

# Poet's passion for freedom writ large

Next week is the 400th anniversary of John Milton's birth. *Richard Harries* considers the poet's view of God

JOHN MILTON, who was born 400 years ago next Tuesday, 9 December, is remembered from many points of view — literary, political, and historical.

But what of his understanding of God? In particular, the dilemma that his religious worldview posed for him in trying to “justify the ways of God to men”? And the even more acute dilemma that his view poses for us today? Milton was driven by three fierce internal forces: his belief in himself as a great poet; his passion for intellectual freedom; and his hatred of tyranny.

His hatred of tyranny led him to oppose the despotic monarchy of Charles I, and to support regicide. It also led him to attack the regime of Archbishop Laud, and, by extension, the bishops of the Church of England generally, for a similarly autocratic attitude.

With admirable consistency, it made Milton a fierce critic of similar tendencies both in Cromwell's regime, and in Presbyterian church government.

Then, with almost foolhardy bravado, he reasserted his fundamental principles on the eve of the restoration of the monarchy. It is not surprising that with the return of Charles II he was imprisoned, and only as a result of the influence of good friends did he escape with his life.

This struggle with supreme rule is reflected in his great achievement, *Paradise Lost*. For at the heart of this poem is the continuing refusal of Satan to submit to his Divine Creator. That, we might say, is a commonplace of Christian mythology. But what makes for interest, and reveals the dilemma, is the persuasive force with which Milton has invested the character of Satan.

Milton's Satan is heroic in his refusal to submit, and his defiance, even in defeat, is magnificent. Satan's speeches are some of Milton's most eloquent poetry. It is not surprising that people such as Shelley and Blake have felt that Milton himself was of the devil's party.

MILTON'S PASSION for intellectual freedom is expressed in the

*Areopagitica*, written in response to Cromwell's government system of censorship, and when Milton himself was open to criticism for his advocacy of divorce.

Here, again, a tension emerges between Milton's defence of the right to read and learn about what is evil (except for Roman Catholic writing, which he took to be a threat to the state itself), and the temptation of Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the *Areopagitica*, Milton argues that learning to discern what is good is inseparable from knowing about its alternative, evil. Indeed, we can only become mature human beings, as opposed to remaining children, if we are tested by the temptations of life — and that means knowing what these are, not only in life itself, but through books.

As human beings it is part of our proper destiny to learn to discern and discriminate through both reading and living. Yet, in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as they are in the account in Genesis. There is no reason given for this: it is simply for the creature to obey the command of the Divine Creator. But if they are not exposed to good's alternative, how can they grow in the good?

The dilemmas exposed in the tension between Milton's political attitudes and what he asserts as religiously correct in his most famous poem were, in one way, easier for him than they are for us today. Yet, at the same time, there is a scientific worldview available for believers today — which was not part of the intellectual culture of Milton's time — which makes it easier for us to live with such a tension.

The dilemma for Milton was less pressing, in the sense that he comes across as an unequivocal advocate of hierarchy, provided it was not exercised despotically. It comes across most strongly in his understanding of the relationship of men and women.

While there is much that is tender and moving in the relationship of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, it is strongly argued that the Male is superior in intellect and therefore has the right to command. Eve finds her vocation in submission. For Milton, this hierarchical principle exists not only between God and Man, but between the Son and the Father, because, for him, the Son, though God's vicegerent, is subordinate in an Arian sense.

We find it more difficult today to accept this hierarchical principle, and the high value it places on obedience; not least, of course, in the relationship between men and women.



What we do know today, however, is that God has given the whole creation, not just human beings, real autonomy. He has given creation a life of its own, and in Austin Farrer's phrase, has “woven it from the bottom up”.

In other words, our starting point in thinking about the relationship of God and the world is the real independence given it by God, and it is against that background that we try to understand the place of pain, suffering, and death. All are part of the natural order, and cannot be seen purely as a result of the rebellion of some primordial ancestor.

God works in relation to natural processes, and, in particular, through building a relationship with us through Christ to achieve his loving purpose, but always with respect to that fundamental freedom with which he has endowed the world.

The other way in which the dilemma is lessened is through a

Unjust desserts: anonymous engraving from a 1798 edition of *The Poetical Works of John Milton* from the text of Dr Newton

**‘the dilemma is lessened through a full grasp of Christian orthodoxy’**

full grasp of Christian orthodoxy. Milton did not believe in the Trinity. But within the Trinity the emphasis is on the mutual giving and receiving of equal persons, not hierarchy. Furthermore, the proper emphasis — from an orthodox point of view — is not on obedience as such, but on God's winning us over to himself, in order that we may freely partake of the very life of the Godhead. So the emphasis is not on submission to superior authority, but on loving invitation and participation.

Milton was torn between his passion for liberty, and his perceived religious duty to submit to a God which part of him sensed was a tyrant writ large. But Jesus our brother, the Divine Son who shares himself with us, and who draws us into the life he shares with the Father and the Spirit, is not like that.

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