

A Calvinistically Warped Mind—Warfield on John Miley's Arminianism

Warfield's strong criticism of the noted fundamentalist leaders Andrew Murray, R. A. Torrey, and Lewis Sperry Chafer were based on his deep dispute with Arminianism. His arguments against Arminianism can perhaps best be seen in his "Review" of Methodist theologian John Miley's Systematic Theology. Though Miley was not associated with the fundamentalist movement, this review represents Warfield's criticism of Arminianism as a distinct theological system. Warfield, though critical of Miley's contentions, still respects him as a scholar. His appreciation for Miley stands in sharp contrast to the tone of subsequent reviews of books from major fundamentalist leaders.

B. B. Warfield's "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," is a two-part review article originally published during the years 1893-1895. It corresponds directly to the sequential publication of Miley's two-volume work (1892-1894). Warfield describes the volume as an "altogether good book, which the Arminian should find satisfying, and with which the Calvinist should count it a privilege to join issue."¹ He praised the work as "clear, direct and strongly written; ...characterized by candor, restraint, and modesty; it is orderly in arrangement and lucid in discussion."² But Warfield's respect for Miley who was a noted Methodist theologian and professor of systematic theology at Drew Theological Seminary, did not deter the Princetonian from offering direct criticisms. After all, one of Miley's express goals was to refute two of Warfield's own beloved mentors, Charles and Archibald Alexander Hodge.³

Warfield begins his review with an evaluation of the way in which Miley has organized his system. "The first volume included the topics which fall under the heads of Theology proper and

¹ B. B. Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," originally published in two parts, The Thinker: A Magazine of Christian Literature (April 1893); and The Magazine of Christian Literature (Feb. 1895), and reprinted on their entirety in Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 2, ed., John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 308.

² Ibid.

³ See for example; John Miley, Systematic Theology (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1894), Vol. 2, pp. 143 ff.

Anthropology."⁴ The second volume completed the system discussing "Christology, Soteriology and Eschatology. Three appendices...discuss, respectively, the inspiration of the Scriptures, the angels, and the Arminian treatment of original sin."⁵ As Warfield sees it, the supreme value of Miley's work lies in its clarity. All essential differences between the Calvinistic system as defined in the Westminster Standards, and the distinctly Arminian theological system of which John Miley is a capable advocate, are clearly set forth. In Warfield's estimation,

The material is handled in a masterly manner, and the volume as a whole sets forth the Arminian scheme of salvation in as powerful and logical a form as that scheme admits of. For Dr. Miley presents himself here as above all things an Arminian, and as above most Arminians ready to follow his Arminianism to its logical conclusions. Here, indeed, we find the highest significance of the book. It is the Arminian `Yea' to the Calvinistic declaration of what Arminianism is in its essential nature, where its center of gravity lies, and what it means with reference to that complex of doctrines which constitute the sum of evangelical truth.⁶

The importance of Miley's work, in Warfield's estimation, lies in its consistency and in the willingness of the author to follow the logic of the Arminian system to its ultimate end. This is extremely valuable because Miley himself confirms the litany of charges that Calvinists have historically raised against Arminianism.

Miley's treatment of theological prolegomena dominates the opening pages of the first volume. There are over fifty pages devoted to "the nature, sources, scope, and method of systematic theology."⁷ Other than expressing his oft-stated concern that apologetics is not treated under the heading of "Theism," Warfield notes that the introductory material in volume one is "very illuminating" in its treatment of the nature of systematic theology. In addition, Miley offers what Warfield considers to be a "very sensible criticism of the so-called `Christocentric' method. Dr. Miley despairs of attaining a single

⁴ Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," p. 314.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 314.

⁷ Ibid., p. 309.

