THE PURPOSE of this article, which makes no claim to originality,¹ is to present to a wider public of churchmen what might be called ‘the new look on Pelagius’. Recent studies of this notorious heretic have led to the inescapable conclusion that he has not received a fair deal from the historians of dogma. Every student of theology is familiar with the Pelagianism so forcefully refuted by Augustine of Hippo, and most have learnt to regard it more as a kind of humanism than as a wrong-headed version of Christianity. It is frequently depicted as a rationalistic moralism after the manner of Stoicism. ‘Nature, free-will, virtue and law’, wrote Harnack, ‘these—strictly defined and made independent of the notion of God—were the catch words of Pelagianism: self-acquired virtue is the supreme good which is followed by reward. Religion and morality lie in the sphere of the free spirit; they are won at any moment by man’s own effort.’² And even if we do not subscribe to Harnack’s characterisation of the movement as godless rationalism, yet it remains true, in the words of Robert F. Evans, that ‘Pelagius and the heresy called by his name continue to provide occasion for careless slogans and confident postures. In centres of theological learning, the cry “Pelagianism” is inevitably hurled whenever the schemes of men appear to threaten the necessity and sufficiency of the divine grace.’³ Even Growing Into Union has not penetrated beyond the level of caricature; Pelagianism is ‘the doctrine of self-salvation through self-sufficient self-reliance’.⁴

From the fifth century onwards the name of Pelagius has suffered from being uncritically lumped together with his chief followers, Celestius and Julian, who undoubtedly adopted more brazenly anti-catholic stances as the controversy progressed. In this essay we shall concern ourselves solely with Pelagius, partly because he will always retain the central interest as the trail-blazer of the alleged heresy, and partly because it is above all the image of his theology and religion that twentieth-century scholars have so conspicuously clarified,
Pride of place in a brief survey of Pelagian research must go to Alexander Souter for his unravelling of the complicated manuscript tradition of Pelagius's *Commentary on the Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*, which for the first time gave students a text which could be regarded as reliably authentic.¹ (Souter's analysis of the manuscript evidence has recently been challenged in one major respect,² but his achievement remains fundamental.) It is of major significance that Pelagius should have chosen Paul's Epistles as the subject of his *Commentary*. Its central importance in the elucidation of his theology is further enhanced by the fact of its composition some years before the outbreak of the controversy with Augustine, and so before he incurred on that front the suspicion of unorthodoxy in his views on man, sin and grace. A pupil of Souter, A. J. Smith, in a series of painstaking articles stimulated by Souter's own researches pinpointed Pelagius's indebtedness in the *Commentary on Romans* to earlier writers, especially Origen (through the mediation of Rufinus), Ambrose, 'Ambrosiaster' and Augustine himself in his earlier anti-Manichaean and 'pre-Augustinian' works.³

The Swiss scholar Georges de Plinval contributed an excellent full account of Pelagius's life and activities as a writer, teacher and reformer, and also a study of his language and style.⁴ Plinval's work gave a great impetus to Pelagian research, partly by his earlier ascription to Pelagius himself of nineteen writings of uncertain but broadly Pelagian (in the generic sense) authorship.⁵ Plinval's attributions have been variously received. They were swallowed wholesale by John Ferguson in his rather inadequate little book on Pelagius,⁶ and ignored in an equally slight but epoch-making volume on Pelagius's theology and its sources by the Swedish scholar Torgny Bohlin.⁷ All subsequent expositions of the thought of Pelagius have been to a greater or lesser extent based on Bohlin, who 'provided a new point of departure for Pelagian studies'.⁸

Most of the latest advances in this field have been made by English-speaking scholars, which is most appropriate since Pelagius is the first author of British origin known to history. Not all these studies have been of permanent value. The endeavours of J. N. L. Myres and John Morris to interpret the early Pelagian movement in terms of the social and political context provided by the end of Roman rule in Britain⁹ have not stood the test of critical examination, but more substantial and no less stimulating contributions have issued from the pens of Robert F. Evans of the University of Pennsylvania and Peter Brown of All Souls.¹⁰ The net result of these scholarly developments has been to pose with renewed urgency the kind of question long asked in the case of other heresiarchs, namely, 'How Pelagian was Pelagius?'

The time will not be ripe for a definitive answer to this question until a consensus emerges concerning the authorship of the many contested treatises claimed for Pelagius by Plinval,¹¹ and until a further improved text of the *Pauline Commentary* is published. But it is already fully
possible to set forth the main outlines of Pelagius's thought as he himself presented it rather than as Jerome or Augustine reported it. Whether such an exposition justifies describing him as an exponent of 'twice-born' religion, the reader may be left to judge for himself. What is beyond doubt is that Pelagius painted his own portrait rather more attractively than Augustine did. He deserves to be heard in his own cause for a change.

