

“SEMIPELAGIANISM” AND ARMINIANISM IN EARLY MODERN DEBATE

by Richard A. Muller

IN THE NOTE “To the Christian Reader” prefaced to his *Golden Chaine*, William Perkins offered a short description of four basic patterns for the description of divine predestination: the old and new Pelagians, the Lutherans, the “Semipelagian Papistes,” and upholders of the true, namely, Reformed doctrine.¹ The “Semipelagian Papistes ... ascribe Gods Predestination, partly to mercie, and partlie to mens foreseen preparations and meritorious Workes.”² The true doctrine, by contrast, places “the cause of the execution of Gods Predestination, in his mercy in Christ, in them that are saved; and in them which perish, the fall and corruption of man: yet so, as that the decree and eternal counsell of God, concerning them both, hath not any cause beside his will and pleasure.”³ After Perkins’ death, in the context of the debates leading to and following the Synod of Dort, Arminius’ theology would be labeled Semipelagian by his Reformed opponents.

1. Semipelagianism: the Historiographical Problem

Application of the term Semipelagian to the synergistic theologies of the later Middle Ages and of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century has been recently examined in relation both to the origin of the term and to its applicability. Studies have altered the older view that the term was of late sixteenth-century origin in the debates between Dominicans and Jesuits and located uses of the term among Protestant writers, both Reformed and Lutheran in the mid-sixteenth century.⁴ Other scholarly analyses have either accepted the designation as accurate or critiqued it over the question of whether

1. William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine: or, Description of Theologie, Containing the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, According to Gods Word* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1597), p. 7.

2. Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 7.

3. Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 7.

4. Irena Backus and Aza Goudriaan, “‘Semipelagianism’: the Origins of the Term and its Passage into the History of Heresy,” in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65, no. 1 (2014), pp. 25–46; and Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), pp. 137–138 n51; both essays modifying the earlier researches of M. Jacquin, “A quelle date apparait le terme semipélagien?” in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 1 (1907), pp. 506–508; also note E. Amann, “Semi-pélagiens,” in *Dictionnaire de théologie Catholique*, XIV, cols. 1796–1850, here col. 1796.

the synergisms of the late Middle Ages and early modern era actually correspond with the thought of the late patristic writers typically identified as “Semipelagian” in histories of Christian doctrine.⁵ The modern historical debate over application of the term to late medieval nominalist theologies arose in part because of Oberman’s characterization of Gabriel Biel as “essentially Pelagian” and “Semipelagian” because of his approach to *gratia gratis data* and his understanding of the maxim, *facientibus in quod [in se] est Deus non denegat gratiam*. [“to those who do what is in them God will not deny grace.”]⁶ Biel was not accused of either Pelagianism or Semipelagianism in his own time, and Oberman’s reading of Biel was almost immediately challenged, largely on the ground that he had understated the role of grace in Biel’s thought and had therefore not seen how far Biel’s thought was from a heretical Pelagianism.⁷ Subsequent work has, however, also ratified the conclusion that Biel’s teaching was in fact at least Semipelagian,⁸ arguably in terms that relate quite closely to the sixteenth-century definition.

5. On patristic era Semipelagianism, see Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996); and Amann, “Semi-pélagiens,” cols. 1797–1840. For the typical usage in older manuals of the history of doctrine, see e.g., Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles Hay, 2 vols. (1905; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), I, pp. 368–382; and Joseph Tixeront, *History of Dogmas*, trans. H. L. B., 3 vols. (St. Louis: Herder & Herder, 1910–1916), III, pp. 264–272.

6. Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 131–141, 177, 179, 181, 196, 426.

7. Francis Clark, “A New Appraisal of Late Medieval Theology,” in *Gregorianum*, 46 (1965), pp. 733–765, here, pp. 741–751. Clark’s analysis is uncritically taken over in Alister E. McGrath, “The Anti-Pelagian Structure of ‘Nominalist’ Doctrines of Justification,” in *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses*, 57 (1981), pp. 107–119; repeated in idem, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 100–102, 114–115.

8. Harry McSorley, “Was Gabriel Biel a Semi-Pelagian?” in Leo Scheffczyk, Werner Dettloff, and Richard Heinzmann, eds., *Wahrheit und Verkündigung: Michael Schmaus zum 70. Geburtstag*, 2 vols. (Munich: Schöningh, 1967), II, pp. 1109–1120; idem, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman Press, 1969), pp. 199–215, in agreement with Oberman; and James E. Biechler, “Gabriel Biel on *Liberum Arbitrium*: Prelude to Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*,” in *The Thomist*, 34/1 (1970), pp. 114–127, who views Biel as “clearly Pelagian”; also note Wilhelm Ernst, *Gott und Mensch am Vorabend der Reformation: Eine Untersuchung zur Moralphilosophie und Theologie bei Gabriel Biel* (Leipzig: St. Benno Verlag, 1972), p. 412, who concludes a Semipelagian accent in Biel’s theology, but denies Semipelagianism on the ground that there is no temporal priority between the human act and the divine act infusing grace; and Dennis Janz, “A Reinterpretation of Gabriel Biel on Nature and Grace,” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 8 (1977), pp. 104–108, who concludes against Ernst’s modification of the argument in favor of Oberman,

