

Peter Abelard: Discoverer of

by Helga Zepp LaRouche

It took Europe a long time to recover from the collapse of the Roman Empire. Around 800 A.D., there was the relatively short-lived “Carolingian Renaissance” under Charlemagne (who himself could not even read), but which was inspired not only by the English monk Alcuin, but also through contact with the Islamic Caliphates of the Abbasid Dynasty, which contributed greatly to saving the achievements of the Classical Greek period and to bringing them back, enriched, to Europe. There were also some important developments under the Silesian kings.

But, in studying the elements it took for mankind to get to the breakthrough of the Italian Renaissance, I would like to select one period which was an important preparatory development, a period which highlights a conflict that has not lost its importance for the tasks we have to solve today. It sheds light on some interesting facets of what it took to arrive at our modern conception of man, and of what is required for an idea to gain reality in practice. Because, in itself, an idea is not yet real; it has to be

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Peter Abelard

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brought into practice.

I want to talk about the Twelfth century, and the controversy between Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux.

What preceded this, was a relatively difficult period in the history of the Church.

Gregory VII, Pope since 1073, claimed worldly powers, and got involved with King Henry IV of Germany in the famous investiture fight. Henry denied Gregory the right to

call himself Pope, and Gregory answered by anathematizing the King, relieving all bishops and subjects of the German crown of their oath of allegiance. This caused a traumatic experience for the entire population—the Pope against the King—and it shook the foundations of society.

In 1077, Henry IV made the famous march to Canossa, to beg for lifting of the ban. A second ban was issued in 1080.

Henry named the anti-Pope Clement III. When Clement crowned Henry Holy Roman Emperor in Rome in 1084, Gregory called on the Normans for help. They vandalized Rome, and Gregory was forced to flee the anger of its inhabitants. He died one year later, but the investiture fight continued.

Individuality in the Feudal Age

Saint Bernard was convinced that the 'dialectical method' was a complete challenge to the teachings of the Church

After the death of Pope Honorius II (1124-30), the election of Pope Anacletus II (1130-38) took place. Anacletus was supported by one faction of the Roman nobility, the Vatican state, and the Normans, who at that point had their empire in the south of Italy and Sicily. But a second Pope, Innocent II (1130-43), was elected by another faction of the nobility. With the help of Bernard of Clairvaux, and the support of the Kings of France, England, and Germany, Innocent fled to France.

Obviously, this schism, and rule of two Popes, did significant harm to the Church.

Around 1125, Arnold of Brescia, who was then a chorus cantor of the Augustinians in his home town, launched massive attacks against the greedy and power-hungry clergy of his time. He demanded a return to apostolic poverty, and, since he merely spoke aloud what many others were thinking, he soon became a folk hero. "Vagrants" would sing his protest in the streets.

In the monasteries, a similar "poverty movement" emerged. In the Cloister Citeaux, the Abbé Stephan Harding, an Englishman, created a new order out of the sharpened rules of the Benedictines, the *Zisterzienser*. It emphasized a completely ascetic lifestyle, poverty, night watches, self-flagellations, and long hours of prayer. Unlike the



St. Bernard leads a procession of monks at Clairvaux.

Benedictines, they explicitly did *not* want to study or collect manuscripts in libraries, or write historical chronicles. Instead, they emphasized manual labor and agriculture. It is interesting, that nearly all the priests of that order, as well as the lay members, were born of nobility, even high nobility.

The most famous member of this order was Bernard of Clair-

vaux, who joined Citeaux in 1113. He soon founded a new monastery, and helped to spread the order all over Europe. He started out like Arnold of Brescia, protesting against conditions in the Church; but soon, he became Arnold's arch-enemy. Bernard became extremely famous and very influential. He travelled throughout Europe on political missions, took the displaced Pope Innocent under his protection, and tried, by all means, to reinstall him.

Bernard's main concern was to preach a deeper spirituality and a more pious lifestyle; later, around 1147-49, he travelled, preaching everywhere for participation in the Second Crusade. According to the reports of his time, he must have been a very mighty speaker, who was able to arouse his audiences. But to understand what kind of piety he advocated, it is most useful to look at the grounds on which he attacked Peter Abelard.