It must first be emphasised that Pelagius saw himself as standing four-square within the tradition of the orthodox catholic Church. His writings drew upon theologians of both East and West, he was a stalwart opponent of Arianism, and he probably wrote also against Apollinarianism. Above all, Pelagius constructed his theology in conscience opposition to Manichaeism, the late-gnostic dualistic determinism of Persian provenance to which Augustine adhered for an embarrassingly long time before his conversion (and to which Julian the Pelagian reckoned he never ceased to adhere). Pelagius had no time for an ideology which attributed to evil substantial being, declared sin inevitable and located it in the very nature of our humanity as one of its two constituent principles. This anti-Manichaean orientation of Pelagius's thinking has many ramifications (for instance, in his refusal to set body or flesh over against spirit or soul), as well as explaining the undeniable affinities between Pelagius and Augustine's anti-Manichaean phase. It is a crucial determining factor which has only in recent years received due prominence in the interpretation of his thought, largely through Bohlin's book and derivative studies.

It is doubtful if any theologian of the early centuries placed a higher premium on the doctrine of divine creation than Pelagius. As Evans puts it, 'Pelagius' insistence that man can be without sin is an emphatic assertion of the doctrine of creation by a just God; it is nothing more, and it is nothing less.' It is well known that Pelagius expounds an anthropology which insists that man is bound neither by external necessity, such as original sin or 'irresistible grace', nor by internal necessity, such as belongs to the non-human creation from which man is distinguished by freedom of will. The human 'capacity for either direction', for obedience and disobedience alike, is an essential prerequisite, in Pelagius's view, for all judgments of moral worth, for all talk of reward and punishment. Both good and evil are only real when they are the actions of spontaneous will. This estimate of man's freedom as always constitutive of his being, such that we can call it the only 'necessity' of human nature, remains valid for Pelagius throughout the career of every individual and through all the stages of salvation history, though as we shall see, Pelagius has other things to say which in practice radically qualify it.

For the moment we must re-emphasise that the human capacity for good and hence for sinlessness is a divine endowment and not a cause for boastfulness on man's part. It has clearly proved a difficult thing
to give Pelagius the credit he deserves on this point. Harnack's
accusation quoted above that he conceived of nature and free will
independently of the notion of God could not be more erroneous.
For Pelagius human freedom is never independent of God. It
owes its existence to God's creative grace (for so he came to describe it in
the course of the controversy), and is never the achievement of man
himself, who neither creates his own freedom nor is able ever to destroy
it. Therefore, when a man exercises his freedom to do good he is
utilising a God-given ability, and for that good act both God and the
human agent must receive credit, God for the gift and man for the right
exercise of it. But man's obedience would be impossible without his
possession of a divinely implanted capacity which survives unimpaired
any and every abuse of his freedom.

Western thinking has been so conditioned by Augustinianism that goodness achieved without the
continual grace of God, viewed as an enabling activity 'from without',
is almost automatically classified as 'natural' in a pejorative sense. It
is precisely at this point that we must stand outside our tradition if we
are to let Pelagius praise the grace of God as he desires.

Pelagius's Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul sketches a rudimen-
tary Heilsgeschichte or 'salvation-history' of which we must take
note if we are to present a just account of his anthropology. For
although he notoriously rejected the (Augustinian) notion of original
sin, he did take a reasonably realistic view of the force of sin as an
ingrained habit in human history. It is this conception of an ever-
increasing incubus of 'the habit of sinning' (consuetudo peccandi) upon
successive generations that we must relate to his exposition of the three
'times', the time of nature, the time of law and the time of grace.

