



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The theological sources and poetic priorities of Milton’s narrative theodicy

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## Abstract

This study of *Paradise Lost*, interpreted through the lens of John Milton’s treatise *De doctrina Christiana*, argues that the poet seeks to breathe new life into the tropes of orthodox Christian theodicy by radicalising concepts chosen eclectically from both Reformed and Arminian schools of thought, integrating them within the patchwork of his own idiosyncratic heterodoxies and thus catalysing a fundamentally new theology propelled by his narrative priorities. This approach makes the drama that Milton intuitively sees as the driver of dogma, which drama allows him to bring God and reader into the same story, under the spell of his own theodical narration.

**Keywords:** compatibilism; covenant; John Milton; poetics; theodicy

The last century has witnessed a slow-motion struggle to explain how exactly John Milton’s idiosyncratic theology could have generated the energetic theodicy that saturates his prose and poetic works. To this day critical opinion has failed to converge reliably on even the most basic contours of his theology, and scholarly appreciation for his literary project of justifying the ways of God to men varies with each new publication, and according to the personal dictates of each subsequent critic. C. S. Lewis for example perceives and celebrates in *Paradise Lost* the substance of a ‘mere Christianity’ rather like his own: a ‘Catholic quality’ that ‘is so predominant that it is the first impression any unbiased reader would receive’.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, A. O. Lovejoy writes off Milton’s theodicy as a mere triviality, a crude appeal to free will in order to absolve God of responsibility for the evil and suffering he nevertheless allows.<sup>2</sup> Still worse, Milton’s theodicy is in William Empson’s view an attempt at the impossible: a legal defence of *Paradise Lost*’s surprise villain, the archetypically authoritarian

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: OUP, 1961), p. 82. Lewis’s assessment is often still affirmed in many quarters. Note for example how the heterogenies and heterodoxies of *De doctrina Christiana* lead some scholars even today to reject its Miltonian authorship. See Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 163 n. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 212.

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'Father' whom the epic reveals to be a monster insofar as he is in fact the traditional Christian deity of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

In response to Lovejoy and Empson, Dennis Danielson has taken up from Lewis the torch of defending Milton, elaborating a definitive exposition of the poet's theodicy as a triumph of Christian theology in general, and of seventeenth-century Arminian theology in particular.<sup>4</sup> He argues that by rejecting the mainstream Calvinism of his day and adopting instead a broadly libertarian anthropology, Milton was better able than many of his contemporaries to justify the impenetrable ways of God. In Danielson's telling, to assert both God's providence and his goodness, the poet holds in tension two complementary theodical strategies. On one hand, Milton's works clearly offer up a 'free will defence' of God by leaning heavily on the inviolability of his creatures' freedom as a necessary explanation for the real existence of sin and suffering.<sup>5</sup> On the other, Milton justifies God's decision to entrust creatures with free will (despite knowing beforehand where it would inevitably lead) by pointing out the impossibility of moulding creaturely goodness without some kind of 'soul formation' – a period of preparation during which his creatures freely grow in faith and love toward a final maturation.<sup>6</sup> Behind these two approaches to theodicy, Danielson also observes that 'for Milton, not only does theology inform poetry, but poetry informs theology',<sup>7</sup> opening up the potential for exploring more deeply the narrative criteria by which Milton would have sifted through his theodicy's conceptual sources and constructed his expansive vision for God's complete vindication before human eyes.

However, there are good reasons for thinking that the roots and contours of Milton's theodicy are more complex, and more poetically driven than those that Danielson presents. First, scholars have long noted Milton's deep dependence on the writings of Calvinist scholastics, especially Johannes Wolleb and William Ames,<sup>8</sup> neither of whom is once referenced by Danielson. Second, upon closer examination the Remonstrants' continued assertion of God's compatibilist providence threatens to compromise in fact any free will defence. Third, Danielson offers only tangential hints regarding how the 'paradise' of *Paradise Lost* contributes to prelapsarian soul-making while simultaneously neglecting the well-known theological resources at Milton's disposal for imagining such a paradise. Finally, like Lewis, Danielson also tends to downplay those of Milton's views that fall into any number of heterodoxies. In short, if Danielson's defence of Milton's theodicy is to succeed against Lovejoy's claim of triviality and Empson's allegation of cruelty, a fuller picture of Milton's historical sources and poetic priorities is certainly in order.

How then does Milton's unique poetic vision balance divine omnipotence and benevolence alongside human responsibility in a way that could allow for the kind of persuasive and satisfying theodicy that Danielson sees in *Paradise Lost*? This essay will argue that Milton seeks to breathe new life into the classic tropes of orthodox Christian theodicy by radicalising key conceptual elements borrowed eclectically from

<sup>3</sup>William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp. 9–11.

<sup>4</sup>Dennis Richard Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp. 59–62.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 92–163.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 164–201.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen M. Fallon, "'To Act or Not': Milton's Conception of Divine Freedom", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49/3 (1988), pp. 441–4.

the Reformed and Arminian traditions, integrating them within the patchwork of his own idiosyncratic heterodoxies and thus opening the door to a fundamentally new theology propelled by his persistent narrative priorities. Focusing on *Paradise Lost* in particular, as interpreted through the lens of his *De doctrina Christiana*,<sup>9</sup> I will first respond to Lovejoy's suggestion that Milton's 'free will defence' is inherently superficial by examining the poet's narrative commitment to both divine and human freedoms within the context of the broader theological milieu of his day. I will then attend to Empson's accusation that Milton's divinity is a monster by exploring the role covenant theology plays in the poet's 'soul-making' theodicy to reveal the character of God. Finally, I will conclude by briefly reconsidering Lewis' assertion that Milton's heterodoxies are irrelevant to his epic's meaning and force by outlining how these idiosyncrasies affect his narrative theodicy, or rather how his theodicy makes drama itself the driver of dogma.

