

Penance and Peter Abelard's Move Within

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Peter Abelard is perhaps best known for having taken the role of master in the schools to celebrity status. Yet dramatically public as his life was, the analyses he develops in his commentary on the letter to the Romans (c. 1134) and in the Ethica (c. 1138) of moral action, sacramental efficacy, even the atonement, center on interior subjectivity. The rightness of an act is determined in the first instance by the agent's intention, and ultimately by God's. The sacraments, such as baptism and penance, represent what God is accomplishing through his relation to the recipient, independently of the actions themselves or the work of the priest. Further, just as sin involves a turning away from God, so our redemption consists in the love aroused in us by the sacrifice of his Son. All of this displays Abelard's capacity for analytic nuance; but it foreshadows, too, the shift that will divide Christian theology in the sixteenth century.

Of the many individuals in the twelfth century whose fame in their own time has reached down to ours, figures like Thomas Becket, Frederick Barbarossa and Bernard of Clairvaux, there is no one whose fame surpassed that of Master Peter Abelard and no figure more public. Indeed, fame was something Abelard coveted, something he consciously built. It was for the sake of fame, he tells us in his *History of My Calamities*, that he first took up arms and entered the lists of dialectics; and, having defeated all comers in this, he then undertook the even more noble challenge of theology. It was a wound, he writes, far more grievous than what he had received at the hands of Heloise's uncle, Fulbert, when he was forced to publicly burn his book, *On the Unity and Trinity of God*, at the council of Soissons.¹ Given this penchant for life in the public eye, it is all the more interesting that Abelard's theology is marked by a consistent emphasis on what is private.

One may see this theme of the private running through Abelard's ethical theory. What D. E. Luscombe calls "Socratic interiority"² finds an echo in the very title that Abelard gave to his book on morals, the *Scito te ipsum* or *Know Thyself*; though Abelard typically referred to the work simply as his *Ethica*. Abelard wanted to compose a handbook for the purpose of moral self-evaluation and he based his thought on the teaching of Augustine, as did both predecessors and contemporaries who considered the moral life. But whereas Augustine spoke widely about the

¹ For Abelard's account of the burning see *History of My Calamities* 9. J.G. Sikes, following Remigius Stölzle, entitles this book *De unitate et trinitate divina* and says that it was the first of three theological treatises Abelard wrote. J. G. Sikes, *Peter Abailard*, (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965), 258–66. More recent commentators, however, speak rather of three versions of a single work. The original, commonly referred to as *Theologia Summi Boni*, is said to have been the one consigned to the flames at Soissons, followed by two revised and expanded editions, the *Theologia Christiana* and the *Theologia Scholarium*. Cf. John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), 54–61; Peter Abelard, *Collationes*, ed. and trans. John Marenbon and Giovanni Orlandi (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), xviii–xxi.

² D. E. Luscombe, *Peter Abelard's Ethics: An Edition with Introduction, English Translation and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), xxxi.

will, Abelard focused specifically on the act of consent. For one thing, Abelard realized that the term *voluntas* could be used with a range of meanings; and in fact in the *Ethica* Abelard himself uses *voluntas* almost exclusively to refer to our appetites and desires. For another, Abelard believed that what counts in morality is not whether one wills something or desires something or inclines to something. What counts is what we are intending. What are we deciding *for* when we decide to do something?

Abelard develops his analysis of intention within the context of a theology of action, so that from the outset the wrongful act is named a "sin." Early on, Abelard defines a sin as "consent to what is not fitting," ("*consentiendum ei quod non conuenit*") or more precisely, "contempt of God" ("*Dei contemptus*").³

Later he observes that "sin" can be used in many different ways. The penalty for a sinful act, for example, may be termed a sin. But even here he repeats that "properly speaking," ("*Proprie*") sin means contempt of God and consent to evil.⁴ There follows a protracted study of moral action, characterized by the careful drawing of distinctions for which Abelard was renowned, where he at times remains faithful to, and at other times deviates from, the accepted Augustinian tradition, without it being at all clear what the reason is for the difference.