The issue of Arminius’ reputed Semipelagianism is somewhat different from Biel’s given that in the era of the probable polemical creation of the term, Arminius was identified as a Semipelagian and in still more polemical moments as simply Pelagian. Recent scholarship has (and rightly so) abandoned the notion that Arminius was Pelagian, recognizing that this accusation arose out of intense polemic rather than a more objective reading of Arminius’ works.⁹ Some writers, however, have continued to identify his soteriology as Semipelagian,¹⁰ while others have disputed the characterization, depending either on comparison between Arminius’ views and those of the patristic-era Semipelagians,¹¹ or on their interpretation of Arminius’ remarks on the phrase *facientibus quod in de est, Deus non denegat gratiam* over against that of Gabriel Biel,¹² or by arguing a difference between Arminius’ teaching and the Molinist views also identified as Semipelagian in the early modern era.¹³

2. Early Modern Reformed References to Semipelagianism

In approaching this question, two points need to be emphasized. First, that the term, as illustrated by Perkins’ paradigm, was understood as indicating a soteriology distinct from Pelagianism but nonetheless viewed as perilously close to a Pelagian approach to salvation. Once a spectrum of opinion is recognized, non-Pelagian or even anti-Pelagian arguments can be identified in theologies that still do not qualify as

9. Cf. Eef Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas: Vrijheid, genade en predestinatie in de theologie van Jacobus Arminius, 1559–1609* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), pp. 156, 176; with Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, p. 159.

10. Cf. Richard A. Muller, “Arminius and Arminianism,” in *Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 33–36; idem, “The Priority of the Intellect in the Soteriology of Jacob Arminius,” in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 55 (1993), pp. 55–72, here p. 60; by implication in idem, “The Federal Motif in Seventeenth Century Arminian Theology,” in *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 62/1 (1982), pp. 102–122, here p. 107; with John V. Fesko, “Arminius on *Facientibus Quod In Se Est* and Likely Medieval Sources,” in Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, eds., *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013), pp. 347–360; Raymond A. Blacketer, “Arminius’ Concept of Covenant in its Historical Context,” in *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*, 80/2 (2000), pp. 193–220, here pp. 205–207; and Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Farnham, Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 27.

11. A. Mark Ellis, “Simon Episcopius’ Doctrine of Original Sin” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002), p. 122.

12. Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (New York: Oxford, 2012), pp. 159–164.

13. F. Stuart Clarke, “Theology of Arminius,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, 185 (1960), pp. 248–253, here pp. 249–250; idem, *The Ground of Election: Jacobus Arminius’ Doctrine of the Work and Person of Christ* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 145, 166.

Augustinian.¹⁴ Second, the term *Semipelagiani* is not of patristic, but of early modern origin. The term may have originated as a modification of Prosper of Aquitaine's term *Pelagianae pravitas reliquiae* ("remainders of the Pelagian deformity"),¹⁵ but the earliest known usages do not explicitly reference patristic sources.¹⁶ This relative independence of the initial early modern accusations of Semipelagianism from the late patristic controversies probably reflects the medieval reception of the materials: the anti-Augustinians of southern Gaul had been identified simply as Gallican or Massilian opponents of Augustine. It is also the case that the decisions of the Second Council of Orange do not mention the names of the Massilians.¹⁷

In the debates of the 1540s, Calvin demonstrated an awareness of the patristic controversy and of the differences indicated by Augustine between his Pelagian and his Massilian adversaries, but did not associate them with a particular heterodoxy or, indeed, with the condemnations of Orange.¹⁸ The intention behind the usage was, clearly, a matter of guilt by association—to identify contemporary synergism as a derivation from Pelagianism, with synergistic opponents of Augustinian doctrine, and, as debate progressed, with the Massilians, who did not deny original sin and who assumed the necessity of grace. The term, along with a French synonym "demy Pelagiens," was early on applied by Beza to those who held that salvation was a result of a cooperation of divine grace and human choice and who, by extension, argue predestination on the basis of foreknowledge—specifically Roman theologians and

14. McGrath, "Anti-Pelagian Structure," pp. 107–108, 117–118; and idem, *Iustitia Dei*, pp. 100–101, makes too little of a distinction between the two terms and assumes that, since the term Semipelagian was not available and the decisions of the Second Council of Orange were not being considered in Biel's time, the term cannot be applied to his theology. As we have seen above, however, the origin of the term was not primarily for the sake of characterizing the Massilians or the objects of Second Council of Orange's decision. Note also that McGrath, "Anti-Pelagian Structure," p. 116, actually grants Oberman's argument while attempting to refute it: "if it is proposed to consider justification from a purely human standpoint, Biel's doctrine of justification is indeed *solis operibus*—and so are all other doctrines of justification which require any sort of response to the divine initiative," inasmuch as in Biel's view what McGrath identifies as the "divine initiative" is a general grace not in itself effective.

15. See Prosper of Aquitaine, *Letter to Augustine*, in Prosper, *Defense of Augustine*, trans. P. De Letter (New York: Newman, 1963), pp. 38–48, here p. 45 and p. 204 n35.

16. Cf. Theodore Beza, *Novum D. N. Jesu Christi Testamentum, latine jam olim a vetere interprete, nunc denuo a Theodoro Beza versum* (Geneva: Stephanus, 1556), Eph. 2:3; 1 Tim. 2:4 (fol. 249v, 273r); and the Lutheran, *Von der semptlichen unterschreibung der Augsburgischen Confession* (S.l.: s.n., 1561), fol. Aiii recto.

17. Cf. Henri Bouillard, "Saint Thomas et le Semi-Pelagianisme," in *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique*, 43 (1942), pp. 181–209, here, pp. 182–185; with Amann, "Semi-pélagiens," col. 1849.