The time of nature consisted of the era from Adam to the giving of
the law through Moses. During this period there were several indi-
viduals, so Pelagius believes, who were able to live without sin by means
of the law of their own nature or their reason or conscience (these
concepts are closely connected with one another in Pelagian thought).
But all the time the snowball of human sinfulness which Adam's
disobedience had set rolling was gathering size and momentum.
Gradually through ignorance, which was always in Pelagius's mind a
basic cause of sin, the potentiality of man's true nature was obscured,
being overlaid, as it were, by generations of almost universal iniquity
as by layers of rust. It was to remedy this situation that the law was
given through Moses, inaugurating the time of the law which lasted
until the coming of Christ. And just as the gift of the written law was
God's cure for the desperate plight of mankind, which had been in
progressive declension ever since Adam, so the incarnation was a
further divine response to humanity's moral bankruptcy after the
effects of the law had 'worn off'. This is how Pelagius himself sum-
marizes the whole development: 'In the time of nature, the Creator
could be known by the guidance of reason, and the rule of righteousness
of life was carried written in the heart, not by the law of the letter but of nature. But man's way of life became corrupt, nature was tarnished (decolor) and began to be inadequate, and so the law was added to it, whereby, as by a file, the rust should be rubbed off and its original listre restored. But subsequently the habit of sinning came to prevail so strongly among men that the law proved incapable of healing it. Then Christ came, and the Physician himself in his own person, not through his disciples, brought relief to the sickness at its most desperate stage.\textsuperscript{13}

Before we proceed to Pelagius's doctrine of the work of Christ, three points deserve special emphasis. In the first place, the essence of man's created nature was in no way affected at any point in the moral deterioration of mankind. Pelagius followed the creationist rather than the traducianist view of the origin of the soul, which means that in his teaching each birth stands in a direct relation to divine creation. Hence there is much truth in the dictum that for Pelagius 'each man is his own Adam', in terms of both undiminished potentiality for moral perfection and beginning of sinning.

But secondly, although human nature is never corrupted, diseased or vitiated in any way, so that no doctrine of original sin defined as transmission of guilt or infection is allowable, nevertheless Pelagius does not minimize the consequences of the long sad tale of human disobedience, the effects of 'the long-standing practice of sinning', 'the inveterate habit of moral failure'.\textsuperscript{14} Before Christ 'the habit of sinning grew so strong that no one fulfilled the law'.\textsuperscript{15} Commenting on the image of the wild olive tree in Romans 11:24, Pelagius says of the forefathers of the Jews that 'they forgot the law of nature, fell away from their nature (degeneraverunt a natura), and through successive of sinning and a persistent habit of sin began to be almost by nature (quasi natura/iter) bitter and unfruitful'.\textsuperscript{16} Elsewhere Pelagius can speak of the slavery of sin and of being so drunk by habitual sinfulness that one sins almost unwillingly (invitus) and creates for oneself a 'necessity' of sinning.\textsuperscript{17}

Such statements should not mislead us, for in the same context Pelagius insists that sin never becomes part of a man's nature (non naturale) and dwells in him like a lodger rather than as owner-occupier. Or again he depicts sin as staining human nature with the rust of ignorance, which could be dealt with by the file of the law. 'By constant application of its abrasive injunctions the rust of ignorance was to be done away and man's newly polished nature was to stand out again in its pristine brilliance.'\textsuperscript{18} This may suggest a literally superficial theory of sin, but must be taken alongside Pelagius's repeated assertions that the power of habitual sinning in the times of nature and of law rendered the vast majority of mankind incapable of keeping God's law, whether the law of nature or the Mosaic law. Prior to Christ, the law had become powerless to keep a man from sinning, and able only
to make him conscious of his law-breaking. Nevertheless, Pelagius will also affirm that sinlessness remained always a possibility, even if never or very rarely actualized. Because of the encrustments of habit and oblivion, the hidden treasures of the soul are left untapped. ‘It lies beyond the grasp of man to know and to be what he is and remains.’

A third point brings us to the work of Christ. In his distinction between the time of law and the time of grace, Pelagius is not contrasting law and grace. The Mosaic law is no less grace than the grace of Christ is law. This becomes more easily intelligible when we remember that a fundamental cause of sin is ignorance, ignorance both of the divinely created potential of human nature and of the will of God. Ignorance is encountered by impartation of knowledge, and this the law achieves no less than the example and instruction of Christ. From this angle law and grace are in no sense antithetical.

It does not follow that Christ’s redemptive ministry is interpreted solely as one of revelation and education. Pelagius believes in atonement by penal substitution. Christ’s death was a sacrificial offering for the sins of men which secures their forgiveness, a bearing of condemnation which preserves from hell. And if the remission of the cross releases a man from past guilt, the teaching and example of Christ have power to snap the binding force of sinful habit and open up again the possibilities of freedom from sin. The reconciliation of Christ means the restoration or re-establishment of the natural inheritance of humanity. Redemption signifies the realization of the promise inherent in our divinely created destiny. Creation and salvation are impressively held together in the mind of Pelagius.