'unifying principle' in theology and holds that systematizing must proceed 'in a synthetic mode.'⁸ In apparent agreement with Dr. Miley, Warfield notes that he "follows the customary order of topics."⁹ He also makes note of the fact that Dr. Miley has done a very effective job—with "skill and success" as Warfield describes it—in his treatment of the relationship between reason and feeling.¹⁰

Warfield subsequently launches into a critical evaluation of the Arminian system itself, as represented by John Miley. The first specific criticism is the tension inherent within the Arminian system between the "modes of knowledge" (which Miley divides into "natural" and "revealed"), and in the "mode of acquisition" of that knowledge, which in the case of natural knowledge is "purely human" and in the case of revealed knowledge, "is immediately given by the supernatural agency of God."¹¹ The tension stems from the fact that Miley, "at a later point (p. 11), [is] apparently deserting this ground,"¹² when he speaks of the knowledge of God derived by "the heathen" from purely natural revelation.

He there seems to posit a reception by heathen men of a divine revelation, which comes to them through their human faculties, and is not verified to the recipient as from God. Here he seems to step beyond the wall of his own definition, with the effect of throwing himself into the hands of the mystic rationalists. We must hasten to add, however, that when he comes to treat formally of mysticism (p. 16), he rejects the mythical path for attaining religious truth altogether, and deals very stringently with the modern doctrine of the Christian consciousness. We must confess that we do not know how the views expressed at p. 11, as to a not uncommon revelation to heathen seekers, can be accorded with the criticism here; unless we are to suppose that God is nearer to the heathen than to Christians, and deals more intimately with them than with Christians.¹³

Not only is Warfield eager to point out the internal tension within the Arminian system on this point, but it is particularly germane to notice that Warfield is rejecting what he perceives as the erroneous notion

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 310.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 309.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 309-310.

that the "reception of a divine revelation, which comes to them through their human faculties...is not verified to the recipient as from God." It is interesting to note at this point, that those such as Cornelius Van Til, who have accused Warfield of advocating an inherently "Arminian" apologetic and who criticize Warfield for "attributing to 'right reason' the ability to interpret natural revelation correctly,"¹⁴ have failed to notice that Warfield overtly rejects the Arminian conception of such natural knowledge of God. He disputes the claim that "the heathen" autonomously derive true knowledge from divine revelation, when nothing in that revelation supposedly bears exclusive witness of the God who gave it to them.

Warfield next critiques Dr. Miley's treatment of omniscience, which Warfield contends also suffers from an internal tension common to the Arminian system, and unresolved "perplexities which emerge from it for Arminian thought [and which] are not disguised."¹⁵ This tension results from Miley's apparent unwillingness, as a consistent Arminian, to deny "the foreknowledge of free actions," and yet at the same time, be equally unwilling to follow through on the logic of this conclusion and embrace the orthodox Reformed conception of God's decree as encompassing his foreknowledge of future events. It is this perceived inconsistency on Miley's part which Warfield attempts to exploit.

We cannot think, however, that he has followed out his own arguments to their legitimate conclusions. They not only involve the admission of the certainty (as distinguished from the necessity) of free actions (p. 183), which is all any Calvinist believes; but they distinctly imply the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. For example, he acutely reduces the difficulties which are asserted to stand in the way of God's foreknowledge of the free acts of men to absurdity, by pointing out that the same difficulties would press equally against God's foreknowledge of his own free acts. This is unanswerable. But it will require an immeasurably more acute logic still to distinguish God's foreknowledge of his future choices, from a fore-intention to make these choices; and this is just the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), pp. 264-65.

¹⁵ Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology* by John Miley," p. 310.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

How is it, then, that Miley can still contend that God can certainly foreknow whatever comes to pass, and at the same time reject the connection made in Scripture and demanded by logic, between that knowledge and God's eternal decree?