On the one hand, Abelard denies that there is any sharing in the fault (*culpa*) of the first sin, certainly denying the hypothesis Augustine advanced in his anti-Pelagian works that the guilt (*reatus*) of the first sin is somehow transmitted through the working of concupiscence.⁵ The contempt of our first parents for God cannot be our contempt. So he interprets the standard texts appealed to in the tradition on original sin—Ps. 50:7 ("For behold, I was conceived in iniquities"), Job 14:4–5 ("No one is free from uncleanness nor is the one-day-old child if he is alive upon the earth") and Rom. 5:12 ("In Adam all have sinned")—as referring to the punishment of damnation to which everyone is subject. And unlike Augustine, it seems that there is no more intrinsic reason for this universal punishment than simply God's decree. On the other hand, Abelard does reflect the Augustinian pessimism that only an elected minority will be saved. This is not just because so few receive the grace of conversion, but because it is so easy to violate divine justice.

Contempt of God means, for Abelard, an intentional affront to God. But an act can be said to be "unfitting" even if it is not intentionally offensive. Anything that can be described as an act of injustice can, from this standpoint, be said to be a sin. An example Abelard gives is the case of an innocent man whose life is sought by a cruel lord. The man does all he can to avoid

³ *Ethica* 3. See D. E. Luscombe, *ibid.*, 4. Both the Latin text for the *Ethica* and, for the most part, the English translation are taken from this edition; all page citations refer to it.

⁴ *Ethica* 14; *op. cit.*, 56.

⁵ See for example Augustine's *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1. 21. However, Luscombe in *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 140, notes that Abelard renounced his earlier denial that there is a transmission of original fault in the *Confessio fidei* that he composed after his condemnation in 1140.

being slain, but in the end the only way he can save his life is by killing his lord. One could not say, Abelard argues, that the man acted with a bad will, for to will the preservation of one's life is good, and the killing was performed unwillingly. Nonetheless, even if performed in self-defense, the act involved "consenting to an unjust killing which he should have undergone rather than have inflicted." Thus the act is a sin, and the man thereby incurs "by this rashness damnation and the killing of his own soul."⁶

What is more, an act is unfitting if God has revealed it to be such. No one can please God who does not have faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. Thus Abelard states that "It is sufficient for damnation not to believe in the Gospel, to be ignorant of Christ, not to receive the sacraments of the Church, even though this occurs not so much through wickedness as through ignorance."⁷ The classic example here is Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. "Cornelius," Abelard writes, "did not believe in Christ until Peter, when sent to him, taught him about Christ. Although previously by the natural law he recognized and loved God, and through this deserved to be heard in his prayer and to have his alms accepted by God, yet if he had happened to depart from this light before he believed in Christ, we should by no means dare to promise him life however good his works seemed, nor should we number him with the faithful but rather with the unfaithful, however eagerly he had worked for his salvation."⁸ That is why Abelard could say, as he had just before speaking of Cornelius, that "it is not absurd that some should undergo bodily punishments which they have not deserved as is evident with little children who die without the grace of baptism and are condemned to bodily as well as to eternal death."⁹ The alternative would be to admit that unbelievers who intend to do what is right have the same standing before God as believers do, which for Abelard is manifestly false.¹⁰

In the course of his argument, Abelard draws out the distinction between sin as contempt and sin as unfitting to the point that it presages what later in the tradition will be called formal sin and material sin. One who mistakenly kills a man with an arrow while intending to shoot, say, a deer, sins in the act, but should not be blamed for murder. Similarly, the Jews who killed Christ and those who stoned Stephen did so as a matter of conscience, believing that it was pleasing to God; and yet both Christ and Stephen prayed for their killers to be forgiven, which means that their acts were a sin. Even so, however, Abelard says that "they would have sinned more gravely in fault if they had spared them against their own conscience."¹¹ This is more than a little ironic—that is, worrying about assessing the proper degree of blame—since the very fact that they are unbelievers means that regardless of their guilt or innocence they are condemned to eternal hell by divine decision, as are children too young to believe or those who have never heard of Christ.

