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**A Critique of Matthew Lynch’s  
“Free Will and Eternal Security”**

as first published in Volume 1, 2005-07<sup>1</sup>

**by Matthew Lynch**

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I wrote an article entitled “Free Will and Eternal Security” for Volume 1 of *Testamentum Imperium* that defended the Calvinistic doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints as a form of eternal security. In that article there are a number of inadequacies to which we should call attention. The main problem with the article was my lack of academic qualifications, as I shall demonstrate below. I will then point to other, more appropriate sources that I have since found helpful in studying the question of free will and eternal security.

A quick glance at the scant references in the original article reveals that I was unfamiliar with the literature pertaining to divine providence and eternal security. Only four published works are cited, and of these one is an introductory philosophy textbook. Certainly this does not represent a full view of the state of the literature at the time. From this lack of expertise follow several problems. First, the terminology of the prior paper was idiosyncratic and inadequate. The term “Free Grace” was a term that I coined for the article to describe the view that a Christian can apostatize and still be saved. This term implies grace is more “free” on this view than the other views, which is not correct. Second, two of the four references to published

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<sup>1</sup> See original at <http://www.preciousheart.net/ti/2007/07-2%20Lynch,%20Matthew%20-%20Free%20Will%20and%20Eternal%20Security.pdf>.

literature are cited to defend a claim that professional philosophers and theologians have misunderstood the terms of their own trade. The hubris is glaring. In fact, it is I who was confused about the meaning of terms. For example, I defined semicompatibilism as the view that determinism is compatible with “free will,” where free will is defined in a non-libertarian sense. But this is true only if speaking loosely. The actual meaning of the term “semicompatibilism” is the view that determinism is compatible with *moral responsibility*, and it leaves as an open question whether freedom is required for moral responsibility and what type of freedom that may be. I attributed the point to a Mr. Ashton Wilkins, but he should not be thought the source of the error. He does not necessarily endorse anything the original article asserts, and he is in no way responsible for any of the other errors of that article, which are all my own. I misunderstood Mr. Wilkins, and I neglected to read the article by J. M. Fischer, which I had cited. This underscores the importance of tracking down and reading original sources.

For purposes of clarity in this critique I will try to remain consistent with my previous inexact terminology by using the term *Jansenist semicompatibilism* to refer to what I previously called *semicompatibilism simpliciter*. Jansenism was a heresy of the 17th century that was in many ways similar to Calvinism. Several Jansenists adopted a non-libertarian view of free will in which free will consists in the ability to follow one’s strongest desire. This could be classified as a species of semicompatibilism, and is precisely the view which I was advocating in the previous article. However, Jansenism, and so I assume also its view of free will, has been declared heresy by the Catholic Church. An accessible critique of Jansenist semicompatibilism can be found in St. Alphonsus Liguori’s book entitled *Prayer: The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection* in Part 2, Chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> This work is also relevant to those generally interested in eternal security because it describes the source of our confidence in our salvation from a Catholic perspective – namely, appeal to the mercy of God through prayer.

My lack of knowledge in the subject also surfaces in the neglect of entire traditions within Christianity that are deeper and more

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<sup>2</sup> St. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection* (TAN Books, 1994 [1759]).

venerable than the one in which I operated at the time of authorship. The article considers only three categories: Arminianism, Calvinistic Perseverance of the Saints, or Free Grace. The original article does not discuss any Catholic view of perseverance, such as Thomism or Molinism. Thomism is the theory of divine providence following St. Thomas Aquinas, and arguably combines the best aspects of Arminianism and Calvinism. The following table illustrates this (focusing on aspects that pertain to my previous article):

	<b>Arminianism</b>	<b>Thomism</b>	<b>Calvinism</b>
<b>The elect will infallibly be saved.</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>The elect can lose the grace of justification or regeneration after having received it.</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b> but the elect will regain it before death.	<b>No</b>

So it is apparent how Thomism crosses over several categories. The Thomistic view affirms both that the elect will infallibly be saved and the possibility that a regenerate believer can fall from grace into a state of mortal sin. Thomism relieves some of the so-called “tension” between the “warning passages” threatening hellfire to the apostate and those passages promising salvation to the elect. But is the Thomist an “Arminian” or “Perseverance of the Saints” adherent? He does not fit well into either. My categories need some revision.

Of course lack of theological and philosophical training does not, by itself, invalidate an argument. But even at the level of logic, the article fails to be convincing. In that article I claim to show Jansenist semicompatibilism is true from biblical texts. However, the texts it cites can easily be interpreted from a compatibilist’s viewpoint, or even from a libertarian viewpoint. The keystone text of my argument was Ezra 7, in which King Artaxerxes “freely” gives to Ezra gifts (v. 15) so that he may go make sacrifice to God, and yet the text says that it was God who “put it in his heart a *desire*” to do so (v. 27), as if God acts efficaciously by placing the strongest desire in the king’s heart. I said, “This passage describes a free act in exactly the way a [Jansenist] semicompatibilist would,” as if that proves the case – open and shut. In fact, however, I failed to see that this passage describes a free act in exactly the way a compatibilist would too. God ordains the

gift by efficaciously implanting a desire and yet the king exercises libertarian freedom (in which he retains the ability to do otherwise in some mysteriously compatible way). For that matter, a libertarian would not have too much trouble with this passage either. On his view, God puts the desire into the king's heart, but it is inefficacious and the king can freely accept or reject the desire. (In fact he accepts.) I claimed this is the only biblical passage that directly answered the question of which kind of freedom we have, but in reality it does no such thing. The other examples cited suffer from the same problem – and I admitted as much for those. They do not distinguish between compatibilistic and Jansenist semi-compatibilistic freedom.

In the previous paper I spoke too loosely of God causing evil. For example, I commented on Zechariah 8:10, in which God says, “No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy, for I had turned every man against his neighbor.” I said God “caused” these evil acts of the Israelites. I would like to clarify what this means. God does not directly will the morally evil aspect of any situation. Instead, God permits or tolerates evil for a good reason. In the specific case of Zechariah God explains that the hardening of men's hearts was inflicted as a punishment for past sins committed by Israel. “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘...I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me’” (Zechariah 8:14). God hates it when men plot against each other (Zechariah 8:17). God sometimes withdraws grace as a punishment for past sins, and men's heart become hard as a result. The relationship of God to evil is complicated. There are different types of evil, but God does not cause moral evil, i.e. that kind of evil for which an agent can be blamed. In fact it is logically impossible for him to do so. On this topic I refer the reader to St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 49.

This should be enough to show that the original article was the work of an amateur, and should be weighed accordingly. Since I am not in a better academic position now to assert a viewpoint, I will defer to those who are qualified to speak. Fr. Reginald Garrigou-

Lagrange describes the Thomistic view of free will and compares it with other views in his book entitled *Predestination*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP, *Predestination: The meaning of Predestination in Scripture and the Church* (TAN Books, 1998 [1939]).

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