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Columbanus' identity and the writings of Pelagius.

Abstract:

This paper examines whether Columbanus' understanding of the Christian message of salvation was influenced by the writings of Pelagius. It looks at what Columbanus knew about the controversy surrounding Pelagius, and how Columbanus' dispute with bishops in Gaul related to the controversy over the relationship between prevenient grace and effective human free will. Evidence from his letters suggests that Columbanus modified his conception of the Christian message in response to the criticism he experienced in Gaul. This paper will examine these questions to ask how far the teachings of Pelagius were part of Columbanus' sense of his Christian identity.

Keywords: Columbanus, Pelagius, Free will, Grace, Augustine, Jerome.

In this paper I will set out evidence in support of two points. Firstly, I will show that the issue that lay behind the condemnation of Pelagius for heresy in 418 AD, that is, the relationship between prevenient grace and effective free will, was something on which Columbanus focused in several of his surviving writings. Secondly, I will reveal how his position on this question evolved in response to the challenge posed to his certainties about the Christian message during his disagreement with the Gallic bishops.

Columbanus' treatment of this question of the relationship between prevenient grace and effective free will is particularly interesting because he set out his developing views on this topic – made controversial by Pelagius' condemnation for heresy in 418 AD – clearly, and we can see him grappling with the issue and working out his own solution to the problem with which he was faced. This contrasts with other writers for whom we cannot see their thought-processes, and for whom we see only their final positions. Patrick adhered uncompromisingly to Augustine's doctrinal position, and Gildas argued for the position taken by Cassian and Faustus

of Riez, which rejected predestination. Bede promoted Augustine's full programme of original sin, prevenient grace, and predestination in a polemical way as an heresiologue, more fully for example than Prosper of Aquitaine did in his later output on the subject. But we do not see any of these writers questioning themselves. Columbanus is therefore unusual in expressing in writing his own conflicting thoughts on this subject which was so critical for ascetic Christianity, and for the rationale underpinning the monastic way of life. He did not, however, discuss the question of original sin, that is, the question of a negative or a positive account of human nature.

Columbanus is an example of the fall-out from the creation of the myth of 'Pelagianism'; 'Pelagianism' as characterised by its opponents never existed.¹ Five strands of evidence show that the actual process that took place during the campaign against Pelagius was the invention of heresy in order to relocate orthodoxy. The first strand of the argument is the disjunction between what is found in Pelagius' writings and what is found in the account disseminated by Pelagius' opponents of both the alleged tenets and also the spirit of 'Pelagianism'. Pelagius did not teach the 14 tenets ascribed to 'Pelagianism' by Augustine in his account of the heresy.² The second argument is that the doctrine in Pelagius' writings was no different from what had already been propounded in ascetic paraenetic literature for many decades before Pelagius began to write. The third argument is that there was no coherent school, programme, or movement that can accurately be identified as constituting 'Pelagianism'. The tenets bundled together for polemical purposes by Pelagius' opponents had in most cases no necessary link joining them together. The fourth strand in the case for the non-existence of 'Pelagianism' lies in the inability of scholars to agree on a definition of 'Pelagianism' or to classify texts as 'Pelagian' (or not). The history of scholarship on 'Pelagianism' shows that when examined, the concept of 'Pelagianism' does not withstand scrutiny; it cannot be defined, nor are there criteria by which a text can be classified as 'Pelagian'. The fifth argument lies in the identification of motive and means, which is important evidence in support of the argument that 'Pelagianism' was a deliberately-invented fiction. Interactionist Theory from sociological analysis offers a helpful perspective on the process at work in the condemnation of 'Pelagianism' and its supposed heresiarch.

In doctrinal terms what happened is that from pre-existing ideas within mainstream Christian thought as it is visible in literature, in the Latin West two possible anthropologies and two soteriologies crystallized during more than 50 years of discussion and debate from the 360s to

¹ For the evidence to show that 'Pelagianism' never existed, see A. Bonner, *The Myth of Pelagianism*, British Academy Publications, forthcoming.

² Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 35.65, ed. C. Urba and J. Zycha, *Sancti Aureli Augustini. De gestis Pelagii*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 42 (Vienna, 1902), pp. 119-20.

418 AD. After the condemnation of 418 AD debate continued; examples of such debate are Cassian's *Thirteenth Conference* and Prosper's *On the Grace of God and Free Will Against the Conferencer*. But everyone after that point had to work around the caricature of 'Pelagianism'. What constituted dogma, how it was formed on this topic, is itself an interesting subject. Original sin, prevenient grace, and predestination were none of them part of any creed.³ The anathemata condemning what was called 'Pelagianism' condemned doctrines that Pelagius did not teach, except one: that grace was given in accord with merit. The anathemata did not overtly rule out a positive account of man or free will; they stated that denial of various consequences of original sin, prevenient grace, and predestination was anathema; for example the statement that Adam's sin harmed him alone was anathematised, as was the statement that God's grace was given in accord with merit. Augustine insisted that free will was not damaged by prevenient grace and predestination, but he did not resolve the criticism that there was a logical flaw in the notion of single predestination, because if God's prevenient grace caused human moral goodness then *ipso facto* at the same time it did *not* cause goodness in people in whom God chose not to cause virtue. Thus the manner and extent of the installation of the anthropology and soteriology represented by the doctrines of original sin, prevenient grace, and predestination, is itself an interesting subject; for example, Gennadius of Marseilles' *Liber ecclesiasticum dogmatum*, often transmitted in collections of canons as the *Canons of the Council of Nicaea* (*Doctrina ecclesiastica secundum Nicaeanum concilium*, or *Dogma Nicenum*), proposed as orthodoxy an entirely obfuscatory account of the relationship between grace and free will.⁴ But for the purposes of this paper what is important is to put on one side the caricature of Pelagius' teaching, and to stick to the two tenets that he actually taught. These were first, that despite Adam's transgression and expulsion from Eden, contemporary human nature was inclined to goodness, which carried the implication that original sin did not exist; and second, that man had effective free will; there was grace, but it was not necessarily prevenient grace every time, all the time;⁵ there was real human initiative. Free will was possible because human nature was inclined to goodness and could choose to act virtuously sufficiently autonomously that humans were responsible for their actions and were therefore justly rewarded or punished for them by