⁶ *Ethica* 3; op. cit., 9.

⁷ *Ibid.* 14; op. cit., 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*; op. cit., 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*; op. cit., 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 12; op. cit., 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 14; op. cit., 67.

Luscombe notes that although by the mid-twelfth century penance was accepted as one of seven sacraments in the Church, Abelard in the *Ethica* speaks of *penitentia* or repentance as a moral attitude, what he defines as "the sorrow of the mind over what it has done wrong," and of the part played by bishops and priests in helping the penitent be reconciled with God, and not at all of repentance as a sacrament.¹² If, Abelard writes, sin is contempt of God, then conversion involves turning to God in love, a love that drives away the alienation of contempt, that sorrows over the offense one has caused God, chastened because of his complete goodness, that stands prepared to accept whatever punishment the justice of God may impose. This is perfect repentance, contrasted with the sterile repentance of one whose sorrow comes not of love but of fear; a repentance that does not regret having done wrong but only the price that will now be exacted because of the wrongdoing. Such repentance actually hates God's justice. It is the repentance, the sorrow, of the damned.¹³ True repentance displays itself as a "sigh and contrition of heart;"¹⁴ and it is, Abelard says, a gift from God—a turning in love that is a gift of love.¹⁵ As a gift, it is unclear with Abelard to whom it is offered, whether only to some or to the many. What he does say is that according to the teaching of Mathew 12:31, it is not offered to anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin modeled by the Pharisees who declared to be the work of the devil what they knew to be the work of God's goodness.

With the gift of the repentant sigh there comes the immediate remission of sin. "In this sigh we are instantly reconciled to God," Abelard states, "and we gain pardon (*ueniam*) for the preceding sin."¹⁶ Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142) maintained that a sin's fault was remitted by contrition, though a priest was necessary for the eternal penalty to be forgiven; and Peter Lombard (d. 1160) taught that contrition remitted both fault and eternal penalty so long as the intention was present to confess the sin to a priest.¹⁷ But Abelard describes contrition as evidence that God himself has cast away both fault and the penalty of damnation. Not, however, all penalty. There may still be a measure of satisfaction, a compensatory debt that needs to be paid—if not in this life then after death, in Purgatory. And this, for Abelard, is where the priest comes into play.

Abelard lists three things in the *Ethica* that he says are necessary for the sinner to be reconciled with God: repentance, confession and satisfaction.¹⁸ God, we just noted, provides repentance, which marks the repudiation of sin and the turning away from oneself. This first turning is perfected in confession when one humbly accuses oneself before a priest, receives counsel and instruction, and submits oneself to his judgment in an abasement that inaugurates the

¹² Luscombe (1971), 77, n. 2. *Ethica* 18: "Penitentia autem proprie dicitur dolor animi super eo in quo deliquit;" op. cit., 76.

¹³ *Ethica* 18; op. cit., 77, 79.

¹⁴ Ibid. 19; op. cit. 88: "Cum hoc autem gemitu et contritione cordis, quam ueram penitentiam dicimus, peccatum non permanet, hoc est, contemptus Dei siue consensus in malum."

¹⁵ Ibid. 20; op. cit., 91.

¹⁶ Ibid. 19; op. cit. 88–89.

¹⁷ Luscombe (1971), 88, n. 3.

¹⁸ *Ethica* 18; op. cit, 77.

payment of debt.¹⁹ Finally there is the penance that is intended to make full satisfaction. The problem is, God has his own perfect valuation of how much one owes for one's sins. The satisfaction assigned in penance may or may not correspond to God's judgment. It therefore behooves the penitent to follow a personal regimen of penance, in addition to that assigned by the priest, or else run the risk of even more severe penalties being enacted by God in Purgatory.²⁰ This second role of the priest or bishop, imposing satisfaction, is thus the more important to Abelard. And the relaxation of imposed satisfaction in whole or in part, namely the granting of indulgences, is tied to what he thinks is meant by the power of binding and loosing that Jesus was said to have given the clergy.