18. Cf. Backus and Goudriaan, "'Semipelagianism': the Origins of the Term," pp. 31–33.

Sebastian Castellio.¹⁹ Later it became a standard reference to Arminius and the Remonstrants, as also to Molinists.²⁰

The extent to which Beza’s usage took the patristic debates into consideration may be questioned. Given his characterization of Semipelagianism as assuming a cooperation between grace and will, with grace aiding the weakened will, it seems that Beza did not simply view Semipelagianism as an ancient development out of the Pelagian controversies, but chose the term as a reference to contemporary Roman Catholic views on the relationship of divine grace and human free choice.²¹ It is quite clear, however, that later applications of the term dating from the early seventeenth century are not simply references to Romanist and Arminian errors: their definitional structure is also rooted in the anti-Massilian writings of Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine, and Hilary of Arles.

Usages similar to Beza’s are found among early orthodox Reformed writers. Their definitions vary, albeit all identify problems of synergism. Prior to the time of Arminius, Lambert Daneau used the term, as had Beza, to indicate a contemporary Roman Catholic theological problem.²² We have already cited this usage in the work of William Perkins. Kimedoncius, without specifying his contemporary adversary, identified Semipelagianism as the doctrine according to which grace assists the weakened will to accomplish the good. He responded “cum Augustino,” but

19. Cf. Theodore Beza, *Confessio christianae fidei* (Geneva: Ioannes Bona Fides, 1560), iv.17 (p. 57); and idem, *Responsio ad defensionem & reprehensiones Sebastiani Castellionis: quibus suam Novi Testamenti interpretationem defendere adversus Bezam, & eius versione vicissim reprehendere conatus est* (Geneva: Stephanus, 1563), p. 111. The term *demy Pelagiens* appears in Beza’s French translation of the confession, *Confession de la foy chrestienne* (Geneva: Jean Durant, 1563), pp. 66.

20. John Davenant, *Animadversions written by the Right Reverend Father in God, John, Lord Bishop of Sarisbury, upon a treatise intituled, Gods love to mankind* (London: John Partridge, 1641), pp. 8–9, 12, 58, where he identifies Arminius’ teaching as standing in relation to the Jesuit doctrine of predestination on the basis of foreseen merits and also uses the term Semipelagian both historically and as a term for the Remonstrants. On Arminius’ appropriation of the doctrine of *scientia media*, see Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas*, pp. 178–190, 208–209, 213, 244–245; and idem, “Was Arminius a Molinist?” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27/2 (1996), pp. 337–352. Note Alvarez, *De auxiliis* (1610), I, d. 1; d. 2 (pp. 11, 14–15), distinguishing Pelagians and Semipelagians. The Arminians of the era argued against the accusation of Semipelagianism: see Ioannes Corvinus, *Petri Molinaei novi anatomici mala encheiresis: seu censura Anatomes Arminianismi* (Frankfurt: Erasmus Kempffer, 1623), p. 334; as did the Jesuits: see, e.g., Roderigo de Arriaga, *Disputationum theologicarum in Primum Secundum D. Thomae, tomus secundus: sive universi cursus theologici, tomus quartus* (Lyon: Laurentius Anisson, 1647), pp. 416, c. 27; 562, n. 42.

21. For a full discussion of Beza’s usage, see Goudriaan and Backus, “Semipelagianism,” pp. 35–40.

22. Lambert Daneau, *D. Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi liber De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* (Geneva: 1578.), fol. 214r, as cited in Goudriaan and Backus, “Semipelagianism,” p. 40.

mentioned no patristic opponents to Augustine's doctrine.²³ Bucanus defined the Semipelagians, as those "who attribute our conversion partly [to] the grace of God, partly to the power of free choice."²⁴ The scholastics—not named by Bucanus—who teach that "a man by doing what is in him, merits grace *de congruo*" are also to be numbered among the Semipelagians, inasmuch as their doctrine indicates that free choice is only weakened by the fall and that "free choice [*Liberum Arbitrium*] cooperates with the grace of God ... [and] that the will is able to prepare itself for grace."²⁵ The Semipelagian adversaries are still identified as contemporaries—or at least not specified as echoing a patristic heterodoxy.²⁶

In the course of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debate, accusations of Semipelagianism were increasingly accompanied by confirmatory references to the letter of Prosper and Hilary of Arles to Augustine, for the sake of describing theologies that were distinctly synergistic, whether patristic, medieval, or early modern, but in more precise definition not fully Pelagian. Just prior to the Synod of Dort, Pareus made the patristic connection and used the term to describe the adversaries in two of Augustine's treatises, both responses to letters from Prosper of Aquitaine and Hilary of Arles. In Pareus' view, Augustine's *De praedestinatione sanctorum* opposed the Pelagians, whereas his *De bono perseverantia* opposed the Semipelagians—and therefore identified two theological errors associated primarily with the source of faith and perseverance in faith. The Pelagians, Pareus indicated, held that the source of growth (*incrementa*) of faith was from God but that its beginning or initiation was from human beings; the Semipelagians held that the beginning or initiation of faith was from God but its source of growth and perseverance was brought about by human beings.²⁷

At the Synod of Dort, with specific reference to the letters of Prosper and Hilary, as well as to the two books of Augustine noted by Pareus, the examination of the first article of the Remonstrance—despite the Remonstrants explicit denial—identifies

23. Jacob Kimedoncius, *De redemptione generis humani libri tres: Quibus copiose traditur controversia, De redemptionis et gratiae per Christum universalitate, et morte ipsius pro omnibus. Accessit tractatio finitissima de divina praedestinatione uno libro comprehensa* (Heidelberg: Abraham Smessmann, 1592), viii, resp. 8 (pp. 527–528).