³ The anathemata did not positively rule out a confident account of human nature, or free will; they ruled out these positions by condemning denial of the opposing positions (original sin and prevenient grace). So a positive anthropology and effective free will were prohibited negatively, by implication; for example, by condemning the idea that: *The sin of Adam harmed him alone and not the whole human race*. This asserted original sin by means of anathematising denial of original sin.

⁴ C. H. Turner, 'The *Liber ecclesiasticorum dogmatum* attributed to Gennadius', *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1905), 78-99.

⁵ Augustine often used the word *help*, but one of the issues in the controversy was what this word meant in this context; at times Augustine suggested that prevenient grace *drove* (*ago-agere*) humans to virtue, suggesting control: Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 3.5 (ed. C. Urba & J. Zycha, *CSEL* 42, pp. 56-7). The question of human initiative, *initium fidei* for example, the question of chronological priority, was at the heart of the debate, and could not be glossed over with a vague word like *help*. Paul's simile of the potter moulding clay at Rom 9:21 was central for Augustine, and also 1 Cor 4:7: *What do you have that you have not received?*

God. This paper therefore looks at how far these two ideas that Pelagius actually taught influenced Columbanus' thought.

When considering the background to Columbanus' thinking on this subject, it is important to remember firstly, that what constituted dogma on this topic was never clarified;⁶ and secondly, that the manuscript transmission context was critical. Several of Pelagius' letters travelled freely under false attributions, most often to Jerome. Pelagius' works were staples of medieval monastic book-collections. I do not myself think that Pelagius wrote *On the Christian life*, but it is a handbook of the principles of the ascetic reform movement, and on the theoretical side it contains both an argument against justification by faith alone, and also the statement that humans are condemned to hell through following Adam's example (with the implication that they are *not* condemned by the transmission of original sin). Going by numbers of surviving manuscript witnesses *On the Christian life* was the second most copied text of secondary Christian literature during the Middle Ages, after Augustine's *City of God*. There was a vast amount of material in circulation, including Jerome's output, that propounded the same anthropology and soteriology as is found in Pelagius' letters.⁷

The argument that so-called 'Pelagianism' was a deliberately-created fiction is a substantial argument that I cannot present in this paper. However, it forms the critical background to Columbanus' writings. It is the key that unlocks much of his output. Columbanus' writings illustrate the fix that Western Christianity was left in because of the caricature of Pelagius' teaching that was installed. It was installed as orthodoxy that the argument for free will was arrogant and that it was an argument for self-sufficiency. Columbanus had to find a solution to the challenge posed by the 418 AD condemnation, which installed this account of free will as fact. I will end by noting an attempt by someone in the twelfth century, recorded in the margin of a manuscript, to deal with the caricature of Pelagius' position. This anonymous annotator was addressing the same problem that Columbanus faced.

⁶ This issue was never ruled on definitively and clearly. In 418 AD there was no Ecumenical council and Zosimus' *Epistola tractoria* does not survive; the fact that all subsequent rulings on the relationship between prevenient grace and predestination and free will have been interpreted by either side as vindicating their position, suggests that there was no clarity on what constituted official Church dogma on this topic. For example Celestine's *Apostolici uerba* of 431 AD, and Caesarius of Arles' dossier of documents produced between 529 and 531 AD following the Second Council of Orange have each been seen by supporters of both sides of the argument as vindicating their side of the dispute. If there had been a clear papal ruling on what was Church dogma, one of the two sides would have cited it. As it was, both sides quoted Celestine's *Apostolici uerba* as supporting their case, and scholars have interpreted the doctrinal import of Caesarius' dossier very differently.

⁷ 256 copies relative to 313 for *City of God*; these figures are taken from *Die handschriftliche Überlieferung der Werke des heiligen Augustin* (HÜWA), published by Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. These figures exclude France, because the HÜWA volume covering France has not yet been published, but the increased number due to the addition of the copies preserved in France would apply to all Augustine's works, and *On the christian life* (*De uita christiana*) almost always travelled under an attribution to Augustine, so it is reasonable to assume that the number of copies of *On the christian life* would increase proportionately along with Augustine's genuine writings.

