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**SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ARMINIANS
AND THE ACCUSATION OF PELAGIANISM :
SOME TACTICAL APPROACHES**

ARMINIAN PELAGIANISM

In early modern history, « Pelagianism » was still a common heresy². Used to indicate an overly optimistic view of human nature, the term was used in theological discussions and played a role in debates about philosophical theories as well³. As a reference to the opponents of Augustine, the concept of Pelagianism had a long history of application to heretical overestimations of the integrity and abilities of human nature which arose one after the other. When Philipp Melanchthon in the sixteenth century spoke of « the new Pelagians of our time »⁴, he was doing nothing really new. In the fourteenth century – to mention just one example – Thomas Bradwardine wrote a voluminous work *De causa*

1. VU University Amsterdam.

2. An early version of this paper was given at a conference on the occasion of the retirement of Professor Christoph Burger at VU University Amsterdam, 21 May 2010. I thank those who attended, both in Amsterdam and at the *Colloque Patristique* in Tours, for their comments. I am particularly indebted to Irena Backus, whose comments on an earlier version of this article stimulated me to expand and refine its argument. This article builds upon research done in the context of a project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO ; project no. 276-20-002).

3. On the latter, see e.g. Aza Goudriaan, « Pelagianism and the Philosophical Orientation of Reformed Orthodoxy », in Gunther Frank and Herman Selderhuis (eds.), *Die Philosophie der Reformierten*, Stuttgart, forthcoming.

4. Melanchthon, cited in G. Greshake, « Pelagianismus, Semipelagianismus », *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 7, Basel, 1989, p. 236. Cf. E.P. Meijering, *Melanchthon and Patristic Thought. The Doctrines of Christ and Grace, the Trinity and the Creation*, Leiden, 1983, p. 23-29.

Dei contra Pelagium in which he targeted « the friends of Pelagius », especially the « modern » ones of his own day⁵. In the time of the Reformation, Protestants accused Roman Catholic theology of being Pelagian, and shortly afterwards bitter controversies arose within the Church of Rome in which the issue of Pelagianism also played a prominent role⁶.

In the seventeenth century the Dutch Arminians, too, were accused of Pelagianism by their Reformed orthodox counterparts. Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch Reformed minister who became professor of theology at the University of Leiden, disagreed on several points with the broad Reformed theological consensus⁷. The most famous of these disagreements concerned predestination, although the issues of justification by faith, perseverance, and human perfectibility were involved as well⁸. After Arminius's death in 1609 his followers drew up a *Remonstrance* (1610) in which they taught that God's election was based on His foreknowledge of human faith, that Christ died for all human beings indiscriminately (not for the elect only), that grace is necessary but could be resisted by humans, and that it was unclear whether apostasy from faith was possible⁹. These five doctrinal points advocated in the Arminian *Remonstrance* were contradicted in 1618-1619 at the Synod of Dordrecht, a

5. Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelagium, et de virtute causarum*, ed. Henry Savile, London, ex officina Nortoniana, 1618 (repr. Frankfurt/Main 1964), praefatio, p. [i], [liii]; H. A. Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine : A Fourteenth-Century Augustinian. A Study of His Theology in Its Historical Context*, Utrecht 1957, p. 28-30. On the « Calvinist » motives for the 1618 publication of Bradwardine's work, see Luca Baschera, « Witnessing to the Calvinism of the English Church : The 1618 edition of Thomas Bradwardine's *De causa Dei adversus Pelagium* », in Christian Moser and Peter Opitz (eds.), *Bewegung und Beharrung. Aspekte des reformierten Protestantismus, 1520-1650*, Leiden/Boston, 2009, p. 433-446.

6. See e.g. José Martin-Palma, *Gnadenlehre. Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*, Freiburg, 1980.

7. See e.g. Richard A. Muller, « Arminius and the Reformed Tradition », *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, 2008, p. 19-48.

8. See e.g. Carl Bangs, *Arminius. A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, (1985) repr. Eugene, 1998. For a recent survey of research, see Keith D. Stanglin, « Arminius and Arminianism : An Overview of Current Research », in Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, Marijke Tolsma (eds.), *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe. Jacobus Arminius (1559/60-1609)*, Leiden, 2009, p. 3-24. On the (less well-known) dispute concerning justification, see Aza Goudriaan, « Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy », in Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, Willemien Otten (eds.), *Scholasticism Reformed. Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, Leiden, 2010, p. 155-178.

9. For the text of the *Remonstrance*, see G.J. Hoenderdaal, « Remonstrantie en contra-remonstrantie », *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 51, 1970, p. 49-96 ; English trans. in Philip Schaff and David S. Schaff (eds.), *The Creeds of Christendom. With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed. 1931, repr. Grand Rapids, 2007, vol. 3, p. 545-549.