24. Gulielmus Bucanus, *Institutiones theologicae, seu locorum communium Christianae religionis, ex Dei verbo, et praestantissimorum theologorum orthodoxo consensu expositorum* (Bern: Iohannes & Isaias Le Preux, 1605), xviii (p. 197).

25. Bucanus, *Institutiones*, xviii (p. 197).

26. Note that Daniel Tossanus, *Synopsis de patribus, sive praecipuis et vetustioribus ecclesiae doctoribus, nec non de scholasticis: quantum eis deferendum: quo tempore vixerint: qua cum cautione legendi: quaeque eorum dotes & naevi fuerint* (Heidelberg: s.n., 1603), does not mention either the Massilians or the Council of Orange.

27. David Paraeus, *In divinam ad Romanos S. Pauli Apostoli Epistolam Commentarius* (Geneva: Paul Marcellus, 1617), pp. 900–901, on Romans 9, *Dubium* xvii. Both of these views would have been ruled out by the decisions of the Second Council of Orange, which declared that not only the beginning of faith or *initium fidei* but also further increase (*augmentum*) of faith was the gift of grace: see canon 5 in Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, §178.

their theology as Semipelagian, on the ground that they do not rest faith, conversion, perseverance, and salvation solely on the grace of God but assume throughout the cooperation of the human will.²⁸ In the wake of Dort, Du Moulin reiterated the charge of Semipelagianism at length, associating the Arminian doctrine directly with the patristic debate, including lengthy citations from Prosper and Hilary.²⁹ Du Moulin’s definitions of the problem are quite precise, albeit without detailed differentiation of the ancient anti-Augustinian positions. The Semipelagians, he indicates, attempted to find a middle path between Pelagius and Augustine:

For they taught that the sinne of *Adam* flowed into his posterieie: that mans nature was corrupt, and that by the powers of nature he could not come to salvation: But they taught that the grace which should cure nature, is present with all men; and that all men, either by naturall law, or by the written law, or by the Gospell, are so called, that it is free for every man to embrace or refuse the offered grace, to beleeve or not to beleeve: For (they say) that Christ obtained reconciliation for all men; and that God from eternity elected those whom he fore-saw would beleeve in Christ, and persevere in the faith.³⁰

Further, the Semipelagians differ from Pelagius inasmuch as “they acknowledge nature to be depraved with Originall sinne, and that they distinguish nature from grace,” but although “they distinguish nature from grace” they nonetheless lean toward Pelagius because “they will have grace equally extend itself as farre as nature” and “they make such a grace, the use whereof doth depend upon free-will.”³¹ One difference that Du Moulin allows between the original Semipelagians and the Arminians is that the latter “doe more sparingly use the word Merit.”³²

Ussher had recourse to the problem of Semipelagianism both in his *Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuit* (1625) and in his antiquities of the British church (1639), in both instances, with detailed reference to the patristic debates at the time of the Second Council of Orange.³³ Ussher, as one might expect, is more detailed and precise in his definition of the problem than Pareus, similar to Du Moulin:

28. *Acta Synodi Nationalis* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1620), Session Ninety-Nine (pp. 205, 207), examining the first article of the Remonstrants.

29. Pierre Du Moulin, *Anatome Arminianismi seu, enucleatio controversiam quae in Belgio agitantur, super doctrina de providentia: de praedestinatione, de morte Christi, de natura & gratia* (Leiden: Abraham Picard, 1619), xlii (pp. 348–352); idem, *The Anatomy of Arminianisme: or the opening of the Controversies lately handled in the Low-Countryes, Concerning the Doctrine of Providence, of Predestination, of the Death of Christ, of the Nature of Grace* (London: T. S. for Nathaniel Newbery, 1620), xli (pp. 422–427).

30. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 423).

31. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 424).

32. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 427).

33. James Ussher, *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuit in Ireland, wherein the Judgment of Antiquity in the Points Questioned, is Truly Delivered, and the Novelty of the Now*

Beside the professed Pelagians, who directly did deny original sin, there arose others in the Church in St. Augustine's days, that were tainted not a little with their errors in this point of grace and free will; namely, one Vitalis in Carthage, and the Semi-Pelagians, as they are commonly called in France. For the first held, that "God did work in us to will by his Scriptures either read or heard by us; but that to consent unto them nor not consent is so in our power, that if we will it may be done, if we will not, we may make the operation of God to be of no force in us.... The doctrine of the Semi-Pelagians in France is related by Prosper of Aquitanicus and Hilarius Arelatensis ... "they do agree," saith Hilarius, "that all men were lost in Adam, and that from thence no man by his proper will can be freed: but this they say is agreeable to the truth, or answerable to the preaching of the word, that when the means of obtaining salvation is declared to such as are cast down and would never rise again by their own strength, that they by merit, whereby they do will and believe that they can be healed from their disease, may obtain both the increase of that faith, and the effecting of their whole health."³⁴

Further, as Hilary indicated, these latter Semipelagians argue "that grace is not denied, when such a will as this is said to go before it, which seeketh only a physician, but is not of itself otherwise able to do any thing."³⁵

Walaeus used the term as a reference to the doctrine of election on the basis of foreknown faith and offered a rather precise definition, followed by extensive citation of Augustine and Prosper. He poses a question concerning the origins of faith and perseverance and offers three answers: "from free choice," which he assigns to the Pelagians; "partly from grace and partly from human free choice," which he assigns to the Semipelagians; and "from the mere and sole grace of God," which is the "orthodox" position.³⁶ In his treatise against Hoard (1641), Davenant similarly used the term Semipelagian with reference to the opponents of Prosper of Aquitaine and the late fifth-century opponent of Augustinian doctrine, Faustus of Riez. Citing Prosper's *Letter to Augustine*, Davenant identifies the Semipelagian position as placing human obedience prior to grace and "the beginning of salvation from the one who is saved, not from God who saves."³⁷ In his *Exercitationes de gratia universali* (1646), Spanheim makes no patristic reference but initially applies the two terms in

Romish Doctrine Plainly Discovered, in *Whole Works*, III, pp. 534–544; cf. idem, *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates*, xii and xiii, in *Whole Works*, V, pp. 410–424; 488–497.