The evidence I will put forward here is taken from Columbanus' *Letters 2 & 4*.⁸ The first point I want to show is that Columbanus' writings addressed the controversy over the relationship between God's prevenient grace and effective human free will. Almost the whole of *Letter 2* is about faith and works; this was a synonym for the grace and free will debate, as Augustine pointed out:

Therefore having considered and investigated these things according to the strength that the Lord deems it worthy to give us, we conclude that man is not justified by the commands that enjoin a virtuous life except through faith in Jesus Christ, that is, not by the law of works, but by the law of faith, not by the letter, but by the Spirit, not by the merits of actions, but by gratuitous grace.⁹

According to Columbanus' *Letter 2* a council was called because of him in order to discuss faith and good works. It also provided an occasion to discuss the dating of Easter:

I thank God that for my sake so many holy men have been gathered together in order to investigate the truth of faith and good works...See, I say, thank God that also for my sake the occasion of a holy synod has been created for you concerning the discussion of Easter.¹⁰

The bulk of *Letter 2* is ascetic paraenesis on the model of ascetic propagandists like Athanasius, Evagrius of Antioch, Jerome, and Pelagius, founded on the premise that good works, that virtue, achieved salvation. Columbanus adopted their whole agenda; for example he stressed the need to keep all of God's commands, mentioning this requirement 22 times in the letter: 'May God himself, who is accustomed to stand in the congregation of the gods, with his presence inspire the hearts of his people entirely to obey his will through the strength of the commandments'.¹¹ He stressed the need to follow Christ's example: 'Each will need to be moulded to the example of his redeemer and the pattern of the true shepherd'. This included the renunciation of all property. He also stressed the distinction between being a true Christian, in one's actions, and

⁸ Columbanus, *Epistulae*, ed. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, Volume II (Dublin, 1957).

⁹ Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 13.22, ed. C. Urba and J. Zycha, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 60 (Vienna, 1913), p. 176, 'His igitur consideratis pertractatisque pro uiribus, quas Dominus donare dignatur, colligimus non iustificari hominem praeceptis bonae uitae nisi per fidem Iesu Christi, hoc est non lege operum, sed lege fidei, non littera, sed spiritu, non factorum meritis, sed gratuita gratia'.

¹⁰ Columbanus, *Ep. 2.2* (ed. Walker, p. 12), 'Gratias ago Deo meo, quod mei causa in unum tanti congregati sunt sancti de fidei et bonorum operum ueritate tractaturi...Ecce, inquam, Deo gratias, quod uel pro me de Pascha discutiendo occasio uobis sanctae effecta est synodi'.

¹¹ Columbanus, *Ep. 2.2* (ed. Walker, p. 12), 'Ipse Deus, qui stare solet in synagoga deorum, praesens inspiret corda suorum ad suam integro uoluntatem sequendam ex uirtute mandatorum'.

being a Christian in name only.¹² Columbanus also referred to 'fools who rely on faith alone'.¹³ He asserted a direct causal link between righteousness and salvation: '[Christ] with whom we will reign together, if, however, we first suffer here with him so that we may also be glorified together with him'.¹⁴ Columbanus stressed that his monks chose their *imitatio Christi* of their own free will; they were: 'Voluntary paupers for Christ's sake...through the voluntary poverty which the Gospel exhorts'.¹⁵ Before Pelagius' condemnation, another longstanding feature of ascetic paraenesis had been the use of language of perfection as a standard means of inspiring ascetic endeavour. Columbanus followed this practice too; he endorsed perfection as achievable, advising that if they loved one another the monks would be made perfect:

If...we first hasten by the exercise of true humility to heal the poisons of pride and envy and vainglory through the teaching of our Saviour who says for our example: *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart* [Matt 11:29] and so on, then, made perfect with no further blemish, with hatred rooted out, like disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us all love one another with all our hearts.¹⁶

Ecclesiastics too should be perfect in their imitation of Christ; and the older monks had persevered to the end of their lives in perfection: 'We both pray and desire to persevere in these things until death, just as we have watched our elder brothers do'.¹⁷ Columbanus also referred to the *patres perfecti* of the Old Testament, whom monks should imitate.¹⁸ Augustine condemned mention of perfection in living people as blasphemous; in the tenets attributed to Pelagius for which he was condemned as a heretic, Pelagius was accused of teaching the possibility of human sinlessness.¹⁹ Columbanus repeatedly asserted the principle of merit in the attainment of

¹² Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.4 (ed. Walker, p. 14), 'So that...you may ever keep both in work and in word this saying of the true shepherd, which His sheep recognise - *for they do not hear the voice of strangers but flee from him whose voice they do not know* [Jn 10:5] - the stranger's voice they do not recognise, which unless it is lived in practice, is not consonant with the voice of the true shepherd'; 'Ut...hanc uocem ueri pastoris et in opere et in ore semper habeatis, quam suae agnoscunt oues - *non enim audiunt uocem alienorum sed fugiunt ab eo* [Jn 10:5] - cuius uocem non agnoscunt, quae, nisi actualis sit, uoci ueri non concordat pastoris'.

¹³ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.3 (ed. Walker, p. 14), '*Faith without works is dead in itself* [Jas 2:17, 20], and the Lord replies to fools who rely on faith alone that I do not know you'; *Fides sine operibus mortua est in semetipsa* [Jas 2:17, 20], et Dominus fatuis sola fide contentis respondet quia non noui uos'.

¹⁴ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.6 (ed. Walker, p. 16), '[Christus] cum quo conregnabimus si tamen prius hic cum eo patiamur ut et simul cum eo glorificemur'.

¹⁵ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.5 (ed. Walker, p. 14), 'Pauperes pro Christo uoluntarii...per uoluntariam euangelicae admonitionis paupertatem'.