Abelard had been born in Le Pallet near Nantes, in the border area of the Bretagne, in 1079. He was the oldest child of a knight, Berengar, and his wife Lucia. Among his teachers were Roscelin of Compiègne and Wilhelm of

Champeaux, as well as Anselm of Laon, who himself was a pupil of the famous Anselm of Canterbury, the father of Scholastic philosophy. From 1113 on, Abelard had his own school in Paris, which quickly developed a huge following. Together with Hugh of Saint-Victor, he was celebrated by contemporary historians as one of the two *luminaria*, the outstanding intellects of their time.

Now, what were the issues, over which there arose the clash of method, between Bernard and Abelard?

One of Abelard's books was called *Sic et Non (For and Against)*—meaning, that one had to consider all aspects, and then decide; and in it, he treated the problem of certain mis-statements and inconsistencies in the Bible and in the writings of the Church Fathers. There were questions—such as, who was it, who evangelized the first Christians in Rome before St. Peter was there?—which nowadays, is a normal question for any historian, because there were Christians before St. Peter was there, so how did they become Christian?

But Bernard and many of his co-thinkers were convinced, that this “dialectical method” was a complete challenge to the teaching of the Church. Abelard himself wrote, that he wished to provoke his young readers to the greatest exertion in the search for truth, and, through this exertion, to sharpen their wits.

For Bernard, on the other side, faith came from the statement of authority, and his method of conversion was not to challenge the intellect, but was instead rhetorical. For him, Abelard's approach was a dangerous pride in knowledge; Bernard was convinced, that science puffs up men, or leads to conclusions that are incompatible with the teachings of the Church. He accused Abelard of reasoning about everything, and of wanting reasons and proofs for everything; and that, with that, he would take the merit of faith away.

He accused Abelard, furthermore, of always bringing up new things, instead of sticking to proven traditions. Of even introducing new words, or giving new meanings to old ones. Of trying to make everything intelligible.

Abelard, on the other hand, based himself on St. Augustine, and insisted that one should not start with *any* reference to authority whatsoever. He insisted that this would not affect the question of faith, because in this we are only dealing with the shadow of faith, since the truth is only known by God. Abelard attacked those who seek comfort in their ignorance, and hold that he has more fervent faith who assents, whether he understands or not. Authority is inferior to reason, said Abelard, because it deals with opinions about the truth, rather than with the truth itself; whereas reason concerns the subject itself, and comes to a conclusion. With reliance on authority, one *always* faces the problem of the validity of the authority, and since nobody listens to an authority he does not

accept, one has to deal with the grounds on which he can accept it.

Lotulf and Alberic, two scholars of this time, led the attack on Abelard. They stirred up the clergy against him, and did not hesitate to lie. They claimed Abelard would teach the existence of three Gods—when in reality, he was only discussing the problem of the Trinity. They enlisted the aid of their archbishop and the Papal legate, however, and, with the help of Bernard, Abelard's strongest opponent, they succeeded in his conviction by two councils, and his condemnation to be silent and remain under arrest in a monastery.

A historian of his time, Otto of Freising, the uncle of Friedrich Barbarossa, described the motives of Bernard as lying in his religious fanaticism and piety, amplified by the simplemindedness of his nature. But there were others, like John of Salisbury, who found Bernard's unscrupulous behavior abhorrent, and the very respected Petrus Venerabilis came to Abelard's defense, writing to the Pope, that Abelard had been slandered and wrongly accused of heresies, especially by Bernard.

One can imagine how the overzealous Bernard felt, when Abelard, who was reputed to be the sharpest mind of his time, challenged him to a scientific debate, after Abelard had already completely debated into the ground such famous scholars as Wilhelm of Champeaux and Anselm of Laon, his former teachers.

Bernard wrote to the Pope: “I refused this, because I regarded it completely beneath my dignity, to discuss with such lumpen, such trash, concerning the fundamentals of my faith.”

The difference was clear: Abelard tried to meet arguments of reason with better reason; Bernard used force to silence reason.

Abelard and Plato

In the first two books of his *Theologia Christiana*, and in the beginning of *De Unitate*, Abelard describes how he was convinced that many pre-Christian philosophers had actually Christian beliefs, and why this was a great asset in the effort to evangelize and win over the heretics of the Twelfth century. If thinkers like Plato or Virgil, long before the Incarnation, could have an understanding of the Trinity, if this were accessible to human reason, then it was accessible to all men of all ages, since the pre-Christian philosophers could not have known anything of the revelations, but nevertheless they came to correct conclusions.