### Necessity, freedom and goodness

According to Lovejoy, 'the amazing superficiality' of Milton's theodicy stems not only from his God's incessant appeal to free will to justify the fall – a staple of many species of Christian theodicy – but even more so from the natural indifference that this deity exhibits toward his own creation.<sup>10</sup> Although Milton insists on the absolute freedom of rational beings to choose and to act apart from coercion and necessity, he insists equally on the same absolute freedom for their Creator. As a result, by representing the theodicy of *Paradise Lost* as an expression of the Arminian tradition alone, Danielson is able neither to respond adequately to Lovejoy's complaints nor even to exposit accurately the free will defence lying at the heart of the epic. In contrast, this section will argue that Milton pairs a strong libertarian commitment to human freedom with an equally forceful insistence on divine freedom, taking him down a narrative path that integrates Arminianism, Reformed orthodoxy and his own unique heterodoxies. After expositing both radical freedoms, I will show that by holding them in tension, Milton's new theological amalgamation gives poetic force and narrative complexity to his 'free will defence' of God that undercut Lovejoy's claims of indifference and triviality.

The libertarian stakes of Milton's free will defence demand the total repudiation, not only of determinism, but of compatibilism as well.<sup>11</sup> He observes in *De doctrina Christiana*,

All necessity must be removed from our freedom.... If any necessity remains, then as I said earlier it either determines free agents to a single course of action or else

<sup>9</sup>Lewis has argued that this prose manuscript (written in Latin and left unpublished until 1825) is an unnecessary, and perhaps even misleading instrument for interpreting *Paradise Lost*. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has answered definitively any question of its provenance and authenticity, and the theological arguments Milton makes at length in *De doctrina Christiana* shed much light on the narrative themes at stake in what Joel Slotkin has called Milton's 'poetic theodicy'. See Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale, and Fiona J. Tweedie, *Milton and the Manuscript of De doctrina Christiana* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Maurice Kelley, *This Great Argument: A Study of Milton's De Doctrina Christiana as a Gloss upon Paradise Lost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 217; Lewis, *Preface*, pp. 91–2; Joel Slotkin, 'Poetic Justice: Divine Punishment and Augustinian Chiaroscuro in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly* 38/2 (2004), pp. 101–3.

<sup>10</sup>Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 160–65; 351 n. 38.

<sup>11</sup>Danielson, *Milton's Good God*, pp. 136–8.

compels them against their will or else assists them when willing or else does nothing. If it determines free agents to a single course of action, man will be rendered the natural cause of all his actions and likewise of his sins, and as if he were created with a propensity for sinning. If it compels them against their will, man will be rendered by that compulsion of the decree the cause of his sins only *per accidens*, God being the cause of the sins *per se*. If it assists them [when willing], God will still be rendered the cause of the sins along with man, as principal or joint cause. Finally, if it does nothing, no necessity exists, and it removes itself by doing nothing.<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely because he centres his theodicy entirely on creaturely culpability for evil that Milton must also excise all possibility of divine responsibility for the fall's eventuality and outcome. Any interference by God upon the deliberations of the rational creature's will, regardless of whether it be fully determinative or simply compatible with it, will keep God on the hook for evil, compromising the syllogistic integrity of any free will defence. For example, this dynamic is visible in Book III of *Paradise Lost* when God defends his innocence regarding the fallen angels' rebellion on the basis that 'they themselves decreed/Their own revolt, not I'.<sup>13</sup> They fell into sin (as will also Adam and Eve) completely free of his directive influence:

I form'd them free, and free they must remain,  
Till they enthral themselves; I else must change  
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree  
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd  
thir freedom, they themselves ordain'd thir fall.<sup>14</sup>

Just as any creaturely thralldom after the fall is the corrosive consequence of a creature's own volition alone – apart from God's prevenient grace preparing and permitting redemption – similarly divine benevolence may infuse life before the fall, but the liberty that God has given prelapsarian humanity is absolute: in paradise 'force upon free will hath...no place'.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite his emphasis on the freedom of the human will, Milton rejects the intellectualist God of Arminian compatibilism and champions instead a robust view of God's freedom, the origins of which (if not its endpoints) can be found in Reformed orthodoxy. Arminius and the Remonstrants had rearranged the traditional order of the divine decrees to reflect more consistently the omnibenevolent character of God, asserting that God not only acts *in accordance with* his nature, but also that he acts *because it is* his nature.<sup>16</sup> Thus, God's creation of the world, like the universality of his grace becomes a necessary principle predetermined by his essence, thereby guaranteeing limitless opportunities for undetermined human arbitration. However, these constraints also make God's providence compatible with his infinite foreknowledge and eternal wisdom, forcing him by principle to adapt his responses to his creatures' actions

<sup>12</sup>John Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of John Milton*, trans. John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 61.

<sup>13</sup>John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 3.116–117, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

<sup>14</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 3.124–128.

<sup>15</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.1174.

<sup>16</sup>Fallon, 'To Act or Not', p. 430.

to effect his desired outcome – like a divine chess master – and implying (if in a derivative sense) the necessity of their free decisions. It is here that, *pace* Danielson, Milton's theodicy abandons his Arminian sympathies for another model of divine freedom.

Milton's preferred Protestant scholastics, William Ames and Johannes Wolleb, offer a more accurate window into the kind of unshackled divine freedom that Milton will write into his theodicy.<sup>17</sup> Like many Reformed writers of the time, these theologians locate the source of God's 'efficiencies' (his external workings of creation and providence) within his own free will, *consistent* with his nature but *not caused* by it.<sup>18</sup> For example, with respect to God's will, Ames argues that 'What God wills to do outwardly he wills not out of natural necessity but by preceding choice, for there is no necessary connection between the divine nature and such acts. ... Properly speaking, therefore, there is no cause of God's will'.<sup>19</sup> He even goes so far as to dismiss 'a necessity in all future things' no matter how 'certain' they may be, since the will of God itself 'is the prime root and efficient cause of all contingency and freedom in things'.<sup>20</sup> Again, this contingency and freedom does not imply that God's goodness is irrelevant; on the contrary, unlike the 'intellectualism' propounded by Arminians, the possibilities for action inherent in divine benevolence are as manifold as his essence is infinite. Moreover, creaturely contingency and human freedom are only possible themselves because God himself is infinitely free and contingently wills a contingent world. On this point Ames is of one mind with Wolleb, who also concludes that, 'No active cause [*causa impulsiva*] other than the absolutely free will and pleasure of God can be assigned to the divine decrees'.<sup>21</sup> Although theological aporias clearly emerge from this kind of theological incompatibilism ('God both did, and did not, will the first sin'),<sup>22</sup> Milton's creative intuition nevertheless embraces this expansive vision of freedom for his theology's principal Actor.