¹⁶ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.5 (ed. Walker, pp. 14-6), 'Si...uenena superbiae et inuidiae uanaeque gloriae per saluatoris nostri praeceptum ad exemplum dicentis: *Discite a me quia mitis sum et humilis corde* [Matt 11:29] et reliqua, humilitatis uerae exercitiis curare primum festinemus, sine ullo deinceps scandalo omnes perfecti, odio deleti, sicut discipuli Domini nostri Iesu Christi nos inuicem ex toto corde diligemus'.

¹⁷ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.6 (ed. Walker, p. 18), 'In his usque ad mortem perseuerare et oramus et optamus, sicut et seniores nostros facere conspeximus'.

¹⁸ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 20), '[Jerome] taught monks to follow the fathers who were perfect'; 'Monachos uero docuit sequi patres perfectos'.

¹⁹ The last of the 14 tenets Augustine attributed to Pelagius in his *On the Deeds of Pelagius* made the assertion of the possibility of human sinlessness anathema: Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 35.65 (ed. C. Urba & J. Zycha, *CSEL*

salvation: 'If you merit to be recognised by Him who will say to many: *Amen, I say to you that I never knew you* [cf. Matt 7:23]...we...whom the kingdom of heaven will contain if we are of good merit'.²⁰ Columbanus also referred to reward, using the word *reward* or *payment (merces)*, suggesting a commercial transaction and a return on investment.²¹

Columbanus repeatedly presented the co-operative, synergistic model of the relationship between man and God that was propounded in the ascetic paraenesis of Athanasius, his translator Evagrius of Antioch, Jerome, Pelagius, and Gildas, among others. In this approach to Christianity perseverance was the product of co-operation between man and God; the monks both pray for this co-operation and they desire and will it.²² Columbanus depicted both the monks' initiative and the action of the Holy Spirit at work:

And so then unity of minds and peace and love can be secure, spread by the Holy Spirit through the inner bodies of believers, when all alike desire to fulfill the divine commands...In order that we may love one another with a love that is not feigned, let us carefully consider our Lord Jesus Christ's precepts, and once we have understood them, let us hasten to fulfill them.²³

This evidence shows that Columbanus adhered to the assumptions of asceticism propounded by advocates of this approach to Christianity in the second half of the fourth and the fifth centuries.

Columbanus, however, also actively himself explored the relationship between grace and free will, between faith and works; he was not just a passive recipient of ascetic assumptions about the Christian message of salvation; he also reflected critically on this issue and the ideas that underpinned his monastic way of life:

42, p. 120), 'From Peter's statement that we are sharers in the divine nature [2 Pet. 1:4], it follows that the soul can be as sinless as God'; 'Quod ex illo, quod ait Petrus, diuinae nos esse consortes naturae, consequens sit ut ita possit esse anima sine peccato, quemadmodum Deus'.

²⁰ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.6 (ed. Walker, p. 16), 'Si mereamini ab eo agnosci, qui multis dicet, *Amen dico uobis quia numquam noui uos* [cf. Matt 7:23]...nos...quos capiet regnum caelorum, si boni simus meriti'.

²¹ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 20), 'Except for that still stricter life which has the greater reward'; 'Excepta austeriore adhuc uita quae maiorem habet mercedem'.

²² See n. 16 above: 'We both pray and desire'; 'Et oramus et optamus'.

²³ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 22), 'Tunc ergo potest certa esse unio animorum et pax et caritas, per Spiritum Sanctum diffusa uisceribus credentium, quando similiter mandata diuina complere omnes desiderant...Ut ergo in caritate non ficta nos inuicem amemus, Domini nostri Iesu Christi praecepta diligenter consideremus, et intellecta complere festinemus'.

But someone will say, ‘Are we really not entering the kingdom of heaven?’ Why can you not, according to the Lord's grace, if you become like little children, that is humble and chaste, simple-hearted and innocent?²⁴

Columbanus here posed the question that was vital for all ascetics: would their strenuous effort not get them into heaven? This was the problem raised by those who objected to the interpretation of predestination as preordainment rather than as God's foreknowledge of autonomous human actions; these Christians worried that such an understanding of predestination seemed to block the direct causal entailment between effort and reward, between righteousness and salvation, because the closed membership of the Elect had been pre-determined. For these Christians, such a view of predestination entailed that God's justice was hidden, not transparent. Columbanus answered this anxiety by stating that actions did indeed determine salvation: *if* they behaved like innocent children, they *would* enter heaven. But the key phrase in Columbanus' words is: *iuxta gratiam Domini*, which is the focal point on which his sentence turns. Relevant possible meanings of *iuxta* are: *according to*; *along with* or *together with*; and *in consequence of*. If *iuxta* is read as *according to*, then grace became teaching, precept, and example; so the sentence says that they can get to heaven if they do what Christ commanded according to the injunctions given in the gift of the New Testament. If *iuxta* is read as *along with*, then the sentence refers to the co-operative model frequently presented by Columbanus, in which God's grace co-operates with man's will. If *iuxta* is read in this sense, then the sentence says that they can get to heaven if they behave correctly *together with* (*and*) God's grace helps them. A third possibility is that *iuxta* here means *in consequence of*, and *grace* means *prevenient grace* (*gratia praeueniens*);²⁵ if this is the case, then Columbanus here could be referring to Augustine's conception of prevenient grace as a free gift that caused virtue. But this reading of *iuxta* and *gratia* would not fit with the conditional *if* in the question: 'Why should you not enter heaven in consequence of the Lord's prevenient grace, *if* you...?' There cannot be uncertainty and a conditional *if* after the gift of Augustinian prevenient grace, which was an all-powerful causal agent that made man virtuous. However, if grace here refers to the gift of salvation and Christ's coming, then *iuxta* can mean *in consequence of*, because the

²⁴ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 20), ‘Sed dicit aliquis: “Numquid nos non intramus in regnum caelorum?” Quare non potestis iuxta gratiam Domini, si efficiamini sicut paruuli, humiles scilicet et casti, simplices et innocentes?’