The common opinion in Abelard's day was that the keys given to Peter in Matthew 16:19 referred to a dual power which in reality was given to all the apostles, who then handed it on to their successors: the power of binding and loosing, and the power of discerning who should actually be bound or loosed.²¹ Abelard himself argues that there was only one power given to the apostles, the first, according to which prelates can forgive sins or hold them retained, can readmit a sinner to the communion of the Church or declare him excommunicated. The second is not a power conferred in ordination but a gift bestowed by God on whom he chooses, though presumably in a successor to Peter who has imitated Peter's faith and charity. The power, Abelard states, was given to all the apostles before the resurrection; the gift, according to John 20:23, to only ten, excluding Judas and Thomas. It is the gift of discretion or discernment that enables a confessor to see what God sees, that is, to see whether or not a penitent has true compunction, and therefore to perceive whether God himself has absolved the person of sin, and whether the person has been brought into relation with God's Kingdom, which is altogether distinct from union with the Church over which the clergy have administrative control.²²

Abelard's move in the *Ethica* from the intentionality of the moral agent, which so often remains hidden from view, to the intentionality of God, which is less accessible still, is anticipated in his earlier commentary on St. Paul's letter to the Romans (ca. 1134)²³ where he favors what is interior over what is exterior, intentionality over act. In a striking interpretation of Romans 3:19–26, he takes Paul's reference to God's justice and righteousness as meaning God's love, and to the righteousness of those justified by God as meaning God's love igniting love within believers. It is mere consistency, then, when he goes on to say that to speak of our

¹⁹ Ibid. 24; op. cit., 99.

²⁰ Ibid. 25; op. cit., 109.

²¹ Luscombe (1971), 112, n. 2.

²² *Ethica* 26; op. cit. 117–27. In the end, it would seem that the priest's authority, conferred in ordination, over one's relation to the Church is the reason why, according to Abelard, the injunction in James 5:16 that one confess to one's brethren should not be taken as referring to just any brethren in the faith.

²³ John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 65.; cf. Sikes, op. cit., 266–67. Marenbon places the *Ethica* around 1139.

redemption, of Christ overcoming sin, is to mean that his death sets one's heart aflame with thankful love.²⁴

Yet this equation of righteousness with love of God founders on the same rock as will his later definition of sin as contempt of God; the rock, that is, of predestination. For no person can be said to be righteous in any definitive sense unless that person is saved. And no one can be saved who does not conform to what has been determined by God. Cornelius, according to the *Ethica*, may have been good, and even loving of God, but he would not have been saved without explicit faith in Christ. Here in his commentary on Romans, Abelard is willing to go much farther in his estimation of Cornelius, comparing him to Abraham as one who believed and loved God, and declaring them both to have been justified, made righteous.²⁵ The problem raised in the commentary, though, is baptism; the Lord himself commanded it.²⁶ Not to be baptized is to be damned. Does this not mean that one could be both righteous by virtue of one's faith and love, and yet be damned because not baptized? It does, admits Abelard. But he sees three ways around the dilemma. First, it is not sufficient to have been righteous in life. One must be righteous in death as well. And if one were to die without having been baptized, one would perceive the consequence that awaited, which, driving out charity, would mean that one would not die as righteous after all. Then there is the providence of God. If one really is predestined, God will not allow death to snatch away the chance for baptism. Finally there is the fact that baptism has its equivalents. Martyrdom, for example, saves in lieu of actual baptism. And in addition to baptism, there seems to be for Abelard what might be called the condition of baptism, or a baptism by desire.²⁷ The person who knows the meaning of baptism and loves the Lord who commands it, and therefore is willing to undergo baptism out of duty and love, may still be saved even if he dies before he is able to receive the sacrament.