Milton not only concurs with his Calvinist colleagues in his insistence on the freedom of God's decree, but outdoes them. He agrees with Ames that the goodness of God's nature does not impose necessity upon the divine will, explaining in *De doctrina Christiana* that

[Even] if a certain immutable internal necessity of acting rightly, independent of all external influence, can coexist in God with the utmost freedom of action, since in the same divine nature the two qualities tend to the same result, it does not for that reason follow that the same possibility must be granted in the case

<sup>17</sup>On the crucial, yet uneven influence of Ames and Wolleb on Milton, see John K. Hale, *Milton's Scriptural Theology: Confronting De Doctrina Christiana* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 39–47, 62–3, 95–7; John K. Hale, 'Points of Departure: Studies in Milton's Use of Wollebius', *Reformation* 19/1 (2014), pp. 69–82; T. S. K. Scott-Craig, 'Milton's Use of Wolleb and Ames', *Modern Language Notes* 55/6 (1940), pp. 403–7; Arthur Sewell, *A Study in Milton's Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: OUP, 1939), pp. 35–45; John M. Steadman, 'Milton and Wolleb Again (Paradise Lost, I, 54–56, 777)', *Harvard Theological Review* 53/2 (1960), pp. 155–6.

<sup>18</sup>William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* 1.8.1, trans. and ed. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997 [1968]), p. 100; Johannes Wolleb, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* 1.5.1, in *Reformed Dogmatics: J. Wollebius, G. Voetius, F. Turretin*, trans. John W. Beardslee III, 26–262 (New York: OUP, 1965), p. 54.

<sup>19</sup>Ames, *Marrow* 1.7.36–39, pp. 97–8.

<sup>20</sup>Ames, *Marrow* 1.7.49–50, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup>Wolleb, *Compendium* 1.3.3, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup>Wolleb, *Compendium* 1.9.2, p. 67.

of two different natures, namely God's nature and human nature, for the external immutability on the one side and the internal liberty on the other can oppose each other, and not will the same thing. Indeed I do not even concede any necessity in God to act, but only that he is necessarily God. Scripture itself witnesses that his decreeing, and likewise whatever action he takes, are absolutely free.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, the extraordinary freedom of creaturely action is the consequence of a divine decree that itself issues freely from a deity unconstrained even by his own nature. Along these lines, midway through *Paradise Lost* the archangel Raphael quotes God's assertion of his own absolute liberty, willing his decisions apart from any hint of intellectualist rigidity:

Though I uncircumscrib'd my self retire,  
And put not forth my goodness, which is free  
To act or not, Necessitie and Chance  
Approach not mee, and what I will is Fate.  
So spake th' Almightye, and to what he spake  
His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.<sup>24</sup>

In Benjamin Myers's estimation, 'The poem's portrayal of God therefore properly centres on God's freedom. Even more vigorously than in Reformed orthodox theology, *Paradise Lost* depicts God as a being exalted in his utter freedom; he is free to create or not and free to redeem or not'.<sup>25</sup> God's only limitations are those he freely and contingently decrees in the pursuit of bestowing an agency similar to that which he himself enjoys by nature.<sup>26</sup>

Milton however also seeks to overcome the limitations that orthodox Trinitarianism would place on the divine actor's radical freedom. Confronted with Ames' axiom that whenever God's actions are truly necessary, they must be carried out from eternity,<sup>27</sup> Milton takes the opposite path and embraces an immanent framework of divine freedom within which all of God's decrees and actions issue temporally from his contingent choices. Abandoning the *voluntas necessaria* with which (as orthodoxy had ordinarily insisted) the Father eternally begets the Son,<sup>28</sup> he demands that 'generation' be included among God's external efficiencies,<sup>29</sup> and writes into his poetry and prose an Arian Christology that reimagines the genesis of the Son taking place contingently in the same world of time and space within which our own human stories unfold.<sup>30</sup> According to this storyline, the Father did not have to beget the Son (some aeons ago), and yet he nevertheless freely chose to bring the Firstborn of his creatures into being;<sup>31</sup> likewise, the Holy Spirit, 'had been created, that is, produced, from God's substance not by a necessity of nature but by the free will of the agent ... after the Son, and far inferior to [him]'.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3, pp. 58–9.

<sup>24</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 7.170–175.

<sup>25</sup>Benjamin Myers, *Milton's Theology of Freedom* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup>Ames, *Marrow* 1.8.13, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup>Myers, *Milton's Theology of Freedom*, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.5, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup>Myers, *Milton's Theology of Freedom*, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.5, p. 133.

<sup>32</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.6, p. 272.

Lest the language of consubstantiality provoke any confusion with respect to Milton's subordinationism, it is important to remember that Milton's vision for divine freedom pushes him to discard creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) in favour of creation out of God (*ex deo*).<sup>33</sup> He conceives of creation as a series of voluntary acts of self-limitation that allow God to be not only the efficient and final cause of his creatures, but their formal and material cause as well:

For indeed that original matter is not to be thought of as an evil or worthless thing, but as a good thing, a seed bank of every subsequent good. It was a substance, and derivable from no other source than from the fountain-head of all substance; at first unarranged and disorganized, but afterwards God arranged it and made it beautiful.<sup>34</sup>

The possibilities of divine freedom are on display in the act of creation as God removes himself from a portion of his own infinite extension in order to make space for his creatures and derives from his own unlimited substance the unformed matter with which to fashion them. All creation therefore is in some primordial sense consubstantial with God, exercises the same liberty as God, and exists together with God within the same narrative universe. The result of this heterodox synthesis is that twofold liberty upon which Milton's free-will theodicy fundamentally depends:

By withdrawing ontologically from his own active essence, God freely relinquishes part of his own being, and in this way calls forth a created order, an ontological Other, the very being of which consists in its autonomy vis-à-vis God. Creation itself, as that from which God 'retire[s]' (7.170), is therefore nothing other than a radical 'liberation' of creaturely reality. As Victoria Silver has noted, God occasions creaturely freedom by creating ontological 'room' for his creatures. God withdraws and circumscribes his own fullness in order to grant autonomous space to his creatures.<sup>35</sup>

Milton's conclusion is that the only way to 'assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the wayes of God to men',<sup>36</sup> is to extend the same incompatibilist freedom to God that his rational creatures enjoy, leaving nothing to the sphere of necessity but the bare fact of God's existence.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, when Lovejoy contends that Milton's free will defence makes his God fundamentally indifferent to creaturely evil and human suffering, he is overlooking the profound and ongoing involvement of this deity with the works of his hands. Whereas Lovejoy perceives in *Paradise Lost* and *De doctrina Christiana* a divine incompatibilism that is good only to wash the blood from such almighty hands, he nevertheless has

<sup>33</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.7, pp. 290–91. Regarding Milton's 'monism' and creation *ex deo*, see also Campbell et al., *Manuscript*, pp. 108–9; Peter F. Fisher, 'Milton's Theodicy', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17/1 (1956), pp. 37–8; David Bentley Hart, 'Matter, Monism, and Narrative: An Essay on the Metaphysics of *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly* 30/1 (1996), p. 25; Lewis, *Preface*, pp. 89–90; Myers, *Milton's Theology of Freedom*, p. 110.

<sup>34</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.7, p. 293.

<sup>35</sup>Myers, *Milton's Theology of Freedom*, pp. 110–11.

<sup>36</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1.26.

<sup>37</sup>John Rogers, 'Milton and the Mysterious Terms of History', *English Literary History* 57/2 (1990), pp. 297–303.



failed to notice that Milton is not defending God as author of the narrative he is relating, but rather as its primary actor and protagonist. These poetic priorities come into clear view as he sifts through his theological sources and builds a narrative theodicy that brings God into the theatre of creation's ongoing drama in a way that Christian orthodoxy never could; or perhaps, as David Bentley Hart observes, it is the other way around: 'Milton's God is the God of event, action, story, presence; and space and time – the theater of these things – are part of divine existence. ... In Milton's poetic vision, Being becomes epic'.<sup>38</sup> Rather than yield unswerving allegiance to any coherent tradition of systematic theology or biblical interpretation, the poet makes the rhetorical decision to pair together duelling anthropological and theological incompatibilisms in order to narrate fully the fall's contingency, all the while enabling each of his epic's characters – whether creature or Creator – to participate in his story as a fully moral volitional actor, with a liberty equal to every other. The deity of *Paradise Lost* boldly enters the stage (especially in Book III) as an active and vocal member of the narrative's tragic yet optimistic cast, offering a defence as much of himself as of the human objects of his love. The fall occurs – and God for Milton is vindicated – because he is but one actor among many others, a contingent member of the epic's *entire* ensemble, an ensemble that is completely free to love, choose, act and in the end, to save.

### Soul-making, paradise and covenant

Nevertheless, while Milton's theodicy of radical freedom effectively lowers the standard of proof necessary to acquit God of personal wrongdoing, it does not by itself answer the more basic theodical question: how does God's goodness relate to his creation, or to his decision to create *this* world in particular? Why would an author freely agree to sign away his royalty rights, to accept risk and chance and to become but one actor in an underdetermined story that (he knows) will produce such evil and suffering? Addressing himself to these kinds of questions and going even further, William Empson argues that Milton's deity is more than an indifferent voluntarist, that in fact the demiurge of *Paradise Lost* is bent toward evil rather than justice. Thus, in Empson's hands the Father-Torturer of his own Son becomes no more than a legalistic authoritarian whose wicked machinations actually constitute the fall's principal cause.<sup>39</sup>

In response to Empson, however, Danielson has identified in Milton's thought a necessary corollary of his free will defence, one that concretely reveals God's character, connects creation's goodness to God's own and offers a teleology for the astonishing gift of creaturely free will. The poet's writings project an Irenaean vision of paradise, part of a 'soul-making' theodicy in which the *possibility* of sin (though not sin itself) becomes the necessary instrument for the gradual formation of humanity's confirmed and final perfection in the image of God.<sup>40</sup> In this reading the Eden of *Paradise Lost* becomes a precisely calibrated theatre of desire designed to put a truly good couple through the gauntlet of real temptation, with a promise of reward at its end.<sup>41</sup>

Recognising the value of Danielson's insight but taking it a step further, I would argue that there is more evidence for this kind of theodicy in Milton's works that Danielson detects. 'Soul-making' as paradisaical probation and preparation correlates

<sup>38</sup>Hart, 'Matter, Monism, and Narrative', p. 24.

<sup>39</sup>Empson, *Milton's God*, pp. 103, 266–70.

<sup>40</sup>Danielson, *Milton's Good God*, pp. 167–72.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 197.



well with those covenant theologies that already in his own day were bridging the dramatic chasm between the dogmatic systems of Protestant scholasticism and the tangible story of God's creative and redemptive relationship with his creation. In order therefore to explore these themes and their impact on Milton's overall theodicy, in this section I will first compare Milton's own views on the traditional 'covenant of works' with others that were influential in the seventeenth century, before highlighting how his understanding of the gracious conditionality of paradise allows him to articulate poetically the instrumentality of humanity's past and present probations within a narrative theodicy that expands to envelope Milton's readers.