²⁵ At least six things could be understood by the term *grace*, all of them aspects of God's grace, because he gave many gifts to mankind. For example, the grace of his creation of mankind with a rational capacity and free will; the grace of Christ's advent and Scripture and Christ's teaching; the grace of Christ's passion and the redemption of mankind's sins; the grace of baptism with the remission of sins; the grace of salvation and access to the Kingdom of Heaven; and prevenient grace, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that caused man to love and therefore to carry out morally virtuous actions. The word *grace* is used in all these senses in Christian literature of the fourth and fifth centuries.

sentence would recall man's debt to God for Christ's bringing salvation through his passion. So, it looks as if we have to read *iuxta* in one of the first two senses, or we should not read grace as *prevenient grace*. If grace is not *prevenient grace*, then it must be a different sort of grace, for example either a reference to New Testament precept and Christ's example, or to co-operation between man's effort and God's grace, or to the general grace of salvation given to mankind. This last analysis is supported by the fact that Columbanus went on to gloss this causal process as dependent on human effort, using the verbs *let us ponder* (*consideremus*) and *let us hasten* (*festinemus*).²⁶

In this discussion of the relationship between grace and works, Columbanus also did what advocates of *prevenient grace* urged; he offered a prayer for gratuitous grace to cause virtue in him and his colleagues: 'May his freely given grace grant to us that we all shudder at the world, and love him alone, and desire him along with the Father and the Holy Spirit'.²⁷ It is therefore clear that Columbanus was directly discussing this subject, and that he was well aware of the grounds of the controversy and the technical terms used in the debate. So in *Letter 2* Columbanus discussed the question of the relationship between God's *prevenient grace* and effective human free will, even going so far as explicitly to pose the question raised by *prevenient grace*, the question that was critical for the motivation that underpinned ascetic effort; and he maintained a position of asserting both effective free will and God's gratuitous grace, in a co-operative model which combined human effort with God's grace.

The second point I want to show is that Columbanus' position on this question evolved in response to the challenge posed to his certainties during his disagreement with the Gallic bishops.

I will use Columbanus' *Letter 4* to illustrate this; it was written in the situation of his deportation from France as a result of his disagreement with the episcopal authorities there. In my view in *Letter 2* Columbanus had been sure of his position with regard to grace and free will, but in *Letter 4* he revisited his certainties as a result of the dispute. By the end of the letter he had reached a different formulation of his position. Because he was working out his response to the

²⁶ Columbanus. *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 22), lines 8-9.

²⁷ Columbanus, *Ep.* 2.8 (ed. Walker, p. 22), 'Praestet hoc nobis sua gratuita gratia ut omnes mundum horreamus et illum solum amemus illumque cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto desideremus'.

critique of arrogance, it is necessary to follow his train of thought in the letter. Six stages in his thinking are visible.

In stage one, Columbanus began by reiterating the principles of the ascetic reform movement. He highlighted how Christ voluntarily ascended the cross leaving an example so that we should follow in his footsteps: ‘The Son of God willingly (for He was offered up because He Himself willed it) mounted the cross as a criminal, *leaving to us* as it is written, *an example, so that we should follow in his footsteps* [cf 1 Pet 2:21]’.²⁸ Columbanus stressed merit and earning salvation when he wrote of the secrets of salvation: ‘But they are difficult in order that they might be precious; they are veiled in order that they might be merited by few, since they are very wonderful’; and he asserted a causal relationship between suffering and reward, using a Biblical citation to suggest that salvation was earned: ‘For *if we suffer together with Him, we will reign together with Him* [Rom 8:17 and 2 Tim 2:12]’.²⁹

In stage two, Columbanus introduced doubt. He started with the idea of the need to ask for God’s help and that humility was key: ‘But so that he should persevere, let each constantly beseech the help of God with all humility of mind’.³⁰ Then he quoted a signature citation of Augustine's argument for the absolute prevenience of grace: *It is not of him who wills nor him who runs, but of God who shows mercy* [Rom 9:16], and explained that: ‘The mercy of God is greater and better than man's life, however good that life may be’.³¹ This was a critique of self-sufficiency, and gave God priority in control of human salvation. If someone put Augustine’s doctrine of prevenient grace to Columbanus, Rom 9:16 is a citation they would have used. If someone gave him a work by Augustine to read, it is highly likely that it would have contained this citation.

In stage three Columbanus then roundly condemned arrogance, and reached his solution to the problem of overconfidence in man's capacities: perfect fear of God (*timor perfectus*); this was true perfection:

For none merit mercy save those who confess themselves abject before God and themselves to be unworthy of salvation in themselves, unless they should be

²⁸ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 30), ‘Dei filius uoluntarius (oblatus est enim quia ipse uoluit) crucem ascendit ut reus, *relinquens nobis, ut scriptum est, exemplum, ut sequamur uestigia eius* [cf 1 Pet 2:21]’.