Thus Abelard separates the act of baptism, its performance, completely from the condition of righteousness. What baptism accomplishes is the remission of the penalty that God decrees is to be paid for sin, for one's own personal sin and for the sin of the first man and woman. And this is illustrated nowhere more clearly than in the case of the infant. The infant who has been baptized is absolved of all penalty, but he cannot be said to be righteous; certainly baptism does not make him righteous. He is too young to possess either the love or the faith in which righteousness consists. If he were to die, though, and thereby be released from his infantile

²⁴ *Commentaria in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* 2. 3. 26. ll. 242–69. Text in *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 11, ed. E. M. Buytaert, O.F.M. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1969), 117–18.

²⁵ *Comm. Rom.* 2. 3. 27. ll. 283–89; op. cit. 119.

²⁶ "Sicut uero eum qui praedestinatus est bene agere oportet ut saluetur, sic eum qui iam iustus est credendo et diligendo baptizari propter praefixam Dei sententiam de baptismo . . ." Ibid., 2. 3. 27. ll. 336–39; op. cit., 120. Circumcision, Abelard notes, took the place of baptism before the coming of Jesus.

²⁷ G. E. Moffatt translates Abelard's phrasing as "a state of baptism." See E. R. Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockam* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 286 and n. 26. Abelard's exact meaning is a little hard to follow. He is talking about the situation of a person who dies possessing charity, and who therefore should be saved, but who has not been baptized: ". . . posset et mori baptizatus in eo tempore in quo nondum est baptizatus, et sic saluari. Quod si dicas coniunctim eum posse simul et habentem caritatem et non baptizatum, non recipio magis quam si diceres aliquem posse mori adulterum et praedestinatum." Ibid., 2. 3. 27. ll. 331–36; op. cit. 120.

state, he would see, upon leaving his body, the glory prepared for him by God. This sight would invariably fill him with love, and this love spark the rise of righteousness.²⁸

Notably enough, Abelard is anxious to assure the reader that neither the sacrament of baptism nor any merely "external act" can effect righteousness. We do not hold to the view that we are justified by works, he asserts;²⁹ and thus takes a position firmly opposed to the doctrine that will later be referred to as sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato*.

Of course, Abelard was a notorious provocateur, suffering the indignity of condemnation not only at Soissons in 1121, but again at Sens in 1140. As it happens, the research of Lottin, Blomme, Luscombe and others has shown that Abelard's thought was not always so novel as the label "heresy" alleges. Bernard of Clairvaux said in his eleventh sermon on the Song of Songs that it was for the sake of eliciting from us a thankful love that Christ suffered as he did. Gratian and Robert Pullen, following a tradition that traced back to the Council of Chalons (813), taught that, in the words of Gratian, "sins are forgiven by the contrition of the heart, and not by verbal confession."³⁰ Nonetheless, Abelard's pronounced regard for the intentional over the objective did hobble the range of this thought. He neglects in his theology of sin any intrinsic connection between the structure of one's acts and one's relation to God. His Christology fails to reach out beyond the idea of the Word taking on flesh as lover and teacher, to approximate the Patristic idea of Christ as fulfilling and perfecting and divinizing those who believe; of Christ incorporating believers into his own Body, the Church, by means of physical actions—the sacraments—that continue his activity of salvation through the agency of those commissioned to participate in his ministry. It is the human side, the ecclesial side, which suffers in Abelard's reflection on the faith. And in this he foreshadows a future time when with faith in Christ never flagging, a loss of faith in the Church will irreparably split Christianity asunder.

²⁸ Ibid., ll. 352–55; op. cit., 121.

²⁹ "Ne quis itaque Iudaeorum nobis, immo Apostolo posset opponere nos quoque *per legem factorum*, id est exteriorum operum sicuti baptismi, iustificari, sufficiat nos hoc de nostra iustificatione, immo omnium quae in caritate consistit, interposuisse et antequam sacramenta suscipiantur, siue nostra siue illorum." Ibid., ll. 356–361; op. cit. 121.

³⁰ Sikes, op. cit., 199.