

ABELARD THE SCHOLAR

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The twelfth century was a time of great intellectual ferment: at the forefront of this movement was the scholar and philosopher Peter Abelard. Yet posterity has forgotten much of the scholarship of Abelard, preferring to remember him for his exploits with Heloise, as a lover not a great thinker. This does him great disservice, for his work was revolutionary at the time, explosive enough to bring him into conflict with Bernard of Clairvaux, and to see him condemned twice by a cautious and traditional Church. His book, *Sic et Non*, still stands as an early attempt to combine Church theology and logic, and can be seen as a precursor to the work of theologians such as Aquinas.

Peter Abelard was born in the small town of Le Pallet in 1079 the eldest son of minor Breton nobility.¹ His family expected him to become a soldier, like his father, yet Abelard soon decided to forgo his inheritance, to withdraw “From the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva.”² He became a student around 1093 and wandered to wherever he could find teaching.³

The life of peripatetic student was an innovation in the history of scholarship. Until the eleventh century, the Benedictine monasteries and, to a lesser extent, to the Cathedral schools had been the only sources of learning.⁴ The Rule of St Benedict expected literacy and scholarship from the monks, and for centuries, the monks had studied both for communal and individual purposes.⁵ In addition to studies that formalized aspects of their communal life, the

monks helped to rediscover ancient knowledge, once lost. Richard Southern calls this a “stupendous task” and one in which the Benedictines played a large part.⁶ Monks conducted private readings and each compiled a *florilegium* – a collection of extracts – for his personal use. The scholastic method developed, in part, out of the methods of compilation of the *florilegium*, in that the student would attempt to patiently and critically assess different passages of Christian scholarship and thus better reach a truth.⁷

In the Cathedral schools, the scholarship was less formal, less bounded by the Rule, and until the eleventh century, the work done in the monasteries overshadowed any done in the Cathedral cloisters. Scholarship had always been necessary at the Cathedrals for the conducting of business, and many Cathedrals had schools attached, yet it was not until the Third Lateran Council in 1179 that the Church formally ordered Cathedrals to maintain a master for the teaching of students.⁸ However, the Cathedral schools formed the basis of the universities that began to emerge in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including the University of Paris.⁹ Great scholars such as Fulbert of Chartres took positions as masters of the Cathedral schools and began to attract scholars to them.¹⁰ One such scholar was Jean Roscelin, a monk of Compiègne who was one of Abelard’s earliest teachers.¹¹ Roscelin was a logician and a nominalist, and his theories had brought him into dispute with the Church.¹² Doubtless Abelard learned a great deal from him in the years he studied with Roscelin at Tours,

¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1974) 9.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002) 153.

⁴ For more information on Benedictine monasticism see Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, *The Penguin History of the Church 2*, ed. Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁵ St Benedict, “The Rule”, in *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Paul Halsall, ed., Fordham University, February 2001 (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>).

⁶ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) 188.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), 138.

¹⁰ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 197.

¹¹ M. De Wulf, “Roscelin,” *The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13189c.htm>).

¹² F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 154.

yet later Abelard was to later to surpass his former master's work and upbraid him for lack of clarity.¹³ In what was to become a pattern, Abelard and Roscelin ended on poor terms: embarrassed to have studied with Roscelin, Abelard ignored his former teacher in his *Historia Calamitatum* and Roscelin wrote an abusive letter to Abelard taunting him about his castration.¹⁴

The students who flocked to teachers such as Roscelin and Fulbert now formed a class of their own. They rejected the strictures of monasticism and were interested in intellectual questions previously ignored by traditional scholarship.¹⁵ Southern notes that an easing of material conditions led to this growth in dispute and discussion¹⁶ while undoubtedly, the growing influx of ancient scholarship through translation and Islamic scholarship fueled the phenomenon further.¹⁷ Northern France became a mecca for these itinerant scholars especially those interested in logic and rhetoric. Italy, in particular Bologna, remained the most important site for legal training – due in part to the influence of the work of Gratian – but Paris and its environs excelled in the humanities and theology.¹⁸ It was to Paris that Abelard traveled in 1100 to learn at the Cathedral school of Notre-Dame.¹⁹

The new schools of law, theology and philosophy brought with them new methods of study. When the monasteries were the most influential sources of scholarship, scholars placed great emphasis upon the Authorities: works such as the Bible or Augustine's *City of God*. However, the new scholars developed the scholastic method around questioning such authorities and developing answers based on logic and informed debate. Scholars compiled books of answered problems,