²⁹ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 32), ‘Sed dura sunt ut pretiosa sint; obscura sunt ut paucis sint digna; paucis uero digna, quia nimis mira sunt’; and ‘*Si enim compatiamur, conregnabimus* [2 Tim 2:12, Rom 8:17]’.

³⁰ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 32), ‘Sed ut sit perseuerans, oret iugiter quisque auxilium Dei cum omni mentis humilitate’.

³¹ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 32), ‘*Non enim, inquit, uolentis neque currentis, sed Dei miserantis est* [Rom 9:16] quia maior et *melior est Dei misericordia super uitam, quamquam bonam, hominis* [Ps 62:4]’.

snatched from such great dangers by the mercy of God alone. And though they are conscious in themselves of good works, yet fearing the judgements of God and lamenting that they have committed many injustices, they humbly trust in the gentleness of God alone; and their perfect fear is more pleasing, the more it practises humility; for God's good pleasure is upon them that fear Him and on those who hope upon His mercy. So none will be saved by his own right hand...except him who humbly uses his capacities, which are themselves gifts, with fear and trembling in the will of God, praying often.³²

So here Columbanus gave God priority and control of access to salvation, and he rejected self-sufficiency. Now alive to the danger of arrogance, he found a way to encompass both priorities; perfect fear encompassed both obedience to God's commands and the rejection of arrogance. Columbanus then explicitly denied the principle of merit; the way to salvation was through effort and humility and 'not through the dignity of merit', and he placed Christ above all. More important than all endeavour, they would reach heaven: 'Through the grace, faith, hope, and love, of Christ'. Grace was placed first at the head of several items in a list.³³ So, in stage three Columbanus made a full statement of Augustinian orthodoxy on prevenient grace.

In stage 4 came Columbanus' most interesting comment, as he showed himself unafraid to use the explicit language of the grace and free will controversy: 'Observe the many dangers; recognise the cause of battle: the greatness of the glory; do not be unaware of the enemy's strength, and free will in between'.³⁴ Columbanus here used the technical phrase for free will (*libertas arbitrii*). Columbanus it now seems had not abandoned his earlier position. He embarked on an extended metaphor about the route to salvation, which he pictured as a battle to get through their enemies and into Jerusalem. Salvation had to be the result of effort: 'If you take away the battle you take away the crown as well'. Effort was a *sine qua non* of salvation for

³² Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 32), 'Non enim digni sunt misericordia nisi qui se miseros confitentur coram Deo et indignos se sentiunt salutis per se, nisi sola Domini misericordia de tantis periculis eripiantur. Qui licet bonorum conscii sibi sint operum, tamen iudicia Dei timentes et multa perpetrasse iniusta gementes in Dei solius pietatem humiliter confidunt; quorum timor perfectus plus placet quo plus humilitati studet; *beneplacitum enim Domino super timentes eum et in eis qui sperant super misericordia eius* [Ps 146:11]. Nullum itaque saluabit dextera sua...nisi qui humiliter suam possibilitatem, et ipsam datam, exercuerit cum timore et tremore in uoluntate Dei orans frequenter'.

³³ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 32), 'Therefore we must walk the royal road to the city of the living God, through affliction of the flesh and contrition of the heart, through bodily toil and spiritual humility, through our endeavour, which is the substance of our lawful duty, not through the worthiness of merit, and what is greater than these, through the grace, faith, hope, and love, of Christ'; 'Gradiendum igitur est uia regia ad ciuitatem Dei uiuentis per afflictionem carnis et contritionem cordis, per corporis laborem et spiritus humiliationem, per studium nostrum, officii rem legitimi, non meriti dignitatem et, quod his maius est, per Christi gratiam, fidem, spem, et caritatem'.

³⁴ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, pp. 32-4), 'Multa cerne pericula; cognosce causam belli, gloriae magnitudinem; fortem non nescias hostem, et libertatem in medio arbitrii'.

Columbanus; a free gift totally unrelated to effort could not be acceptable to him. Despite his attempt to find a language to express the priority of God and subordination of man, Columbanus could not here bring himself to abandon the idea of freedom: ‘If you take away freedom, you take away worthiness’. Some element of deserving had to be retained, and rather than merit, Columbanus here expressed it as *dignitas* (*worthiness*): ‘Si tollis libertatem, tollis dignitatem’.³⁵

But that was not the end of Columbanus' anxious thought on the subject in this letter, because next came stage five, in which Columbanus rowed back again. He twice recalled that signature citation of the proponents of prevenient grace and predestination: *It is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy* [Rom 9:16], as he asserted that:

In the midst of such great dangers *to will and to run*, though it is your duty, is not in your power; for human virtue is not strong enough to reach the goal for which it wishes between so many opposing forces, unless the Lord's mercy makes human virtue also will that the pilgrim's desires be fulfilled and run their course.³⁶

This was another exact statement of Augustine's position, according to which human nature was insufficient for the achievement of salvation, and only God's grace made man will to be good and to persevere. The willing and the achievement – *to will and to run* – ‘licet tuum, non est tuum’, usually translated so as to obscure the contradiction, as something like ‘though it is your duty, is not in your power’. But Columbanus was not afraid to state the contradiction and what he actually wrote was: ‘Although it is yours, it is not yours’. This might perhaps usefully be compared with Augustine's statement of this paradox to the monks of Hadrumetum, in which he observed that God's commands to humans to be virtuous showed that man had free will, and Scriptural commands to ask God for virtue showed that in fact God caused virtue.³⁷