The reason Miley rejects the Reformed doctrine of predestination as a possible solution to this problem is because Dr. Miley finds it inconsistent with our notions of divine goodness that God would create souls who are predestined to be damned.¹⁷ Such a doctrine of predestination is inconsistent with the Arminian *fundamentum*, which is the freedom of the human will.¹⁸ Here, Warfield attempts to point out the difficulties that Miley's formulation raises:

The objection that it would be inconsistent with the divine goodness to create souls whose rejection of salvation is certainly foreknown, is justly set aside with the remark that nescience will not obviate the objection; inasmuch as it presses almost equally against the creation of souls with the known possibility of their loss, and quite equally against the continuance of the race after the fact of such numerous losses has emerged in experience. But surely the bottom of the matter is not yet reached; for if God creates souls which he certainly foreknows will be lost, he must create them with the intention, in this sense, of their being lost; and this is the whole content of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination in this case—of that *decretum horrible* to which men seem so unceasingly to object, but which is as surely a truth of reason as it is of Scripture.¹⁹

Thus, asks Warfield, when Miley subsequently attempts to deal with the origin of evil, "how is it permissible to create these moral beings and put them in this probationary economy, with the knowledge, not that they *might possibly* fall, but that they *certainly would* fall?"²⁰ While Miley may shrink back from what Warfield sees as the obvious conclusion, Warfield does not: "The only tenable ground here is the Calvinistic ground that such action on God's part involves the divine intention, in this sense, of the

¹⁷ Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 263-266.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁹ Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," p. 311.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

fall—that is, its predestination."²¹

Next, following Miley's ordering of topics, the Princetonian moves on to discuss "anthropology." It is here, Warfield states, "that the Calvinistic reader will find most which will seem to him open to question; and this the more that Dr. Miley occupies in this sphere the extremest Arminian ground."²² Warfield gladly acknowledges that Miley has effectively and honestly described the Augustinian position, though Miley himself will only allow for a "native" and not a "penal" depravity. Additionally, Miley "teaches that all men are naturally depraved, and out of that depravity will commit sin; but that this depravity does not come to them in any true sense by way of penalty." In Miley's scheme, the "law of nature" works as a kind of substitute for the category of penal depravity, "because they are born with it and do not produce it, they cannot be held responsible for it."²³ The primary target, then, of Warfield's remarks is Miley's use of the phrase "law of nature." According to Warfield, the phrase functions as a kind of synthetic *a priori*, which in Warfield's estimation, gives us "no explanation at all: it is the deification of a phrase."²⁴ Warfield remarks somewhat sarcastically,

it passes the comprehension of our Calvinistically warped mind to understand how so close a thinker can, on the one hand, hang the whole weight of depravity on a 'law of nature,' or, on the other, deny the condemnability of a state of depravity which inevitably produces sin in every action into which it issues.²⁵

Apparently, it "passes the comprehension" of the Princetonian's "Calvinistically warped mind" when Miley lays forth a scheme in which a "subjective depravity" is described as inevitably producing actual sins, but yet is not itself subject to divine judgement. According to Warfield, such a formulation

²¹ Ibid., p. 313.

²² Ibid., p. 312.

²³ Ibid., pp. 312-313.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 313.

²⁵ Ibid.

confounds "all our ideas of God as a moral agent."²⁶

In his review of Miley's second volume (published in 1894, and reviewed by Warfield the following year), the discussion subsequently moves to "soteriology," and it is here, that the differences between Princeton and the classical Arminianism of Methodism are most evident. This is particularly important to Warfield, because "in the great evangelical revival of the last century, the Wesleyan leaders offered to the world an Evangelicalized Arminianism."²⁷ But for Warfield, the pressing question is, "whether the Evangelical elements thus taken up could consist with the Arminian principle."²⁸ From Warfield's perspective, the answer clearly was "no."

Calvinists earnestly urged that the union was an unnatural one, and could not be stable: that either the Evangelical elements ought to rule to the exclusion of the unharmonized Arminian principle, in which case we should have consistent Calvinism; or else the Arminian principle would inevitably rule to the exclusion of the Evangelical doctrines forced into artificial conjunction with it, and we should have consistent Arminianism.²⁹

It is precisely at this point, Warfield argues, that Miley has performed his greatest service in the publication of such a clear and consistent Arminian system. "After a century of conflict, Dr. Miley's admirably reasoned volumes come to tell us frankly that the Calvinists have been right in these

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 314.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 315.