Now, this obviously hit a raw nerve in many of Abelard's contemporaries! Many scholars of Patristic or medieval times, especially some within the monastic movements, had denied that the literature of the Classical

period should be read at all. They had blasted it as a complete waste of time, and, on top of this, a violation of piety.

One of the most crucial, and famous, debates of this time, concerned the nature of universals—whether they represented truly existing things, as the “realists,” so-called, insisted; or, if instead, they were merely located in the intellect, empty creations, which lacked any real existence, a position which was held by the “nominalists,” of which one of Abelard’s former teachers, Roscelin de Compiègne, was a proponent.

In his book *Dialectica*, Abelard makes clear that he did not regard the nominalist view worth talking about. But he also rejected the realist position of his opponent Wilhelm of Champeaux. Instead, he admitted that he favored the concept of Plato’s “ideas,” and he complained that he did not possess the works of Plato, so he could not check out Aristotle’s accusations against Platonic philosophy, of which he was very suspicious.

Abelard tried to reconstruct Plato’s thinking from various sources: the *Timaeus*, which was the only available text, and references from Priscian and Macrobius’ commentary on Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*. His notion of the concept created by reason (*conceptus*, idea), as distinct from the nominalist position, has been called “conceptualism” by scholars ever since. They created this word *only* to describe Abelard’s philosophy. And it is astounding, that with so relatively few sources, he got very close to Plato’s solution of this problem, the “One and the Many” question of the *Parmenides*.

Abelard referred to Plato, Hermes Trismegistos, and St. Augustine, to arrive at his teaching of the Trinity, that God is not only the good, but “the Good” itself, who, as world-creating wisdom, produces the totality of ideas, and who lovingly moves the world. “The Good” itself, he equated to God the Father; the world-creating wisdom, to the Son; and the loving motion, to the Holy Spirit. His opponents especially criticized his equating the Platonic idea of a world-soul, with the third person of God. But, the equivalence of the Christian and the Platonic Trinity, however, had already first been noted by Claudianus Ramertus, a pupil of St. Augustine.

His late work, *A Dialogue Among a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, is a beautiful answer of the persecuted Abelard, and it totally reflects the Platonic method of the “One and the Many,” in finding a basis of reason for the understanding among the monotheistic religions.

He makes the philosopher reject the beliefs of both the Christian and the Jew on the sole grounds, that each refused to give intellectual proof of his doctrines. Jews would only seek signs, while Christians appeal to the authority of their traditional books alone; but neither’s argument for the truth of their creed will satisfy

the requirement of the philosopher.

The philosopher says: “If faith, in effect, precludes all rational dialogue, if it have no merit but at such a price, such that the object of faith escape all critical judgment, and all that is preached we must accept immediately, whatever the errors such preaching spreads, in that case it serves nothing to be a believer; for, where reason may in no manner agree, neither may reason refute. Were an idolater to come to say to us of a rock, of a chunk of wood, or never-mind-what creature: ‘Here is the true God, the creator of Heaven and earth!’ Were he to come to preach to us never-mind-what obvious abomination, who, then, will be able to refute it, if all rational discussion is excluded from the domain of faith?”

So you see what I’m aiming at! If you imagine all the many cultures which mankind has produced over its development, it was *only* Platonic Christianity, which has developed this method of the intelligibility of the truth, and the possibility to establish reason as the basis for ecumenicism.

And in the same way, counterpose the ill-conceived religious frenzy of the Crusades, with the beautiful conception of the dialogue by Abelard. So did Raymond Lull a century later, followed by Nicolaus of Cusa in the Fifteenth century, and Gotthold Lessing in the Eighteenth.

Now Abelard, one must admit, is not as profound as Plato, Nicolaus of Cusa, or Leibniz. He did not contribute comparable leaps to human knowledge. Nevertheless, he is much more important in the evolution of our modern humanist conception of man, than is generally known. He has sometimes been justly celebrated as the discoverer of *individuality*; and in that, he was an important pioneer for the new, Renaissance image of man.