³⁵ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.6 (ed. Walker, p. 34), ‘If you remove the enemy, you also remove the battle; if you remove the battle, you remove the crown as well; – if these things stand, where they exist, it is necessary that there should be virtue, vigilance, fervour, patience, faithfulness, wisdom, steadfastness, and prudence; if they are not present, ruin is – and, as I would conclude, if you remove freedom, you remove worthiness’; ‘Si tollis hostem, tollis et pugnam; si tollis pugnam, tollis et coronam – si haec sint, ubi fuerint uirtus, uigilantia, feruor, patientia, fidelitas, sapientia, stabilitas, prudentia sint necesse est; si non, strages – et, ut inferam, si tollis libertatem, tollis dignitatem’. *Dignitas* can have a range of possible meanings, including: 1. being worthy, worth, merit, desert (for example, Cicero, in the *Orationes de lege agraria* referred to *dignitas consularis* meaning *being worthy of the position of consul*); 2. dignity, greatness, grandeur, authority, rank; 3. office, official dignity; 4. of inanimate things: worth, value, excellence. My translation takes it that the meaning Columbanus had in mind was *being worthy, worthiness*.

³⁶ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.7 (ed. Walker, p. 34), ‘In tantis periculis *uelle et currere* [Rom 9:16], licet tuum, non est tuum; non enim sufficit uirtus humana inter tantas contrarietates peruenire ad quod uult, nisi misericordia Domini et uelle faciat uota gradientis compleri et currere’.

³⁷ Augustine, *Ep.* 214.7, ed. J. Chéné and J. Pintard, *Bibliothèque Augustinienne 24, Aux Moines D'Adrumète et de Provence* (Paris, 1962), pp. 58-60, ‘Where you think that you do not understand, believe for the time being the words of God that there exist both man's free will and the grace of God, without the help of which free will can neither turn back toward God nor make progress toward God. And pray that you may also wisely understand what you piously believe. You have free will, after all, for this very purpose, that is, that you may wisely understand. For, if we did not have understanding and wisdom through free will, we would not have been commanded in the words of Scripture: *Have understanding, then, you among the people who are lacking in wisdom, and become wise at last,*

Stage six was the final stop in the sequence of thought visible in Columbanus' *Letter 4*.

Searching for a way to rehabilitate merit, Columbanus concluded that: 'Humility of mind is the cause of merit'.³⁸ Having earlier denied merit, Columbanus now reformulated his principle; just as perfect fear was the type of perfection sought, similarly merit now consisted in humility. Again Columbanus expressed himself in a contradiction when he wrote: 'Without help it [human virtue] cannot be assisted'. So Columbanus concluded that man needed help to be humble enough to receive assistance. It might be useful to compare this with Augustine's statement of a similar contradiction:

Does one, then, have recourse to God without God's help so that one may attain God's help? Do we cling to God without having been helped by God so that we may be helped by God, once we cling to him?³⁹

Columbanus then embarked on a digression about how neither the proud nor the lazy man had any merit, again by implication validating the importance of effort. Finally, rather than reaching a definitive solution to the problem with a reliable formula, Columbanus ran out of space to treat the matter further.

It is clear that Columbanus explored the relationship between grace and free will in his *Letter 4*; my analysis suggests that we see Columbanus trying to respond to a criticism of arrogance and self-sufficiency which had been put to him. Overall, in his *Letter 4* Columbanus attempted to rescue the principles of effort, perfection, and merit from the criticism that belief in man's free

you fools [Ps 94:8]. By the very fact that we have been commanded and ordered to have understanding and wisdom, our obedience is required, and that obedience cannot exist without free will. But if we could bring it about by free will without the help of grace that we have understanding and wisdom, we would not say to God: *Give me understanding that I may learn your commandments* [Ps 119:12]. Nor would it be written in the Gospel: *Then he opened their minds that they might understand the Scriptures* [Lk 24:25]; 'Ubi sentitis non uos intellegere interim credite diuinis eloquiis, quia et liberum hominis est arbitrium et gratia Dei, sine cuius adiutorio liberum arbitrium nec conuerti potest ad Deum, nec proficere in Deum; et quod pie creditis, ut etiam sapienter intellegatis, orate. Et ad hoc ipsum enim, id est, ut sapienter intellegamus, est utique liberum arbitrium. Nisi enim libero arbitrio intellegeremus atque saperemus, non nobis praeciperetur dicente Scriptura: *Intellegite ergo, qui insipientes estis in populo, et stulti aliquando sapite* [Ps 94:8]. Et ipso quippe, quo praeceptum atque imperatum est, ut intellegamus atque sapiamus, oboedientiam nostram requirit, quae nulla potest esse sine libero arbitrio. Sed si posset hoc ipsum sine adiutorio gratiae fieri per liberum arbitrium, ut intellegeremus atque saperemus, non diceretur Deo: *Da mihi intellectum, ut discam mandata tua* [Ps 119:12], neque in Euangelio scriptum esset: *Tunc aperuit illis sensum, ut intellegent Scripturas* [Lk 24:25]'.