34. Ussher, *Answer to a Challenge*, in *Whole Works*, III, p. 537.

35. Ussher, *Answer to a Challenge*, in *Whole Works*, III, p. 537.

36. Antonius Walaeus, *Quae sint electionis nostrae causa*, in *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Franciscus Hackius, 1643), I, p. 337.

37. John Davenant, *Animadversions written by the Right Reverend Father in God, John, Lord Bishop of Sarisbury, upon a treatise intituled, Gods love to mankind* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1641), pp. 14–15.

tandem as references to contemporary proponents of “universal grace,”³⁸ in some places linking the Arminians specifically with the Semipelagians,³⁹ but identifying the distinction between the Reformed orthodox and both groups as the “particularity” of “effective grace.”⁴⁰

Several points can be drawn from these usages and definitions. Certainly their primary object was to link various forms of contemporary synergism to an ancient debate, in some cases without great interest in the contours of that ancient debate, but in others with a rather pronounced interest not only in the ancient debate but in the difference between Pelagianism and Semipelagianism. By far the larger part of the later definitions evidence an awareness of the details of the patristic debate and draw on Augustine, Prosper, and Hilary of Arles for aspects of their definition of the issue. Understandings of the difference between Pelagianism and Semipelagianism typically identify the former as denying original sin and placing human effort entirely prior to grace, including identifying the beginning of faith (*initia fidei*) as accomplished entirely by the human being—the latter, by contrast affirm original sin and the need for human cooperation with grace. Some like Pareus, Spanheim, and, in more detail Du Moulin, assume that Semipelagians hold a priority of a generalized, universal, or resistible grace. Others, like Davenant and Ussher, argue more closely with reference to specific texts in Prosper and Hilary that, although divine grace is generally available, Semipelagians assume the initiation of salvation begins with the human being. To these characteristics can be added the point that, given their emphasis on the human initiation of salvation or the human role in perseverance, the Semipelagians will also ground predestination in foreknowledge, an issue noted by Perkins and also by Augustine against the Massilians.⁴¹ The variety of definition, often in the context of citing Augustine, Prosper, and Hilary for support, arguably indicates that the early seventeenth-century Reformed understanding of Semipelagianism includes the teachings of the Massilians without being confined to the historical materials.

3. Arminius and the Accusation of Semipelagianism

Arminius was well aware that he had been charged with Semipelagianism.⁴² In particular the unnamed opponents to whom he responded in his *Apology* had claimed

38. Friedrich Spanheim, Sr., *Exercitationes de gratia universali. Accessere l. erotemata auctori proposita, & ab eodem decisa, cum mantissa c. anterotematum*. 3 parts (Leiden: J. Maire, 1646), pt. 1, fol. (???)3v, (???)4r, (???)5r; also (???)5r–v, (???)6v–(???)7r. N.B., the repeated “?” enclosed in parentheses was used by the printer to identify the unpaginated leaves of the work.

39. Spanheim, *Exercitationes de gratia universali*, pt. 1, fol. (???)4v–(???)5r; so also, *ibid.*, *Dissertatio de gratia universali*, p. 52.

40. Spanheim, *Exercitationes de gratia universali*, pt. 1, fol. (???)7r.

41. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, c. 34 [xvii] in *NPNF*, 1st series, V, p. 515.

42. See the examination of this issue in Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace*, pp. 159–164.

that he raised the point that “It may be discussed, whether Semipelagianism is not true Christianity [*verus Christianismus*].”⁴³ In response, after musing about the impropriety of inventing of epithets such as “semipelagian, quarterpelagian, threequarterspelagian, fivetwelfthspelagian,” Arminius comments that he had never intended “to patronize” Pelagian doctrine, but (presumably in view of the vagueness of the various percentages) to indicate that a view might be called Semipelagian and nonetheless be genuinely Christian, particularly if it were a movement away from the Pelagian error. He concludes by identifying the extremes of Pelagianism and Manicheeism and noting that the middle path between these heresies ought to be respected, particularly inasmuch as Augustine implied that this was his own interest, given his polemics against both.⁴⁴ Arminius concludes his remarks by noting the problem of hurling epithets and the importance of examining the actual substance of a person’s views, noting that it would be just as easy for him to convict those who accuse him of Pelagian views of Manicheeism or Stoicism.⁴⁵

What is of interest here is that Arminius does not precisely deny that his views could be identified as Semipelagian and he clearly indicates that, if the term were understood to indicate doctrine mid-way between Manicheeism and Pelagianism, it could well denominate a genuinely Christian view. It was certainly not far from Arminius’ mind that Calvin had been accused—by Bolsec among others—of Manicheeism. Notably, when Arminius cleared himself of the charge of Pelagianism in his *Declaration of Sentiments*, he did not return to the issue of Semipelagianism, but made a point of noting the error of the Manichees and Stoics.⁴⁶

Given what we have already seen about the early modern origins of the term and its intended application, the potential similarity of Arminius’ thought to Gabriel Biel’s late medieval Semipelagianism is not directly relevant to the identification of Arminius as Semipelagian. Still, there is the issue of Arminius’ understanding of the application of the maxim associated with various synergistic theologies of the late Middle Ages, *facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*—“to those who do what is in them God will not deny grace.” In the form found in the accusation against Arminius, it was claimed that he held “God will not deny grace to one who does what is in him.”⁴⁷ To this accusation Arminius responded that, as stated, the phrase could imply that grace was to be excluded from the beginning of conversion

43. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xxx, in *Opera theologica* (Leiden: Godefridus Basson, 1629), p. 179; also in translation, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols., repr. with an intro. by Carl Bangs (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), II, p. 56.

44. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xxx, in *Opera*, p. 179 (*Works*, II, pp. 56–57).

45. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xxx, in *Opera*, pp. 179–180 (*Works*, II, pp. 57).

46. Arminius, *Declaratio Sententiae*, in *Opera*, p. 115 (*Works*, I, pp. 643, 684–689). Note that there is at least one other reference to Semipelagians in Arminius’ works, where he indicates that both the Pelagians and (presumable the patristic era) Semipelagians were ignorant of the overarching governance of God: see *Examen modestum*, in *Opera*, p. 638 (*Works*, III, p. 273).

47. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xvii, in *Opera*, p. 158 (*Works*, II, p. 19).

and that conversion was left entirely to the unaided will. He denied that he had ever made such a statement and had consistently held that grace precedes, accompanies, and follows any “good action” that human beings produce. The doctrine that a human being can do something good and thereby gain favor from God is, certainly, one construction that can be placed on the *facientibus quod in se est*.⁴⁸ This construction can be identified in some of Gabriel Biel’s arguments.⁴⁹ But it is not a view identified in the early modern Reformed definitions as Semipelagianism: they quite clearly identify this view as purely and simply Pelagianism—and it is a view that Arminius clearly denied.

Having rejected this reading of the maxim, Arminius argues that there must be divine assistance if a person is to do “what is acceptable to God.”⁵⁰ He then parses the maxim so as to allow his own teaching: “upon one who properly uses initial grace, God will bestow further [grace].”⁵¹ This approach is also found in Biel, who could refer to first grace as *gratia gratis data* or “grace graciously given” as a divine gift in creation, as distinct from second grace given in salvation—in Oberman’s words, this first grace is “thoroughly naturalized and barely distinguishable from man’s natural endowments.”⁵² Now, this second reading of Biel in which a person cooperates with a preliminary, universal, resistible grace, corresponds precisely with Du Moulin’s and Bucanus’s definitions of Semipelagianism as distinct from Pelagianism. Arminius, certainly more than Biel, emphasized the necessity of grace and, unlike Biel, repudiated a theology of merit; but this latter point was recognized by Du Moulin who indicated that Arminius spoke less of “merit” than the original Semipelagians.⁵³

Similarly, when Arminius responded to the accusation that he claimed that “faith is not the pure gift of God, but depends ... partly on the powers of free choice,” or assumed that “if a man will, he can believe or not believe,”⁵⁴ he did not directly refute the accusation, but rather raised the issue of divine concurrence and disputed the doctrine of a grace that was bestowed “with such potency that it cannot be resisted by any free creature.”⁵⁵ Clarke points to this argument as proof that Arminius was not Semipelagian,⁵⁶ but not only the denial of irresistible grace, but also Arminius’ explanation of the “pure gift of grace” by way of the example of a rich man bestowing

48. Cf. Heiko Oberman, “*Facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat Gratiā*: Robert Holcot OP and the beginnings of Luther’s theology,” in *Harvard Theological Review*, 55/4 (1962), pp. 317–342.

49. See Oberman, *Harvest*, pp. 133–134.

50. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xvii, in *Opera*, p. 159 (*Works*, II, p. 20).

51. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xvii, in *Opera*, p. 159 (*Works*, II, p. 20).

52. Oberman, *Harvest*, p. 138.

53. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 424); and Bucanus, *Institutiones*, xviii (p. 177), as quoted above; and disagreeing with the conclusion in Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, pp. 162–163, that Arminius’ answer clears him of a Semipelagian view.

54. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, vii (i.e., xxvii), in *Opera*, p. 176 (*Works*, II, p. 51).

55. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, vii (i.e., xxvii), in *Opera*, p. 177 (*Works*, II, p. 52).

56. Clarke, “Theology of Arminius,” pp. 249–250.

a gift on a beggar who does nothing more than extend his hand, points toward Arminius' own explanation of the *facere quod in se est*. "Does it cease to be a pure gift," Arminius queries, "because the beggar extends his hand to receive it?"— or, further, does the extension of the hand indicate that the charity "depended partly on the *liberality* of the giver, and partly on the *liberty* of the receiver?"⁵⁷ The answer to Arminius' rhetorical questions—contrary to Clarke's interpretation—is simply that the beggar has done what is in him, extend his hand, and that this proportionate act is enough to receive the grace.⁵⁸ As elsewhere, Arminius does not identify the act of the beggar as a meritorious work,⁵⁹ a point of difference between his argument and the late medieval versions of Semipelagianism. There is, arguably, a parallel between Arminius' metaphor of the beggar and Ussher's medical analogy "that grace is not denied, when such a will as this is said to go before it, which seeketh only a physician, but is not of itself otherwise able to do any thing."⁶⁰