²⁹ Ibid. Later, Warfield was to write, in "Calvinism, then, objectively speaking, theism comes to its rights; subjectively speaking, the religious relation attains its purity; soteriologically speaking, evangelical religion finds at length its full expression and its secure stability. Theism comes to its rights only in a teleological conception of the universe, which perceives in the entire course of events the orderly outworking of the plan of God, who is the author, preserver, and governor of all things, whose will is consequently the ultimate cause of all. The religious relation attains its purity only when an attitude of absolute dependence upon God is not merely temporarily assumed in an act, say of prayer, but is sustained through all the activities of life, intellectual, emotional, executive. And evangelical religion reaches stability only when the sinful soul rests in humble self-emptying trust purely upon the God of grace as the immediate and sole source of all the efficiency which enters into its salvation. And these things are the formative principles of Calvinism." See, Warfield, "Calvinism," p. 365.

contentions,"³⁰ namely, that evangelicalism and Arminianism—each when logically conceived—are mutually exclusive on several critical points.

Arminianism, he says, has no logical place in its system for a doctrine of race sin, either in the sense of the participation of the race in the guilt of Adam's first sin, or in the sense of the infection of the race with a guilty corruption. Arminianism, he says, has no logical place in its system for a doctrine of penal substitution of Christ for sinners and of an atonement by satisfaction. If the Arminian principle is to rule, he says, the doctrine of race sin must go, and the doctrine of vicarious punishment must go. And, as he thinks that the Arminian principle ought to rule, he teaches that men are not by nature under the condemning wrath of God, and that Christ did not vicariously bear the penalty of sin. Thus, in his hands, Arminianism is seeking to purify itself by cleansing itself from the Evangelical elements with which it has long been conjoined.³¹

This is an important point, and why, in Warfield's estimation, Miley's work is so valuable. "Dr. Miley...clears away the Evangelical accretions from the Arminian core," and in doing so he "commands our complete admiration. It is quiet logic, working its way to an irrefutable end."³² But it is an end to which Warfield himself cannot go. In his estimation, "it is better far to be inconsistently Evangelical than consistently Arminian."³³ It is because of Dr. Miley's clarity and consistency that the attempt to combine evangelicalism and Arminianism ultimately fails in Warfield's estimation. As Miley's efforts so clearly demonstrate, "the world should come to know with the utmost clearness that these Evangelical doctrines are uncomfortable with Arminianism. It is just as well that the world should realize...that Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism."³⁴ In Warfield's mind, "every proof of Evangelicalism is a

³⁰ Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," p. 315.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 316.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. Elsewhere, Warfield defines "evangelical truths" as "salvation by faith only, dependence for salvation on the blood of Christ alone, the necessity for salvation by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit," elements, which "evangelical Arminians" such as Wesley, tried to combine (as Warfield believed inconsistently — but blessedly so) with distinctly Arminian elements. Warfield clearly felt that Miley had demonstrated the impossibility of this, *if* one attempted to remain faithful to the Arminian principle of human freedom as the foundation for a Christian theology. See B. B. Warfield; "In Behalf of Evangelical Religion," The Presbyterian, (September 23, 1920), pp. 20 ff; and reprinted in B. B. Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 1, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing

proof of Calvinism."³⁵

After briefly touching upon Miley's treatment of "Christology" and "Eschatology," Warfield moves on to investigate in some detail Miley's doctrine of the atonement. Here again, Miley's clarity is commended, because in this case, "the Governmental theory of the Atonement is expounded and advocated with freshness and force."³⁶ Since, as Miley himself freely admits, "freedom is fundamental in Arminianism," therefore, "the [Arminian] system holds accordingly the universality of the atonement and provisory nature of the atonement, and the conditionality of salvation."³⁷ The problem which Miley faces, according to Warfield, is "to find a doctrine of atonement comfortable to the Arminian *fundamentum*, which Dr. Miley does not hesitate to locate in its psychology of the will."³⁸ Dr. Miley, being the very capable theologian that he is, again follows this Arminian *fundamentum* through to its logical conclusion. To demonstrate this, Warfield cites Miley's views that "the cardinal doctrines of the Wesleyan Soteriology" are—"that the atonement is only provisory in its character, rendering men savable, but not necessarily saving them"; and that salvation is conditional in the sense of a real Synergism (p. 169)."³⁹ The critical point in all of this is, according to Warfield, that once again "we go thoroughly with Dr. Miley in his clear proof (p. 122) of the untenableness of those schemes which seek to unite an atonement of penal substitution and conditional universalism."⁴⁰

Company, 1980), p. 387.

³⁵ Ibid. This is because Warfield understood Calvinism as "just religion in its purity. We have only, therefore, to conceive of religion in its purity, and that is Calvinism." B. B. Warfield, "What is Calvinism?" in *The Presbyterian* (March 2, 1904) pp. 6-7, and reprinted in; Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 389.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

³⁷ Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 275.

³⁸ Warfield, "Review of *Systematic Theology*, by John Miley," p. 317.

³⁹ Ibid. Warfield is citing from Miley's *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

It is important to note that this is not simply another round in the on-going debate between the Calvinists and the Arminians over the extent of the atonement, because in Warfield's estimation, there is far more at stake here. Ultimately, the historic Protestant conception of the character of God as "the infinitely holy and just One, [who] must react upon sin with a moral indignation which is exactly proportionate to its guilt, and which burns inextinguishably until it is satisfied by adequate punishment" is the real point of contention in this debate.⁴¹ The problem in Miley's conception is that God does not need react to sin as a holy and righteous avenger.

'If justice,' he says, 'must punish sin simply for the reason of its demerit, penal substitution is the only possible atonement' (p. 169). That the rectoral theory of the atonement may be held, and with it the Arminian system, therefore, we must deny to God that moral indignation in view of evil, which we cannot help recognizing as one of the highest endowments of moral beings, and must transmute his 'justice' into merely public justice of a wise ruler; we must revise in a word, all our natural notions of the relations of an infinitely holy being to sin. Dr. Miley attacks this problem at an early point (pp. 93 ff.), the result of his discussion being that he concludes that while punishment may not be inflicted where there is no sin, and may never go beyond the intrinsic demerit of sin—'and God has the exact measure of its desert'—yet sin need not be 'punished according to its desert' (p. 97) —provided that the requirements of God's moral government are not endangered by the failure to punish it. In other words, while sin may not be punished beyond its desert, it may be punished below its desert, if it can be rendered safe to do so.⁴²

This conception of God's holiness and justice leads Warfield to conclude that this issue is "certainly one of the watersheds between Calvinism and Arminianism." It becomes clear that "those who believe that God must, by virtue of his all-perfect nature, visit sin with a punishment fitted to the exact measure of its desert—no more certainly, but just as certainly, no less—must, so far as logic can compel them, become Calvinists."⁴³ When the logic of Miley's conception of the atonement is set forth, there can only be one conclusion in Warfield's mind. "If it be 'safe' to forgive sin on the ground of a 'substitute for penalty,' it would seem just as 'safe' to make a sincere personal repentance that substitute as to make the suffering of

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 318.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

an alien such substitute."⁴⁴ Warfield concludes: "Dr. Miley's argument seems to us to issue in setting aside all real necessity for atonement."⁴⁵ Almost lamentably, Warfield notes that in Dr. Miley's system, "forgiveness itself remains an act of pure grace,"⁴⁶ therefore, there is no need for atonement in the first place, and the question is raised as to why Christ suffered at all. Why did the Son of God have to die if some other possible means of dealing with sin, such as personal repentance, could serve as a legitimate method of remitting the penalty due us as sinners?.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 318-319.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 319.

⁴⁶ Ibid.