Milton considers paradise to be an ideal place for his human characters to experience a period of probation and preparation. Like most of God's decrees touching humankind, his decree for humanity's perfection is conditional upon their response: 'if you stand firm, you will remain; if you do not stand firm, you will be expelled; if you do not eat, you will live; if you do eat, you will die'.<sup>42</sup> Yet Milton's theodicy does not interpret this imposition of an arbitrary condition as a permanent restriction meant for eternity, but instead reimagines the prohibition and its sanctions as a temporary trial designed to test Adam and Eve's love of God all the while forging by fire their growing knowledge of good and evil. When Adam is surprised that he might not always love and obey God, he questions Raphael, 'But say, / What meant that caution joind, *if ye be found / Obedient?*'<sup>43</sup> The archangel informs the man that in fact he is on probation in paradise:

Son of Heav'n and Earth,  
Attend: That thou art happie, owe to God;  
That thou continu'st such, owe to thy self,  
That is, to thy obedience; therein stand.  
This was that caution giv'n thee; be advis'd.  
God made thee perfet, not immutable;  
And good he made thee, but to persevere  
He left it in thy power, ordaind thy will  
By nature free, not over-rul'd by Fate  
Inextricable, or strict necessity;  
Our voluntarie service he requires,  
Not our necessitated, such with him  
Finds no acceptance, nor can find, for how  
Can hearts, not free, but tri'd whether they serve  
Willing or not, but will but what they must  
By Destinie, and can no other choose?<sup>44</sup>

This insistence on the 'voluntarie service' to be 'tri'd' implies that Adam's arrangement with God is a direct corollary of the absolute freedoms of God and humanity discussed above, since in the theatre of Milton's narrative theodicy the elevation and maturation of a rational creature into the image of God cannot be attained through the exertion of the divine will alone but must also involve the exercise of the creature's radically contingent freedom as well.

<sup>42</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3, p. 63.

<sup>43</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 5.512–514 (emphasis original).

<sup>44</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 5.519–534.

Moreover, Raphael specifies a higher purpose for this process, albeit one consonant with Milton's own peculiar spiritual materialism. Just as the archangel is able to convert Adam's material food into spiritual victuals that he can consume, he likewise reveals that humanity's present 'happie state' holds out the hope of transcending the blessedness of Eden and ascending to even higher realms of substance and beatitude:

And from these corporal nutriments perhaps  
 Your bodies may at last turn all to Spirit,  
 Improv'd by tract of time, and wingd ascend  
 Ethereal, as wee, or may at choice  
 Here or in Heav'nly Paradises dwell;  
 If ye be found obedient, and retain  
 Unalterably firm his love entire  
 Whose progenie you are. Mean while enjoy  
 Your fill what happiness this happie state  
 Can comprehend, incapable of more.<sup>45</sup>

Herein lies the key plank of Milton's soul-making theodicy: a period (Raphael's 'mean while') of *possible* fall into sin will make Adam and Eve 'improv'd by tract of time', to reach a state of which even Paradise is 'incapable'. God creates human beings fully capable of withstanding real temptation, although he defers their ultimate perfection until after they are 'found obedient'.

Summing up Milton's views then: an arbitrary prelapsarian prohibition, together with its promises and sanctions, governs the contingent outcome of a probationary and preparatory period of soul-making, one that allows those human beings whom a truly good God created truly good to be truly tested, after which they will either sublimate to higher forms of life, or else they will suffer death. And because the possibility of sin is an inherent component of this soul-making period, which is itself vital for the freely willed fulfilment of his creation, God is therefore justified in freely creating a world with such freedom and contingency of its own. After all, 'An opportunity for sinning does not in fact make a sinner, but it does display one'.<sup>46</sup>

Milton here may subtly be taking advantage of the prevailing dogmatic winds in his own day as he formulates the contours of his theodicy. A new wave of theologians had been advocating for a historical, even literary approach to Scripture that was thematically oriented toward God's covenants with his people. Despite their diverging accounts of the diversity of these covenants, almost all agreed that two fundamentally distinct 'federal' agreements form the architectonic structure of the redemptive narrative: a covenant in Adam by works (*foedus operum*), and a covenant in Christ by grace (*foedus gratiae*).<sup>47</sup> Importantly, the former presumes precisely the kind of probationary framework that Milton's soul-making theodicy requires.<sup>48</sup> Like most covenant theologians of the period, William Ames links the original prohibition given to Adam and Eve with the law administered to Israel by Moses and infers that the primordial paradise lost had not been the final state of perfection: a further spiritual exaltation of humanity had been

<sup>45</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 5.496–505.

<sup>46</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.8, p. 331.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–28, 42–49.

<sup>48</sup>Ames, *Marrow* 1.10.31–32, p. 113.

expected subsequent to a successful probation. The contingency of this intermediate state leads Johannes Wolleb to remark that,

The first man was immortal even with respect to his body; not absolutely, as if his body, which at his origin was made from the elements, could not be resolved into them, but [he was immortal] in the strength of the divine covenant; it was not a matter of being unable to die, but of being able not to die.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1640s a consensus document like the Westminster Confession of Faith includes an explicit affirmation of this probationary arrangement: ‘The first Covenant made with Man, was a Covenant of Works [*foedus operum*], wherein Life was promised to Adam; and in him to his Posterity, upon Condition of perfect and personal Obedience’.<sup>50</sup> The conditions of the Covenant of Works and humanity’s free fulfilment of them were necessary to fulfil God’s purposes for creation. Having granted the reality of this arrangement and of the (admittedly qualified) freedom of the human will, the theodical implications were obvious for theologians like Wolleb: ‘The cause of the transgression of Adam and Eve was neither God nor a decree of God, nor the withholding of any special grace, nor the permission to fall, nor any naturally incited motive, nor the providential government of the fall itself,<sup>51</sup> for ‘man could have remained in the sinless state, if he had so willed’.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, despite any similarities between these accounts of Edenic probation and the poet’s, Milton refuses to embrace the mainstream consensus of his day regarding a *foedus operum*.<sup>53</sup> He objects to any characterisation of the primordial conditions as a covenant of works:

There are such people as designate this ‘the covenant of works’ [*foedus operum*], although it does not seem – from any passage of scripture at any rate – to be either a covenant or of works. ... For since by his own disposition man behaved well, and was by nature good and holy, then surely neither was it necessary for anyone to be constrained by any bond of a covenant to [do] what he would be doing voluntarily, nor would any of his good works have shown obedience since, without any command, he was brought to them entirely by a natural inclination. Any command at all, moreover, whether God’s or a magistrate’s, even with prize and penalty proffered, should not automatically be called a covenant, but rather a declaration of authority.<sup>54</sup>

The difference he sees between a ‘covenant’ that establishes a relationship between two parties, and an ‘exercise of jurisdiction’ by one party over another may boil down to

<sup>49</sup>Wolleb, *Compendium* 1.8.1, pp. 65–6.