There is, moreover, a further confirmation of a Semipelagian reading of Arminius' comments in his answer to one of the other defamatory articles: he had been accused of teaching that pagans, devoid of any true knowledge of God, could, "by the powers of nature," please God and be rewarded with an "enlarged knowledge by which they may be brought to salvation."⁶¹ Arminius denied the accusation, adamantly stating that a person who is an utter "stranger to the true knowledge of God" will be incapable of doing anything pleasing to God: to claim the opposite would be to lapse into Pelagianism. In order to be pleasing to God, he continues, an act must be "good, at least in a certain respect" and the person who performs it must know that it is "good and agreeable to God."⁶²

Arminius next examines the meaning of "nature" and "powers of nature [*viribus naturae*]" as employed in the accusation. He argues that a nature that is "entirely destitute of grace" will not have access to the true knowledge of God, namely, his "eternal power and Godhead," that, according to Romans 1:18–20, is known to those "held in unrighteousness." Some knowledge of the "eternal power and Godhead" is still "held in unrighteousness," to the end that those who fail to glorify God are left without excuse. Such knowledge cannot come from nature, as nature of itself tends earthward: this knowledge itself arises from the grace of God.⁶³ Arminius continues by citing a form of the scholastic maxim, "For the person who does what is in him,

57. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, vii (i.e., xxvii), in *Opera*, p. 176 (*Works*, II, p. 52).

58. As also noted in Muller, "Priority of the Intellect," p. 60; and Fesko, "Arminius on *Facientibus quod in se est*," pp. 349, 351–352.

59. As observed by John Mark Hicks, "The Righteousness of Saving Faith: Arminian versus Remonstrant Grace," in *Evangelical Journal*, 9 (1991), pp. 27–39, here pp. 30–31.

60. Ussher, *Answer to a Challenge*, in *Whole Works*, III, p. 537.

61. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xv, in *Opera*, p. 156 (*Works*, II, p. 14).

62. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xv, in *Opera*, p. 156 (*Works*, II, pp. 14–15), citing Romans 1:18–21, 25, 28; 2:14–15.

63. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xv, in *Opera*, p. 156 (*Works*, II, p. 15).

God will do what is in him [i.e., in God].”⁶⁴ This doing what is in one, moreover, as the scholastics held, is not a full or condign good (*ex condigno*) but a proportionate or congruous good (*ex congruo*). Arminius concludes with his own interpretation of the Semipelagian maxim.

I refuse to employ this saying of the scholastics without the addition of these words: *to the person who does what is in him by the power of divine grace that is already granted to him, on him God will bestow a greater grace: according to the declaration of Christ: to the person who has, it shall be given.*⁶⁵

Arminius’ language here reflects Bucanus’ definition, “free choice cooperates with the grace of God” so that “a man by doing what is in him merits grace *de congruo*.”⁶⁶

In his study of seventeenth-century Reformed natural theology, John Platt rightly concluded that Arminius here denied a purely natural true knowledge of God and advocated a view of universally available gracious gift of knowledge of God’s power and deity.⁶⁷ Arminius also indicates that, on the basis of this knowledge and of the resistible, non-saving grace associated with it, a person may act to receive further, saving grace—which, again, taking the maxim by itself, conforms to the second reading of Biel, except for Arminius’ careful omission of the term “merit” from his language of congruity. As we have seen noted by Du Moulin, Arminius does not say *meritum de congruo*, rather only *ex congruo*, leaving open the point that doing what is in one is not a work tending toward righteousness but an initial act of faith. Arminius’ argument here also fits Du Moulin’s description of Semipelagianism as teaching “that mans nature was corrupt, and that by the powers of nature he could not come to salvation: But they taught that the grace which should cure nature, is present with all men; and that ... it is free for every man to embrace or refuse the offered grace, to beleeve or not to beleeve.”⁶⁸

These indications of a synergistic approach to conversion, the primary basis of contemporary accusations of Semipelagianism, stand in clear relation to Arminius’ understanding of predestination as a consequent willing grounded on divine foreknowledge:

To these succeeds the fourth decree, by which God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from eternity those individuals who would, through his prevenient grace, believe, and through his subsequent grace would

64. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xv, in *Opera*, p. 157 (*Works*, II, p. 16).

65. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xv, in *Opera*, p. 157 (*Works*, II, p. 16), Arminius’ italics.

66. Bucanus, *Institutions*, xviii (p. 215).

67. John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575-1650* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), pp. 180, 182.

68. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 423).

persevere, according to the before described administration of those means which are suitable and proper for conversion and faith; and, by which foreknowledge, he likewise knew those who would not believe and persevere.⁶⁹

Salvation is decreed on the basis of foreknown belief; damnation on the basis of foreknown unbelief. Salvation is by grace, but prevenient grace is universally offered and resistible and subsequent grace, also, can be rejected.⁷⁰ Arguably, in accord with Arminius' Molinism, an eternal foreknowledge of the human act and perseverance in faith is the deciding factor.⁷¹ We return to the definitions of Semipelagianism offered by Perkins before the Arminian controversy and by Du Moulin after it. Perkins indicated that Semipelagians "ascribe Gods Predestination, partlye to mercye, and partly to mens foreseen preparations and meritorious workes."⁷² Du Moulin indicated that according to the Semipelagians, "God from eternity elected those whom he foresaw would beleeve in Christ, and persevere in the faith" and, as we have seen, recognized that Arminius did not concentrate on merit after the manner of the Massilians or the late medieval Semipelagians.⁷³ On this issue as well, the early modern definitions, particularly those of Bucanus and Du Moulin, frame several versions of synergistic theology, one of which is represented by Arminius.