Thus we are generati of God by creation, and regenerati, born again, made regenerate, by the grace of the Gospel in conversion and baptism. Pelagius conceives of a radical discontinuity between what we would call ‘the natural man’ and the baptized Christian. Baptism plays a central role in Pelagius’s thought as ‘the sacrament of justification by faith’. Sola fides occurs quite often in the Commentary, linking together forgiveness of sins through Christ’s death, conversion, baptism, and the enjoyment of righteousness understood as acquittal for past sins. But Pelagius also unambiguously teaches justification by works, for the baptized Christ must fulfill works of righteousness for which the blotting out of the past and his present acceptance through faith have prepared him. So in fact justification by faith alone ‘applies to the unique situation of the individual at his conversion and baptism’.

The implications of the ‘baptismal regeneration’ posited by Pelagius are worth pondering, against the background of what has gone before concerning human freedom, the power of sinful habit and the time of grace, and with reference to his setting in the history of the early Church. It is easy to imagine Pelagius’s teachings at Rome as a protest against
lax Christian behaviour which tended to obscure the lines of demarcation between Christian and pagan. It is also important to place Pelagius fully within the circles which had felt the impact of asceticism from the Christian East. One feature of this Westernization of the ascetic movement, which is linked especially with the names of Jerome and Rufinus and found a ready welcome among the Roman aristocracy, was the tendency to universalize the ethic of the élite and apply to the whole Christian community the demands of ascetic discipline. Several of Pelagius's writings were addressed to high-born Roman ladies whose conversion to the faith was a conversion from the world to the life of ascetic renunciation. He is presented to us in our sources as a counsellor of Christian perfection, concerned to vindicate the ideal of a Church visibly holy in all its members. In other words, he propagated a Christianity of discontinuity, with the crisis of conversion and baptism constituting the decisive break with the old life. As he wrote to Demetrias, 'Everything that retards or undermines progress in the "spiritual" life you overcame at the outset at the moment of your conversion. The desire for marriage, concern for one's posterity, the lure of luxury and ease, the pomp of the world, the lust for riches—you rejected them all, and can say with Paul, "The world is crucified to me, and I to the world".'

'In its spiritual meaning,' declared William James, 'asceticism stands for nothing less than for the essence of the twice-born philosophy.'

Pelagius refuses to allow that the person speaking in Romans 7 is Paul the Christian apostle. The whole passage culminating in the cry 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' voices the experience of one who has not yet passed through the death and resurrection of Christian baptism. But 'if any person has been converted from his sins, he can by his own effort and God's grace be without sin'. 'How is it possible for the flesh to be contrary to the self in a baptized Christian?' One can realize how utterly ruinous to Pelagius's understanding of the Christian religion would have been a 'peccatology' which rooted sin so deeply in human nature that it survived even the waters of baptism. We can probably gain a fair idea of how Pelagius viewed the crisis of conversion and baptism from the accounts Cyprian and Augustine gave of their own experiences.
I said, "is such a conversion possible, that there should be a sudden and rapid divestment of everything that, either innate in us has hardened in the corruption of our material nature, or acquired by us has become inveterate by long accustomed use?"... Such were my frequent thoughts. And as I was myself so fast bound by the innumerable errors of my former life that I did not believe I could be released from them, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my besetting faults, and in despair of improvement I used to cherish my wickedness as if it was actually native and indigenous to me. But as soon as the stain of my earlier life had been washed away by the aid of the water of (new) birth and a clear light from above had flooded my purified heart, as soon as I had drunk of the Spirit from heaven and the second birth had restored me to a new man, then straightway in a wondrous fashion doubts began to be resolved, hidden things to be revealed and the darkness to become light. What before had seemed difficult began to appear feasible, what I had thought impossible capable of accomplishment. Thus I was able to recognize that what was born after the flesh and spent its previous life at the mercy of sin was of the earth, while that which the Holy Spirit was enlivening had begun to belong to God."

Augustine's story in the Confessions, especially books 8 and 9, is too well known to need rehearsing. But it is highly interesting to observe that the words in it to which Pelagius in Rome reacted with such indignation—in an incident normally regarded as the outbreak of the controversy—are found in book 10, when Augustine is analysing his present condition at the time of writing, that is, some twelve or so years after his conversion. Here Pelagius encountered not once but four times the prayer 'Grant what you command, and command what you will' (Da quod iubes et iube quod vis), set amidst a description of the state of the long-baptized Augustine stressing his frailty in face of the manifold temptations he experiences day by day. It was surely not merely against the single sentence that Pelagius reacted but against the whole depressing portrait of the continuing strength of old lusts and habits. It breathed a defeatist spirit which he could not excuse. (In the subsequent controversy Julian was to accuse his catholic opponents of teaching that 'baptism does not grant complete remission of sins nor remove our faults, but shaves them down, so that the roots of all our sins are retained in the evil flesh, like the roots of shaved hair on the head, whence the sins may grow again and need cutting off once more.'