<sup>50</sup>*The Confession of Faith, agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster: examined and approved Anno 1647, by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; and ratified by Act of Parliament 1690 7.2*, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche: In authentischen Texten mit geschichtlicher Einleitung und Register*, ed. E. F. Karl Müller (Waltrop: Harmut Spenner, 1999 [1903]), p. 558.29–34.

<sup>51</sup>Wolleb, *Compendium* 1.9.2, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup>Wolleb, *Compendium* 1.8.1, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup>Christopher John Donato, ‘Against the Law: Milton’s (Anti?) nomianism in *De Doctrina Christiana*’, *Harvard Theological Review* 104/1 (2011), pp. 80–2.

<sup>54</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.10, p. 359.

Milton's biblicism: Genesis after all does not use the word, so then he will not; and nowhere in scripture is it recorded that Adam gave his explicit consent to the primordial conditions of his tenure in Paradise. However, (pedantry aside) it is more likely that his own vision for original humanity as *posse peccare* is inherently opposed to the idea of a principle of meritorious works, since the first couple's innate goodness and sanctified intuition were more than sufficient to guide them through temptation – in other words, there is no merit in doing what comes naturally. This is on display as Raphael celebrates the strength of Adam's goodness in his final exhortation to Adam:

Be strong, live happie, and love, but first of all  
 Him whom to love is to obey, and keep  
 His great command; take heed lest Passion sway  
 Thy Judgment to do aught, which else free Will  
 Would not admit; thine and of all thy Sons  
 The weal or woe in thee is plac't; beware.  
 I in thy persevering shall rejoice,  
 And all the Blest: stand fast; to stand or fall  
 Free in thine own Arbitrement it lies.<sup>55</sup>

Love, especially toward God, issues naturally from Adam, and obedience is not a labour that must be itemised and assessed but the expression of that freely given love by which Adam (and his posterity) will stand vindicated. God demonstrates his goodness through loving provision, while Adam demonstrates his reciprocal goodness in response through loving obedience and trust. Neither 'covenant' nor 'works' therefore will do this concept justice in Milton's eyes.

'Works' in particular is at once too comprehensive and too limiting a category for humanity's primordial estate, since God's grace was present and operative in the lives of the happy couple even before the fall, and because grace remains as conditional today as it was in paradise itself. Whereas Ames and Wolleb assert a single covenant of works straddling both the prohibition given to Adam and the law given to Israel – a legal covenant in which neither grace nor faith play a formal part – Milton's theodicy labours instead to establish the continuity between Adam's reality and the reality of his readers by identifying a single covenant both of works *and* grace that has throughout history governed the relationship between God and humanity. This covenant, conditional upon obedience and faith,<sup>56</sup> was grounded in the original conditions of paradise, then renewed for Eve and Adam after their fall, then revealed throughout the Old Testament, and has lastly been fulfilled in Christ.<sup>57</sup> As Joseph Duncan puts it,

Milton's Adam in the state of innocence lives with more dignity, faith, and love than would be possible under a covenant of works, and after the fall he is able to accept the covenant of grace on behalf of all his sons, not merely the elect. Milton's God freely gives all to Adam and Eve in paradise, and offers a salvation that all are free to accept after the Fall.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 8.633–641.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph E. Duncan, *Milton's Earthly Paradise: A Historical Study of Eden* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 141.

<sup>57</sup>Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.4, pp. 81–5.

<sup>58</sup>Duncan, *Milton's Earthly Paradise*, pp. 146–7.

In other words, any prospect of walling off Eden from his modern Protestant readers by using the rigid rubric of ‘works’ – so common among his Reformed contemporaries – was unconscionable for a poet whose goal in justifying the ways of God was to invite his readers back into the drama of the garden as faithful participants themselves.

The pedigree of this mono-covenantal theodicy can be traced reliably to the Arminian theologies developing in Milton’s era. Although this tradition is most famous for its positions on the divine decrees and the freedom of the human will, it is worthwhile to consider carefully the nuances of its covenant theology when examining Milton’s own approach to the theodicy. While Jacobus Arminius himself actually hews quite closely to his more Calvinist rivals regarding the unfolding development of redemptive history *after* the fall, he insists that the primordial covenant with Adam presupposes a grace at work in paradise that ‘is not simply remedial ... it is constituent of the created order itself.’<sup>59</sup> Richard Muller has observed that, unlike Reformed orthodoxy – but very much like Milton – Arminius connects the substance of God’s original covenant with Adam to natural law and human reason, and consequently with the very prevenient grace that according to his systematic theology enables all sinners to respond to Christ’s overtures in the gospel.<sup>60</sup> Raymond Blacketer highlights the effects of this continuity:

The new covenant is a reused, post-fall version of the *foedus primaevum*, in which the condition laid upon humanity is no longer perfect obedience, but faith in Christ. In both cases, the human *foederati* possess the ability to fulfill their end of the bargain: Adam, by perfect obedience, and Christians, by faith in Christ: The new covenant is a restoration of the *foedus in creatione*, with allowances made for sin.<sup>61</sup>

The subsequent Arminian theologies of Simon Episcopius and Philipp van Limborch would go even further in developing Arminius’s prior trajectory toward an even more “‘naturalistic” view of grace’,<sup>62</sup> coming to reject the *foedus operum* entirely on the basis of an anthropology that stresses the complete, arbitrary freedom of the human volition after the fall in continuity with the original state of humanity’s righteousness during the probationary state of paradise.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Raymond A. Blacketer, ‘Arminius’ Concept of Covenant in Its Historical Context’, *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis/Dutch Review of Church History* 80/2 (2000), p. 207. For the Dutch theologian’s own words regarding the prelapsarian covenant, see, for example, Jacobus Arminius, *Apology against Thirty-One Defamatory Articles* ad Art. 19, in *The Writings of James Arminius: Translated from the Latin in Three Volumes*, 3 vols, trans. James Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977 [1853]), 1.334–5; *Seventy-Nine Private Disputations* 29, in *The Writings of James Arminius*, 2.71–4; *Twenty-Five Public Disputations* 13.2–5, in *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1.539–41.

