out of necessity He equates reason with choice, echoing this idea in *Aeropagatica*; without freedom, will and reason are "[m]ade passive" and become "[u]seless and vain." Adam and Eve should have refrained from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge as a sign of their obedience. Thus their transgression after the fall is not simply eating the fruit, but choosing to eat it. Raphael explains that reason resides differently in celestial and earthly bodies. In Book V, he explains that in angels reason is intuition but in man it requires discourse, and that man cannot reason alone but in conversation with others.

Milton, thus, believes in producing ethical men governed by reason, not by passion. Paradise Lost advocates Milton's prophetic vision and the poem conveys a deep conviction of justice in God's ways and insists on man's freedom to choose right path or the wrong one. In Book IX before Adam and Eve are deceived, Adam reminds Eve that

But God left the will free, and reason he made right (351-352)

Mc Colley while talking about free will says that it is upon the liberty which provides men the dignity of individual responsibility that Milton's drama of disobedience and restoration depends; and the success of his effort to justify the ways of God to men. For if Adam and Eve are not sufficient as well as free, God will in effect have inclined the scale toward disobedience. Adam in order to protect Eve, repudiates his duty and in doing so he breaks the hierarchical chain of being, and allows her as a free agent to seek temptation. Adam and Eve before the Fall are engaged in the process of growing and making responsible choices in a world of limitless potentiality. Milton emphasises in his characterisation of Adam and Eve a potential goodness which is affirmed *De Doctrina Christiana*, rather than a natural depravity which would negate both their freedom and their responsibility. Arthur E. Barker has demonstrated that "Milton was never moved to revise his belief that the unwritten Law of God is that 'law of nature' given to the first man, of which remnants and a kind of reflection remain in all men's hearts, and which in the regenerate is day by day being renovated in the direction of its primitive (or prelapsarian) perfection." This law is "the basis of true liberty, and this in turn depends upon what Milton thinks of as demonstrable continuity of a providence which makes possible similar responsibilities and opportunities under every dispensation."

The poem's major theme fully accords with Milton's theological views which are based on a doctrine of free will, therefore they can hardly narrow the meaning of the poem regarded as the metaphor of our common experience. Man's disobedience was not the revelation of his nature but the violation of it, that is the voluntary resignation of his free will. Milton has very cleverly given us the experience of Adam and Eve before the fall pertinent to our own, is not by showing that how they like us, were congenitally enslaved by their own passions, but by showing that we, like them, have the opportunity either to enslave ourselves or to exercise our restored free will in response to God's providence. The scene before the fall provide an account of the growth of Adam and Eve in understanding and exercising the responsibilities of free will. Milton has established in the poem that he was in the favour of individual freedom by the presentation of gender hierarchy, which does not impose any fixed roles to a certain gender. His depiction is means of teaching and learning which promotes sensitively balanced awareness of the whole harmony of creation and of one's part in it which is the basis of creative liberty. Its purpose is the delegation of creative powers, of which God is the ultimate source. It gives a means by which human beings may be exalted by their own efforts and gives each rational being an opportunity for individual growth. Milton believed that each one of us has the responsibility of instructing the rational being

subordinate to us, but the first concern toward this end is to preserve the freedom of will of his subordinate. This preservation can be seen in Raphael's relationship with Adam, Adam's to Eve and reflect's in the Creator whose regard for Adam's liberty and growth is compressed in the words "call'd by thee I come thy guide"

Milton shows the relationship of Adam and Eve through their actions both as nature's stewards and as partners in marriage. Eve's relation to Adam endows the subordinate with freedom to act creatively rather than from necessity. Adam's pre-eminence supports Eve's development of her own special gifts of openness and amiable mildness and permits him to exercise his "more attentive mind" (X:1011) in preserving her freedom; where both are free to act according to their nature. The dramatisation of the scene when Satan enters the garden deals with the problem of free will which is analogous to that of Christian liberty in the *Areopagatica*. Adam and Eve from that very point are a kind of holy community a world containing active evil. Their problem, like that of the Commonwealth Milton tried to defend and guide, is that of preserving their integrity without losing their liberty: the free will upon which that integrity is based. Milton's characterisation portrays and proves not that Adam and Eve are congenitally weak but that they are developing individuals who are responsible for their actions because their wills are free.

John Milton, therefore, being the representative poet of the seventeenth century, which was pulsing with new democratic ideas of civil rights, marital freedom, freedom of speech and press, religious liberty, and the tensions between the church and the state, became the most radical and articulate advocate of these ideas. He was a great Protestant reformer and a prolific scholar, who has tried to uncover some of the genesis and genius of his reformist agenda through the brilliant pages of prose and drama. Milton's ideas of liberty were pervasive in the air and can be seen later in the arguments of John Locke, that further reverberated in the American rights and liberties. In the colonial New England, Milton's ideas of religious and civil liberty helped liberalise and pluralise the establishment. As John Adams put it in 1776, John Milton was "as honest a man as his nation ever bred, and as great a friend of liberty" that the common law tradition has seen.

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