³⁸ Columbanus, *Ep.* 4.7 (ed. Walker, p. 34), 'For this reason, humility of mind is the cause of merit, for without help it cannot be assisted; the arrogant man does not merit it; he is made stubborn, having been abandoned'; 'Quapropter mentis humilitas meriti est causa, sine auxilio enim non potest adiuuari; non meretur superbus; induratur derelictus'.

³⁹ Augustine, *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali* 23 (ed. C. Urba & J. Zycha, *CSEL* 42, p. 144), 'Ergone ut perueniatur ad adiutorium Dei, ad Deum curritur sine adiutorio Dei? Et ut Deo adhaerentes adiuuemur a Deo, a Deo non adiuti adhaeremus Deo?' Or similarly, Augustine, *Ep.* 214.2 (ed. J. Chéné & J. Pintard, *BA* 24, p. 54), 'If then, there is no grace of God, how will he save the world? And if there is no free will, how will he judge the world?'; 'Si ergo non est Dei gratia, quo modo saluat mundum? Et si non est liberum arbitrium, quo modo iudicat mundum?'

will engendered arrogance. He grappled with the issue of how to resolve the potential contradiction, and how to formulate a statement that combined the moral responsibility of free will with the humility of acknowledgement of God's grace. In this letter he ran out of space, but in his sermons he continued to search for a formula that expressed his principles.

There is evidence that by the twelfth century some readers wanted to be able to agree with Pelagius concerning human nature and effective free will. Marginalia in manuscripts reveal that readers felt that it was not possible to express agreement with Pelagius because the caricature of 'Pelagianism' had been installed as orthodoxy so successfully. A set of equations had taken hold, according to which the argument for effective free will equated to arrogance and self-sufficiency and was inherently disrespectful of God; man was sinful, and Pelagius' name represented this sinful arrogance and disrespect for God. These were the same equations that Columbanus struggled against and rejected. Readers who wanted to agree with the arguments for the goodness of human nature and for free will set out by Pelagius, for example in his *Letter to Demetrias*, had to argue that Pelagius' *Letter to Demetrias* was actually by Jerome, and did not in fact contradict Augustine. An example of a marginal note expressing this view can be found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Lat. 1885, s.xii, on f. 103r; here, beside the beginning of the copy of Pelagius' *Letter to Demetrias* contained in the manuscript, an anonymous annotator wrote:

Note: this letter is said by many not to be by Jerome, but by someone else who was a Pelagian, in so far as it asserts too much the good of human nature and free will. But it certainly does not detract from the grace of God in any way. Consequently whoever wrote it, I know this one thing: when it is understood in a catholic spirit and examined faithfully, it will bring you great edification. That it should be by Jerome, its ardent discourse persuades me. For both the style and the flavour resemble the author.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The ideas in Pelagius' writings as they survive were part of Columbanus' understanding of the Christian message of salvation, and so were part of his perception of himself as a Christian. This

⁴⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Lat. 1885, s. xii, f. 103r: 'Nota: a plerisque dicitur haec epistola non esse Ieronimi sed alicuius pelagianiste. Eo quod nimis bonum naturae et liberum praedicet arbitrium. Sed certe gratiae dei in nullo detrahit. Cuiuscumque ergo sit, unum hoc scio, catholice intellecta et fideliter disputata magnam tibi afferet edificationem. Ut sit Ieronimi suadet mihi concio uiua. Nam satis auctorem sapit et stilus atque saliuu'.

was because Pelagius' writings contained the same interpretations of the anthropology and soteriology of Christianity as other fourth- and fifth-century ascetic paraenesis; and the texts written by adherents of this ascetic reform movement, of which Evagrius of Antioch and Jerome were two among many, had a profound influence on Columbanus. We know that Pelagius' *Letter to Demetrias* was circulating in Britain in the late seventh century because Aldhelm quoted from it, and Bede tells us that it was travelling under the name of Jerome in the early eighth century.⁴¹ It is therefore not impossible that Pelagius' letters were circulating in Ireland under an attribution to Jerome in the sixth century. But since in terms of doctrine, Pelagius wrote nothing that Jerome had not already written, Columbanus could have derived all these ideas from Jerome; there is no requirement for him to have come into contact with Pelagius' writings.

It is clear that when he was on the Continent and wrote his surviving letters Columbanus was fully aware of the grounds of the controversy over the relationship between God's prevenient grace and effective human free will. He was not afraid openly to use the familiar terminology of the controversy, and he used the technical term for free will (*liberum arbitrium*) positively. My analysis is that the dispute with the Gallic bishops triggered a challenge to Columbanus' thinking. Before that he had been sure of his ascetic reformist thinking about Christian soteriology and the premise underlying ascetic endeavour. But during his dispute with the Gallic bishops, someone presented to him an argument that characterised his position as self-sufficiency and as arrogant; reading *Letter 2*, it is possible to see how a charge of arrogance might have had some traction. My conclusion is that the sentence of deportation may have been based not just on the dating of Easter but also on doctrinal criticism of Columbanus. And furthermore, that the monastic background from which Columbanus came was one in which the writings of the ascetic reform movement, in particular Jerome, really did dominate his monastic reading, and Augustine's works refuting Pelagius did not.

⁴¹ Aldhelm, *De uirginitate* 49 [prose version], ed. R. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi 15 (Berlin, 1919), p. 304; Bede, *In Cantica canticorum Libri VI Praefatio*, ed. D. Hurst, *Beda's Venerabilis opera*, Pars II, 2B, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 119B (Turnhout, 1983), p. 175.