<sup>60</sup>Richard A. Muller, ‘The Federal Motif in Seventeenth Century Arminian Theology’, *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis/Dutch Review of Church History* 62/1 (1982), p. 108.

<sup>61</sup>Blacketer, ‘Arminius’ Concept’, pp. 208–9. See also Jacobus Arminius, *Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3.540–4; *Examination of a Treatise concerning the Order and Mode of Predestination, and the Amplitude of Divine Grace*, by William Perkins, in *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3.496.

<sup>62</sup>Blacketer, ‘Arminius’ Concept’, p. 207. See also Simon Episcopius, *Institutiones theologicae in quatuor libros distinctae* I.2–10, IV.v.4, in *Opera theologica*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Johann Blaeu, 1650), 1.1–23, pp. 408–9; Philipp van Limborch, *Theologia christiana ad praxim pietatis ac promotionem pacis Christiane unice directa* III.2–9, V.1–2 (Amsterdam: Johann Heinrich Wettstein, 1686), pp. 176–221, 391–401.

<sup>63</sup>Muller, ‘The Federal Motif’, p. 116.

Milton's poetic embrace of soul-making theodicy as an effort to justify the *present* ways of God to men coincides then with these later versions of Arminian covenant theology. On one hand, it must be conceded that the two-covenant framework of Reformed scholasticism does satisfy the logical demands of Danielson's Irenaean model of theodicy; after all, in their *schema* God did create Adam sufficiently righteous to have withstood a genuine probation in Eden through his free obedience to God's moral law revealed in the covenant of works, itself a necessary preparation before passing into eternal life and glory *non posse peccare*. On the other, although orthodox Calvinists had already by this time made notable development in charting the organic unfolding of God's covenant relationship with the world, they did so by insisting on temporal and moral dichotomies that heighten the differences not only between the covenants administered through Adam and through Christ, but also between the dramatic theatres of Adam's Eden and Milton's England. The Arminian alternative proves more attractive for Milton's theodicy not because of its syllogistic necessity for soul-making, but because it breaks down these Reformed dichotomies and blends together their distinct components: 'the Arminian systems make no radical separation between nature and grace, natural law and Gospel, or the antelapsarian duties devolving upon Adam as a rational creature and the rational but revealed laws given for the regulation of a sinful world'.<sup>64</sup> This mono-covenantal eliding of theological categories is what allows for the bridging (perhaps even a collapsing) of pre- and postlapsarian realities, generating the possibility of the narrative unity sought by Milton's theodical vision.

Despite the foreign, mythopoeic topology of an epic poem like *Paradise Lost*, Milton's poetic priorities champion a radical continuity between epochs, dispensations and even species of creatures that enables his readers to engage with the drama of theodicy as their own. Drawing a parallel connecting the theatres of the angelic world destroyed in Satan's rebellion and the paradise established by God as a new creation for his new children, Milton portrays prelapsarian humanity's free ability 'to stand or fall' in Book VIII of *Paradise Lost* as reflecting the trial of the angels themselves, who like Adam and Eve had been created by God *posse peccare*:

My self and all th' Angelic Host that stand  
 In sight of God enthron'd, our happie state  
 Hold, as you yours, while our obedience holds;  
 On other surety none; freely we serve,  
 Because we freely love, as in our will  
 To love or not; in this we stand or fall:  
 And som are fall'n, to disobedience fall'n,  
 And so from Heav'n to deepest Hell; O fall  
 From what high state of bliss into what woe!<sup>65</sup>

The soul-making probation and preparation through which the angels had passed in order to confirm them freely in love and obedience to God is subsequently mirrored by the trial of Adam and Eve, and just as the downfall of Satan has served to further confirm other angels in their own decisive choices, so humanity's primordial fall and expulsion from paradise becomes the proper index of the active trials within which Milton's readers are themselves active participants:

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>65</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 5.535–543.

so Death becomes  
 His final remedie, and after Life  
 Tri'd in sharp tribulation, and refin'd  
 By Faith and faithful works, to second Life,  
 Wak't in the renovation of the just,  
 Resignes him up with Heav'n and Earth renewd.  
 But let us call to Synod all the Blest  
 Through Heav'n's wide bounds; from them I will not hide  
 My judgments, how with Mankind I proceed,  
 As how with peccant Angels late they saw;  
 And in thir state, though firm, stood more confirmd.<sup>66</sup>

Milton's deliberate choice to forego a strict covenant of works in favour of a single covenant embracing all of creation is not so much due to a personal distaste for theological rigidity, much less an inclination to reject any prelapsarian soul-making, but rather it flows outward from his poetic impulse to envelope the reader of his epic theodicy in its dramatic movement to justify the ways of God, particularly to those persons who are presently undergoing any number of trials and tribulations while exiled in the wilderness east of Eden – or banished from Parliament. The conditions are the same, the stakes are the same and the grace is still the same, permitting its narrative arc to persevere in the multivariate theatres of its readers' worlds. For them the soul-making is as yet unfinished, the trial and formation still go on. Just as angels come to Adam in Paradise, bearing necessary tidings of warning and encouragement, and just as Adam counsels Eve with love, so in the face of their probationary temptations Milton approaches all his readers with a theodicy oriented persuasively toward faith and obedience and calls out, 'relie / On what thou hast of vertue, summon all, / For God towards thee hath done his part, do thine'.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, although this soul-making theodicy may well answer the question of why the goodness of God would lead him to make his creatures free and *posse peccare* in the first place, it may still not be enough to satisfy Empson himself, or anyone concerned with justifying the ways of God to the heirs of Enlightenment. Launching his suit against the 'Father' within the drama of the present time (or more specifically, of the 1960s), the critic's fury is not simply directed at Milton or at his God, but at what he considers to be the Christian evangel itself, together with the scriptures and institution of the church from which the epic is descended.<sup>68</sup> Even so the enduring connection between Milton's Eden and Empson's modernity is evidence yet that *the poet's approach is working*, if only as a negative. The God of *Paradise Lost* is monstrous in Empson's eyes because in some primordial, even mythical way Milton still succeeds in inviting his readers again into the garden and its trials, just as the critic demands that his own erudite audience place Milton's God before the courtroom of the present.

