

Peter Abelard

(1079–1142)

1. His Life

- At an early age, he left his father's castle and sought instruction as a wandering scholar at the schools of the most renowned teachers of those days.
- studied at the Cathedral School in Paris, where he then later taught.
- He enjoyed the greatest renown as a teacher of rhetoric and dialectic.
- He then studied theology.
- After the tragic downfall with Heloise he retired to the Abbey of St. Denis, and, Heloise having taken the veil at Argenteuil, he assumed the habit of a Benedictine monk at the royal Abbey of St. Denis.
- But he quarrelled with the monks of St. Denis, the occasion being his irreverent criticism of the legend of their patron saint, and was sent to a branch institution, a priory or cella, where, once more, he soon attracted unfavourable attention by the spirit of the teaching which he gave in philosophy and theology.
- His orthodoxy, especially on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, was impeached, and he was summoned to appear before a council at Soissons, in 1121,
- His teaching was not condemned, but that he was nevertheless condemned to recite the Athanasian Creed, and to burn his book on the Trinity. Besides, he was sentenced to imprisonment in the Abbey of St. Médard.

- Because of fights with the abbot there he fled to a desert place in the neighbourhood of Troyes, where pupils soon began to flock. Huts and tents for their reception were built, and an oratory erected, under the title "The Paraclete", and there his former success as a teacher was renewed.
- The next Abbot of St. Denis, Suger, absolved Abelard from censure, and thus restored him to his rank as a monk.
- Abelard elected to be Abbot at another abbey.
- Heloise takes over the Oratory of the Paraclete, where she became Abbess.
- As Abbot of St. Gildas, Abelard had, according to his own account, a very troublesome time. The monks, considering him too strict, endeavoured in various ways to rid themselves of his rule, and even attempted to poison him. They finally drove him from the monastery.
- He eventually returned to Paris and renewed his teaching.
- Then Bernard of Clairvaux, the most powerful man in the Church in those days, was alarmed at the heterodoxy of Abelard's teaching, and questioned the Trinitarian doctrine contained in Abelard's writings, finally succeeding in having some teachings condemned by a council.
- At Cluny he was given honourable and friendly hospitality. There Abelard spent the last years of his life.
- very controversial
 - attacked by Bernard of Clairvaux
 - The following teaching of his was condemned by the Church: "Those who crucified Christ without knowing who he was did not sin; what happens out of ignorance may not be counted as guilt."
- Petrus Damianus considered logical dialectics to be superfluous.

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- He thought that even the first principle of thought did not hold in all case in theology.
 - He taught that God could reverse an historical event so that it did not happen.
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- Bernhard von Clairvaux
 - Abelard wants to see everything clearly, he knows no mysteries. (*Nil videt per speculum, nil in aenigmate.*)
 - "Abelard knows everything that exists in heaven and earth; only himself he does not know. What is closed up and sealed he does not open, he tears it apart."
 - For a long period all his works were included in the later index of Forbidden Books.

2. Heloise

- *The Story of My Misfortunes* [*Historia Calamitatum*]

3. Logic

- his main field
- Logic was popular with students.
- the beginning of philosophical thought
- the problem of universals: Where do universal concepts exist? In thought? In reality?
- The phrase "The Name of the Rose"
- A father of the arising university

4. Doubt as a Theological Method

- *Sic et Non*
- a list of 158 philosophical and theological questions about which there were divided opinions.
- “When, in such a quantity of words, some of the writings of the saints seem not only to differ from, but even to contradict, each other, one should not rashly pass judgement concerning those by whom the world itself is to be judged, as it is written: “The saints shall judge nations” (cf. Wisdom 3: 7-8) [...]. Let us not presume to declare them liars or condemn them as mistaken[...]. Thus with our weakness in mind, let us believe that we lack felicity in understanding rather than that they lack felicity in writing—those of whom the Truth Himself said: “For it is not you who are speaking, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks through you” (Matthew 10:20). So, since the Spirit through which these things were written and spoken and revealed to the writers is itself absent from us, why should it be surprising if we should also lack an understanding of these same things?”
- methods for resolving contradictions:
 - “unfamiliar manner of speech”
 - different meanings of words
 - “It is often appropriate to change the wording to suit the differences among those with whom we speak, since it frequently happens that the proper meaning of a word is unknown or less familiar to some people.”
 - metaphorical speech
 - “We also ought to pay close attention so that, when some of the writings of the saints are presented to us as if they were contradictory or other than the truth, we are not misled by false attributions of authorship or corruptions in the text itself. For many apocryphal works are inscribed with the names of saints in order that they might obtain authority, and even some places in the text of the Holy Testament itself have been corrupted by scribal error.”
 - “Nor is it any less a matter for consideration whether such statements are ones taken from the