Questiones, using the newly discovered Aristotelian logic and analysis.²⁰ Abelard was at the forefront of this movement and soon came into conflict with more traditional teachers unwilling, or unable, to follow this new paradigm. Abelard's master in Paris, William of Champeaux, was a renowned philosopher but soon the two clashed and the atmosphere became poisonous as William took a "violent dislike" to Abelard and some of Abelard's fellow students became angry at the presumptuousness of the new student.²¹

Already, Abelard had ambitions to become master of his own school at Notre-Dame, but William attempted to block these plans and "secretly used every means he could to thwart [Abelard's] plans" to open a school in Melun.²² William failed, and Abelard's school soon became popular and as his confidence grew, allowed him to move it closer to Paris at Corbeil. Dates in Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* are never clear, but it would appear he began teaching at Melun in approximately 1102, when he was still only in his early twenties. Soon, the stress became too much and his health failed. He returned to his family in Le Pallet to recuperate in 1105.²³ For some unknown reason, when Abelard returned to the academic fray, he went to Paris not Melun or Corbeil. He returned to the school of his nemesis, William of Champeaux. Soon, the two began to argue about universals, a sphere of logic that Abelard had first approached under Roscelin. William of Champeaux was, unlike Abelard, a realist, and Abelard attacked his position.²⁴ He seems to have won the argument after "on several occasions I proved myself superior in debate" until he "forced [William] to give up his original position." His students abandoned William and he abandoned teaching.²⁵

Even Abelard seems puzzled that a dispute about universals be the basis for the destruction of a master's reputation, for to him the question of universals was only a

¹³ M. De Wulf, "Roscelin," para 4.

¹⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 58.

¹⁵ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 195.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁷ George Makdisi, "The Scholastic Method in Medieval Education: An Inquiry into Its Origins in Law and Theology," *Speculum* 49.4 (1974), 641.

¹⁸ George Holmes ed., *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 135.

¹⁹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 154.

²⁰ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 139.

²¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 58

²² *Ibid.*, 59

²³ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 154.

²⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

part of the field of dialectic or logic.²⁶ However, the question of universals was important in the period and a potentially dangerous subject, especially before the bulk of Aristotle's work on logic became available to scholars. The problem concerned the nature of reality: whether a universal truly existed or was merely a name given to a general concept. The realist, inspired by Plato, argued that the universal was more than a term; that 'tree' could be applied to all trees and existed independently of trees; that it had a real existence.²⁷ Realists such as William of Champeaux argued there was a universal essence (*subsistentia*) out of which all individuals would flow.²⁸ Nominalists, including Roscelin, argued that the universal was merely a name (*nomen*); the only things that truly exist are individuals.²⁹ Abelard himself took a more moderate stance than Roscelin, but still argued against Realism. Abelard argued that while the universal was not real it was also more than just a word or a sound; it was an abstraction, a mental construct of the shared attributes of individuals.³⁰

Abelard now harbored ambitions to become master of the school of Notre Dame but William "eaten up by jealousy" was able to thwart him. Instead, he returned to Melun, and later moved his school to Mont Ste Genevieve on the outskirts of Paris – the current site of the University of Paris. There, he continued to argue with William and his followers.³¹ He remained at Mont Ste Genevieve from 1109 to 1113 until, upon the pleading of his mother, Abelard decided to leave teaching and once again become a student, but this time of divinity.³² He traveled to the school of Anselm of Laon, a noted and popular theologian, where he promptly angered his teacher with his hubris. Abelard was unimpressed by the old man, "who owed his

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁷ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 154.

²⁸ M. De Wulf, "Nominalism, Realism, Conceptualism," *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003 (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11090c.htm>)

²⁹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

³¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 61.

³² F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 155.

reputation more to long practice than to intelligence or memory" and claimed, "Anyone who knocked at [Anselm's] door to seek an answer to some question went away more uncertain than he came."³³ Southern describes the school of Anselm as using "heartless and uninspired efficiency" in teaching and it cannot have sat well with Abelard's arrogance or his love of debate.³⁴ He began to lecture upon the Bible, despite his short time studying, and "relied upon [his] own intelligence" rather than long practice.³⁵ According to Abelard, Anselm soon grew "wildly jealous", attacked Abelard's attitude and banned him from further teaching. Within days, Abelard left and returned to Paris, yet he had made more lifetime enemies.³⁶

Upon his return to Paris, Abelard finally achieved the position he had long coveted: he became *magister scholarum* of the school of Notre Dame, a post he held for several years.³⁷ This must have been very satisfying to Abelard. He had the position he deemed his due, he could teach both logic and theology and large numbers of students flocked to hear him. Scholars at the time had "begun to feel comfortable about their command of the past;" they had begun to write the *Summa*, or summary works that consolidated this knowledge and fueled yet further discussion.³⁸ This scholarship worried traditionalists, especially monastics, yet seemed unstoppable.³⁹ It must have been a marvelous atmosphere for Abelard's fertile intelligence. Yet, without the conflicts of previous years, he became proud and lax, and allowed himself a terrible mistake: his relationship with Heloise. Within a short time, his inattention to his school had alienated many students; his seduction and apparent abandonment of Heloise he had made an enemy of the senior clergyman, Fulbert; and ultimately, he lost everything.⁴⁰ Abelard left his position as *magister*

³³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 62.