### Dogma, drama and conclusion

What however should one make of Milton's poetic strategies and narrative framework for theodicy? Does his theodicy's persuasiveness originate from within the Christian

<sup>66</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 11.61–71.

<sup>67</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.373–375.

<sup>68</sup>Empson, *Milton's God*, pp. 272–3.



narrative that Empson abhors, or has Milton changed in some way the essential arc of traditional Christian theodicy? C. S. Lewis and Dennis Danielson have each maintained that the overarching contour of Milton's epic and its theology should be reckoned as a variant of Christianity. Lewis is the more up-front of the two concerning what he regards to be the poet's doctrinal peccadillos, his Arian convictions expressed in *De doctrina Christiana* especially.<sup>69</sup> However, these aberrations have little impact on the mere-Christian narrative that he sees in *Paradise Lost*, and since prior generations had not found much heterodoxy in Milton's works before the nineteenth century, Lewis decides to continue interpreting his epics as Thomist rather than Socinian.<sup>70</sup> Danielson is even more emphatic that Milton's actual theology is Christian, to the point that he sees the poet's rejection of creation *ex nihilo* as a reassertion of biblical orthodoxy rather than its denial.<sup>71</sup> In either case, these authors represent a long strain of criticism that views the poet's theology as representative of an essentially Christian approach to a narrative theodicy.

Undoubtedly, there is some truth to this claim, at least with respect to the general categories of theodicy Milton pursues. As I have shown above, like many Christian writers throughout the ages, he points to neither fate nor chance, but to the freely willed decisions of creatures for the evil that exists in the world, and he finds resources in both Arminianism and Calvinism for articulating how this freedom coexists with God's. Additionally, just as his contemporaries were building their systems of covenant theology using the biblical narrative and patristic categories available to them, Milton likewise argues for an Irenaean vision of paradise that gives a logical *wherefore* to free will: an opportunity for creatures to mature in goodness and love before ascending to even greater actualisations of the image of God, a process that would have been impossible without genuine freedom and the real possibility of sin.

Nevertheless, as I have also demonstrated, Milton's *sui generis* approach to these traditional Christian theodical strategies is saturated by heterodoxies, compromising his overall persuasiveness. Milton ends up justifying God's ways by integrating all things – created and Creator, poet and reader – as equal participants in an ongoing story with no ultimate composer. There are no limits to this reduction: the poet immanentises God as an actor among actors within creation's epic with all its twists and turns, and the poem's readers are welcomed to the stage of this unfinished drama. Of Milton's theodicy one could well affirm with David Bentley Hart, that 'all of Being is joined in one great story, one epic, which – though no created mind can comprehend it – lies open to the advances of the poet'.<sup>72</sup> But in this case the Christian idea of providence – that God is the transcendent author of history's narrative – has been replaced by a historicised protagonist for whom providence is merely the exertion of his own will among others'. He may be more powerful than those lesser beings whose existence derives from his, and we are assured that his general purposes will overcome any resistance, but this deity possesses no actual power over individual destinies apart from the exertion of naked might. In subjecting God to the demands of his narrative priorities, Milton removes from his theodicy a crucial bulwark of Christian hope, leaving his readers to grapple with what God's victory over evil actually means.

<sup>69</sup>Lewis, *Preface*, pp. 85–7.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 91–2.

<sup>71</sup>Danielson, *Milton's Good God*, pp. 29, 38–9.

<sup>72</sup>Hart, 'Matter, Monism, and Narrative', p. 25.

Similarly, by brushing away the distinctions between humanity's state before and after the fall, between works and faith, or between nature and grace, the mutually shared drama of probation that Milton is narrating actually sidelines the mediator whose probation in the Gospels illuminates and characterises better the context of Christians undergoing trial and suffering. Rather than imagining an immediacy between the sufferer and Christ, Milton's theodicy instead pushes his readers into dramatic unity with Adam and Eve; that is, whereas in more traditional covenant theologies the *foedus gratiae* is mediated by Christ himself such that the failed *foedus operum* of Paradise is now fulfilled and superseded, in Milton's *schema* Christ's redemptive work has only restarted the probationary clock for each individual in her own state of nature.

Such a proposition is complicated all the more by Milton's Christology. William Empson notes that in Christian theology a traditional justification for the Son of God's suffering on the cross (vicarious or otherwise) is that he remains One with the Father: his passion and death are a manifestation that God himself has at least become a co-sufferer alongside a creation in agony.<sup>73</sup> However, the logic of Milton's Arianism ruptures this basic link between the instrument of suffering and the goodness of God, and within Milton's immanent theatre of wills and freedoms, the Father's brutal execution of his creaturely firstborn (despite his Son's willingness) is now a violence perpetrated against an innocent 'other'. In a profound way then Milton's Arianism can be seen as a revolt against the concept of divine freedom from culpability that lies at the centre of any *Christian* free will defence, and it certainly calls into question the Christian understanding of divine goodness that must always inform *Christian* soul-making theodicy.

In other words, although Milton draws his theological arguments from orthodox sources – whether patristic, Reformed or Arminian – his heterodox views end up shaping them into a new kind of theology, to the point of undermining the key Christian elements of the theodical narrative that he begins telegraphing from the first few stanzas of *Paradise Lost* and that he meticulously recounts in *De doctrina Christiana*. His theodicy is not nearly as superficial as Lovejoy makes it out to be, nor is his God the monster that Empson imagines; but despite what Lewis has argued, neither is Milton's epic an adequate synthesis of Christian theological reflection on evil, suffering and the goodness and greatness of God. *Paradise Lost* may at times appear very Christian to its readers, and Milton may have incorporated tropes from the most orthodox of theological sources, but even so, the devil (as they say) is very much in the details.

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<sup>73</sup>Empson, *Milton's God*, p. 244. Again, Empson despises Christianity in general, although on this point he prefers orthodoxy to Arianism, even Milton's Arianism.