writings of the saints that either were retracted elsewhere by these same saints and corrected when the truth was afterwards recognized – as St. Augustine often did - or whether they spoke reflecting the opinion of others rather than according to their own judgment.”

- “Poetic and philosophic writings also say many things based on opinion, as if they were steadfast in truth, things which however, are clearly quite inconsistent with the truth.”
- “Cicero openly acknowledges that philosophers also expressed many ideas according to the opinions of others rather than their own judgement.”
- “The times and causes of dispensation ought also to be distinguished, because what is permitted at one time is found to be prohibited at another, and what is often commanded with rigor may sometimes be tempered with dispensation.”
- “Moreover, an easy solution for many controversies may be found as long as we are able to be on our guard for the same words being used with conflicting meanings by different authors.”

- etc.

- written for young students

- a pedagogical concept

- Doubt is essential to learning.

- Doubt is aroused by contradictions.

- “We have undertaken to collect the diverse sayings of the Holy Fathers, which stand out in our memory to some extent due to their apparent disagreement as they focus on an issue; this may lure [*provocent*] the weaker readers [*teneros lectores*] to the greatest exercise of seeking the truth, and may render them

sharper readers because of the investigation. Indeed this first key of wisdom is defined, of course, as assiduous or frequent questioning. Aristotle, the most clear-sighted philosopher of all, advised his students, in his preface 'Ad Aliquid', to embrace this questioning with complete willingness, saying (cited by Boethius, In *Categorias Aristotelis*, ii): 'Perhaps it is difficult to clarify things of this type with confidence unless they are dealt with often and in detail. However, it would not be useless to have some doubts concerning individual points. And indeed, through doubting we come to questioning and through questions we perceive the truth [*Dubitando quippe ad inquisitionem venimus; inquirendo veritatem percipimus.*].¹ In consequence of this, Truth herself says (Matthew 7:7), Ask and it shall be given you; knock and it shall be opened to you. Teaching us this spiritual lesson with Himself as an example, He let Himself be found, at about twelve years of age, sitting and questioning in the midst of the teachers, showing Himself to us in the model of a student with His questioning, before that of a schoolmaster in his pronouncements, although His knowledge of God was full and complete. And when some passages of Scripture are brought before us, the more the authority of the Scripture itself is commended, the more fully they excite [*excitant*] the reader and tempt him to seek the truth. Hence it seemed good to me to prefix to my work here (this work of mine which we have compiled out of passages from holy authors, gathered into one volume), the decree of Pope Gelasius concerning authentic books, so that it can be understood that we have included no passages from apocryphal writings here. We also append excerpts from the *Retractions* of blessed Augustine, from which it may be clear that nothing set forth here is taken from passages that he later emended when he made his retraction."²

- eventually develops into the scholastic disputation (*Quaestio disputata*).
 - After presenting convincing arguments pro and contra, the author then presents his own opinion on the question, followed by treatments of the initial arguments.

¹ Cf. Abael., *Log.*, 223, 16-17: Sed utile est dubitare potius, quippe per dubitationem venit ad inquisitionem, per inquisitionem pertingitur ad veritatem.

² Peter Abelard, *Sic et non*, prologue, end.

5. The Subjectivity of Morality

- his book on ethics: *Scito teipsum*
- Morality exists in the intention.
- There is no more connection between the goodness of the intention and the goodness of the deed than between a father and his son.
- "We call the intention good which is right in itself, but the action is good, not because it contains within it some good, but because it issues from a good intention. The same act may be done by the same man at different times. According to the diversity of his intention, however, this act may be at one time good, at another bad."
- In chapter three of *Scito te ipsum* he taught that it is not a sin to lie together with the wife of another man, it is not sinful to lust after her; rather, sin is the consent to do it.
- "It is not a sin to kill a human being."