4. Conclusions

It should also be clear that the approach found in Ellis' study, namely to begin with a summary of the late patristic Semipelagian theology and compare it to Arminius,⁷⁴ is unsatisfactory, inasmuch as the term itself and its original definitions arose in the sixteenth century and were used to describe perceived problems in the theology of the era. The gradual increase of reference to the patristic sources as well as the naming of the Massilian opponents of Augustine as Semipelagian came to serve as a further indicator in the polemics of a non- and even anti-Augustinian teaching held by opponents of the Reformed—just as it also indicates the rise of interest in patristic theology as a foundational reference point for catholicity on the part of the early orthodox Reformed.⁷⁵

69. Arminius, *Declaration of Sentiments*, in *Works*, I, pp. 653–654; also *Certain Articles*, xv.4, in *Works*, II, p.719.

70. Arminius, *Works*, II, pp. 19–20.

71. For a more detailed argument on Arminius' doctrine of predestination, see Richard A. Muller, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius' Gambit and the Reformed Response," in Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, eds. *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), II, pp. 251–278.

72. Perkins, *Golden Chaine* (1597), p. 7.

73. Du Moulin, *Anatomy*, xlii (p. 423).

74. Ellis, "Simon Episcopius's Doctrine of Original Sin," pp. 121–122.

75. Cf. Irena Backus, "The Fathers in Calvinist Orthodoxy: Patristic Scholarship," in Backus, ed. *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, 2

Similarly, the argument that Arminius’ view does not correspond precisely with that of Gabriel Biel is insufficient, given among other things both the origin and the breadth of early modern definitions of the term.⁷⁶ The more historically suitable method is to begin with the term and definitions as found in early modern documents and ask whether a particular doctrinal perspective has been described by the definitions—and we have found that Arminius’ argumentation does belong to the spectrum of opinion found in the early modern definitions of Semipelagianism.

This conclusion also stands against the argumentation found in Clarke’s studies, despite his recognition of the historical origin of the term “Semipelagian” in the sixteenth century.⁷⁷ Clarke recognizes that, in his response to the charge of Semipelagianism, Arminius denounced both Pelagianism and the use of the terms like “Semipelagianism,” but then indicated that a Semipelagian might well hold “the truth of Christian doctrine.”⁷⁸ “It is possible,” Clarke concludes, “that, knowing of the use of the term against Molina and others from whom he had learned something, he wished to come to their defense.”⁷⁹ But it is precisely this indication of a favorable reading of Semipelagianism, as broadly understood in early modern definitions, that associates Arminius’ teaching with it—and, significantly, Arminius did not deny this particular accusation. The association with Molina only serves to justify the application to Arminius.⁸⁰

Finally, when the ways in which Arminius indicates an initial cooperation between a resistible grace and human free choice or, as just above, a proper use of initial grace,⁸¹ are seen in the light of his clearly stated view that election is grounded in divine foreknowledge of belief and perseverance, Arminius’ thought does not

vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), II, pp. 839–866; and note idem, “Irenaeus, Calvin and Calvinist Orthodoxy: The Patristic Manual of Abraham Scultetus (1598),” in *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 1 (1999), pp. 41–53.

76. As in Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, pp. 162–163.

77. Clarke, *Ground of Election*, pp. 145, 166; Clarke’s other argument, in his “Theology of Arminius,” pp. 249–250, was addressed above.

78. Arminius, *Apologia adversus articulos*, xxx, in *Opera*, p. 179 (*Works*, II, pp. 56–57).

79. Clarke, *Ground of Election*, p. 145.

80. Several writers have denied that Arminius drew on Molina; but see Eef Dekker, “Was Arminius a Molinist?” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27/2 (1996), pp. 337–352; and Richard A. Muller, “Arminius’ ‘Conference’ with Junius and the Protestant Reception of Molina’s *Concordia*,” in Jordan J. Ballor, Matthew T. Gaetano, and David S. Sytsma, ed., *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis: Augustinian Dynamics in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, forthcoming).

81. Cf. Arminius, *Examen modestum*, in *Opera*, p. 754; *Works*, III, p. 449; with *Certain Articles*, xvii.12–13, 16; xix.9–10 (*Works*, II, pp. 721–724); *Declaratio Sentiarum*, in *Opera*, p. 119 (*Works*, I, pp. 653–654); and *Apologia adversus articulos*, iv, in *Opera*, p. 140 (*Works*, I, p. 750); but note idem, *Nine Questions*, vi (*Works*, II, pp. 67), which argues that faith is an entirely gratuitous gift; similarly, note Arminius to Uytenbogaert, 27 March 1603, in *Praestantium et eruditorum virorum epistolae* (1684), Ep. 60 (pp. 111–116), partially translated in *Works*, I, pp. 746–747.

assimilate precisely to the ancient Semipelagian view or precisely to Biel's developed position, or, given Arminius' emphasis on foreknown faith, to Molinism. That can be safely concluded. On the other hand, the term Semipelagian in early modern Reformed argumentation typically applies to various forms of synergistic theology in which there is a human cooperation with a resistible universal grace, yielding the conclusion that the human act must be understood as the initiator of salvation. The term arose in response to synergism, initially to contemporary Roman Catholic forms of synergism, it was soon used to identify the contemporary synergisms with the Massilian opponents of Augustine, to Molina's teachings, and to related views, notably those of Arminius, that indicated a cooperation between God and human beings in the receipt of grace. In the context, moreover, of formulations of the doctrine of predestination, the term "Semipelagian" was intended to identify the teaching that God elects those who are foreknown as cooperating in the initiation of salvation by their response to universal grace. Arguably, in this broad application the term does apply to Biel, to Molina, and to Arminius, despite their differences with the Massilians and with one another. Indeed the term was defined primarily for the purpose of identifying these various forms of late medieval and early modern synergistic theology.