THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPACT OF MOLINISM IN THE 17TH CENTURY

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I. Molinism: Definitions of the Ambiguities of a Classification

“Molinism” is one of the ghosts that haunt the theological and philosophical controversies of the 17th century. For Molina’s early adversaries it was simply a new edition of Pelagian heresy, and rivers of ink were poured to confirm or confute this identification. For the Jansenists, “Molinism” was not only a doctrine of grace and of freedom, but the first step of a wide series of evil moral innovations, ranging from probabilism to the doctrine of “philosophical sin,” in short a “relaxed” (relachée) doctrine whose ultimate aim would be to promise men a cheap salvation. To yet others, who perhaps share Molina’s conception of grace, but who have no wish to be confused with the “Jesuits,” “Molinism” will appear as an offshoot of “scholasticism” and its abstract language, which is not acceptable to all those who would love to return to the simplicity of the church fathers.

However, these polemical identifications conceal an important fact, namely that Luis de Molina’s thought provided a first-class theoretical

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1 For the biography of the scholastic doctors here discussed, see Carlos Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* (Paris: 1890–1916); *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris), and the very helpful website www.scholasticon.fr, by Jacob Schmutz.


3 The masterwork of this kind of anti-Jesuit litterature is *Les Provinciales* (1656) by Blaise Pascal. But its most engaged follower was Antoine Arnauld: see his *Oeuvres* (Paris-Lausanne: 1775–82), 29–36.

model throughout the 17th century that was capable of being rejected but also of being accepted to a greater or lesser degree. His views were not just confined to occupying a place in the theological debate on free will and grace following the Reformation and the Council of Trent, but changed the agenda of the debate and redefined its categories in a way which proved to have a long influence.

There still remain two major obstacles for those who wish to study its influence and relevance. The first is that the controversy between Molina and Bañez is only one episode in a long transconfessional struggle between different conceptions of grace. On the one side there were those like Molina, who fully accepted the principle that God wanted to save all men (Timothy I, 2:4), inferring therefrom that he can refuse only those who in their turn refuse him and that, conversely, salvation for the predestined must also depend on the creature’s meritorious decision to cooperate. Against this scheme of theology of grace (Grace ex praevisa merita) is set another scheme of theology of grace founded on the thesis that since the will of God governs over every event supremely, divine grace must always be efficacious and therefore, if someone is not saved, it is simply because God has not wanted this person to be saved. In a word, on the one side an image is proposed of God as a father who is generous towards his children, albeit circumspect in distributing his gifts, whereas on the other hand the image is put forward of a sovereign God whose power over the world is absolute, and whose decisions cannot be judged in moral terms. Now, if the Council of Trent had brought most of the Catholic world nearer the first position—if not for no other reason than on the basis of the famous formula whereby the man inspired by grace may still dissent if he so wishes (dissentire posse, si velit)\(^5\)—and if, in the Protestant world, orthodox (“Gomarist”) Calvinism represented the stronghold of the second position, then both orientations indeed existed in all confessions. Each of the contending parties had thus to elaborate their own positions by distinguishing them not only from those held by the internal enemy but also from the embarrassing public companions made up of sympathizers of the same thesis in other confessions. For an

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