Augustine seems to have been reluctant to provoke an open confrontation with Pelagius. This may have been partly due to the friends they held in common, such as Paulinus of Nola, and the enemies they also shared, like Jerome. But it is not improbable that it owed something to the nostalgia Augustine felt for a position he had once espoused but adhered to no longer. Parts of his early anti-Manichaean work on Free Will were highly congenial to Pelagius,
with his more developed anti-Pelagian views. Moreover, the picture of Augustine that we gain from his writings in the years immediately after his conversion and baptism suggests not a little 'the sudden relief of tension, the happy unclouded sense of serious purpose', which Pelagius always associated with the decisive change of regeneration. So when some years later Augustine girded up his loins for combat with the Pelagians both his hesitancy in entering the fray and the vehemence with which he eventually joined battle may be explicable in part from his wistfulness and embarrassment when reminded of attitudes and ideals he once maintained himself. Since then he had come to regard the Christian life more as one long convalescence than a confident advance from grace to perfection. And so, it seems, it was Pelagius and not Augustine who preserved the true outlook of the earlier centuries of the Church, which came to terms with the problem of post-baptismal sin only with painful slowness. 'Pelagius is the last, the most radical, and the most paradoxical exponent of the ancient Christianity—the Christianity of discontinuity.'

1 The writer acknowledges a deep debt to R. F. Evans, Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals (London, 1968), and Peter Brown's brilliant article 'Pelagius and His Supporters: Aims and Environment', Journal of Theological Studies n.s. 19 (1968), pp. 93-114.


8 Pélagie: Ses Écrits, Sa Vie et Sa Réforme (Lausanne, 1943), Essai sur le Style et la Langue de Pélagie (Fribourg-en-Suisse, 1947).

9 'Recherches sur l'oeuvre littéraire de Pélagie,' Revue de Philologie 60 (1934), pp. 9-42.

10 Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study (Cambridge, 1956).


12 Bonner, art. cit., p. 352.

13 Myres, 'Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain, Journ. of Roman Stud. 50 (1960), pp. 21-36; Morris, 'Pelagian Literature,' Journ. of Theol. Stud. n.s. 16 (1965), pp. 25-60. For criticism see the literature referred to by Brown, art. cit., p. 94 n.1.
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14 Evans' main works are referred to in notes 1 and 6 above; Brown, art. cit., and 'The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy Between East and West', ibid., n.s. 21 (1970), pp. 56-72; also Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (London, 1967), a profoundly perceptive work.

15 Evans, Four Letters, denies Pelagius's authorship of all but four of the nineteen, and it seems that his arguments are winning acceptance.


17 Evans, Pelagius, p. 92.

18 Bohlin, op. cit., pp. 10, 12-22; Evans, op. cit., pp. 53, 68, 85, etc.


20 In discussing the Hebrew patriarchs' lack of law before Moses Pelagius comments, 'This was not of course because God was at any time unconcerned for his creation, but because he knew that he had made human nature in such a way that it would suffice for the fulfilling of righteousness in place of law,' Letter to Demetrias 8.

21 Cf. Evans, op. cit., p. 109: 'Pelagius does not teach the doctrine that men by their own "unaided nature" may attain salvation; he teaches that men have the capacity to be without sin, which . . . is a different doctrine.'

22 Evans, ibid., pp. 96-113.


24 Ibid., 8.

25 Commentary on Gal. 3: 10 (Patr. Lat., Suppl. I, 1277)


28 Evans, op. cit., p. 99.

29 Ibid., p. 102.


32 Evans, op. cit., p. 113.

33 Ibid., pp. 109 with n. 109 and 113 with n. 134.


35 Evans, op. cit., p. 119.

36 Letter to Demetrias 10. However, Evans has shown, op. cit., ch. 3, that Pelagius took issue with Jerome over the latter's excessive denigration of marriage.


38 Cf. apud Augustine, Nature and Grace 54: 64.


40 Apud Augustine, Nature and Grace 52: 60.

41 Letter to Donatus 3-4.


44 Brown, 'Pelagius . . .', art. cit., p. 107. The latter part of this article is largely based on Brown's very important presentation.

45 Ibid.