³⁴ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 104.

³⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁸ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 205.

³⁹ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 140.

⁴⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 66–77.

scholarum, became a monk, and began the earnest study of theology.⁴¹

We might wonder what work Abelard might have produced had disaster not befallen him, had he remained at Notre Dame, yet it was as a monk he wrote two of his most influential and controversial works. Between 1118 and 1121, he wrote *Theologia*, and later he wrote *Sic Et Non*. In both, he attempted to synthesize theology and logic, to explain the divine and resolve contradictions within theological thought through use of reason.⁴² Both works brought him further trouble. Enemies he had made at Laon attacked *Theologia* at the Council of Soissons in 1121: they claimed that Abelard's nominalist theories refuted the central dogma of the Church that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God. Despite Abelard's protestations, the Council condemned the work and had it burned. In his *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard later claimed this condemnation was the result of academic envy, as he once again drew students to his teaching.⁴³ This might seem reasonable, yet Roscelin had been similarly accused and more severely punished for similar works some years earlier.⁴⁴ Whatever the cause, Abelard was distraught: he "considered [himself] the unhappiest of men," and "wept for the injury done to [his] reputation."⁴⁵ Yet Abelard continued to draw trouble to himself. Despite his protestation of humility since his castration, he persisted in baiting both his old enemies and attracting new foes. After the writing of *Sic Et Non* while teaching at the Paraclete, he acquired a more powerful adversary than ever before: Bernard of Clairvaux.⁴⁶

Bernard of Clairvaux was a Cistercian monk, a traditionalist and a Church reformer. He was renowned throughout Europe not only for his works of spirituality but also for his fearsome nature. He despised the new scholasticism as being a distraction from spirituality,

unnecessary and potentially heretical. For Bernard, faith alone was enough. Abelard, as the great teacher of scholasticism and new Christian thought, became the target for Bernard's wrath.⁴⁷ Bernard wrote to many senior churchmen condemning Abelard. He claimed that Abelard had "defiled the church; [...] infected with his own blight the minds of simple people."⁴⁸ These letters soon began to circulate: Walter Map heard one such letter from Bernard to Pope Eugenius read aloud at a dinner hosted by Thomas Becket in which Bernard accused Abelard of being as "proud as Goliath" and associated him with Arnold of Brescia, a noted heretic.⁴⁹ These letters did Bernard no credit, but they did irreparable harm to Abelard.

Supported by numerous bishops, abbots, French nobles and enemies of Abelard, Bernard prosecuted Abelard for heresy at the Council of Sens in 1141. The result was a foregone conclusion: Bernard had already persuaded the bishops presiding at the trial to convict Abelard. Abelard understood this, and knew that whatever he did, he would be condemned. Refusing to admit his work was heretical, or that he was a heretic, he said only, "I appeal to the pope" and left the Council. In his absence, the Council condemned his work, but did not condemn him. Abelard left for Rome, but never made it. Already too ill, Peter the Venerable gave him refuge at Cluny, and it was there that Abelard must have heard that Pope Innocent II had condemned him and burned his work. Later absolved by the Pope, it was in a Cluniac priory that Peter Abelard died in 1142, at sixty-three years old.⁵⁰

Peter Abelard was one of the most important figures in the birth of scholasticism and the rebirth of the intellectual life in the twelfth century. As the emphasis turned from the monasteries to the cathedral schools, great teachers began to gather in schools that would later

⁴¹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 157.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 79.

⁴⁴ M. De Wulf, "Roscelin".

⁴⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 84.

⁴⁶ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 159.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁸ St Bernard of Clairvaux, "Letter 338," quoted in *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁹ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium* (Courtier's Trifles), edited and translated by M.R. James, revised by C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts, eds B.F. Harvey, D.E. Greenaway and M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 79.

⁵⁰ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 162.

become the great universities. Peter Abelard was one such teacher, and his radical work – on universals and melding rationality and theology – has an importance beyond the tragedy of his love affair with Heloise for which he is best known. His story illustrates the often brutal and vicious

world of medieval academia, when the emphasis upon individuals rather than the institution led to pride, envy and conflict. Abelard, always the intellectual troublemaker, attracted so many enemies that it assured his true downfall.

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