I would go even so far as to call Abelard a predecessor of Friedrich Schiller and his idea of the beautiful soul, because he was developing a criterion for the judgment of morality, which comes very close to that of Schiller. Abelard says it is *not* the external appearance, or subjective disposition, which decides if an act is moral, but the inner agreement with the deed. Now, this is an extraordinarily modern idea for the Twelfth century!

The medieval code never considered the intention of the person, only the result. What Abelard did, was to dissolve the assumption, that moral behavior would be *only* conformity with objective rules. He emphasized, that it is *always* up to us, to have an inner agreement or disagreement, no matter what the objective circumstances are. This is very important for the whole question of resistance against tyranny, because you can remain free, no matter how frequently they put you in chains. He opened up an *internal degree of freedom* for moral behavior.

Abelard also had very interesting thoughts about the nature of happiness and misfortune, of the true good,

The End of an Epoch

We have said often, that modern times, which started around the Fifteenth century, is coming to an end. If you look at the condition of the world, it underlines, very drastically, that this period of about five hundred years is ending. We are looking at a dying civilization, which is collapsing for, essentially, exactly the same reasons that earlier civilizations and cultures went under.

And it is very clear that either we make something new, beautiful, something completely different than it is now—or, that we plunge, as Prince Philip suggests, into a pre-Christian pagan society. The oligarchs want to go back to their system, pre-Christian cults, Gaia. And don't kid yourself, Gaia is among us, among the Greens, the ecologists; they are already sold on this idea.

And we, I suggest, should answer them with the magnificent concept first developed by Leibniz, the idea of history as science, which was developed further by Lyndon LaRouche.

Schiller insisted that universal history should be the basis of our identity. Leibniz said, that as often as you go back to earlier stages of the world, you will never find the full, final reason for why the world exists, nor why it should be *this* world. But, once the world has been brought into existence, all its conditions follow by necessity.

What kind of a world is this? Obviously, that world in which the most of all which is possible, is realized—"the best of all possible worlds." And therefore, it is also the most complete world possible, because it has the highest degree of possibilities.

But then, Leibniz asks: How can the final cause for the existence of the world, lie in something which is only possible, which does not exist?

Leibniz answers, that the realm of infinite possibilities has very much a real existence. And that is God's nature, as the last, absolute reason for the existence of the world, and its existence in this form. The Divine will is nothing other than the transition, says Leibniz, from the series of possibilities, to the one reality.

And so, to bring this chapter of universal history, which one can trace from pre-history to the end of oligarchism, to a happy conclusion, let us—and here, I mean *all* of us—take the Divine will into our will, as Friedrich Schiller would formulate it. —HZZL

which he said, is not pleasant experiences of the senses, or the disgusting satisfaction of bodily lust. Instead, the true good is the inner soothing of the soul, which comes from the conviction of the value and the meaning of one's own work. Therefore, he writes in the *Dialogue*, a person can be really happy despite defeats, because this inner bliss cannot be wiped out, provided the intellect has a sufficiently high degree of resistance.

If you consider, how oppressive the pre-Christian oligarchical structures were, and how oppressive the feudal oligarchical conditions of the medieval period still were, one must also say, that there was a reason why the more than ninety-five percent of mankind accepted that subjugation. From that standpoint, the question of the degree of inner freedom, which was won by Abelard for humanity, is precious.

It is very simple: Oligarchism will only end, if the overwhelming majority of people stop accepting the condition of slavery, in whatever form it may occur. The power of resistance, of which Abelard speaks, is not inherited. Each of us has to work for it. One acquires it, in struggling for one's own development. Through these efforts, man can organize his relationship to the world and to society in increasing ways. And since man's existence transcends his physical life, whatever we do, affects the future of mankind as a whole.

Universal Education

After the cathedral schools, such as that of Chartres in the Twelfth century, it became the teaching orders, like the Brothers of the Common Life and others, who gave access to the necessary knowledge to an ever-increasing percentage of children and youth, to the kind of universal education which breaks man free from accepting oligarchical subjugation. It was that, which produced such geniuses as Nicolaus of Cusa, the father of modern science, and Louis XI, and made the success of the first nation-state possible. For, it is universal education which will set mankind free of accepting a mental dependence on *any* kind of domination.

Let's look at the person who put that concept of universal education into a complete educational system: Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was one of the pillars of the German Classical period, and, actually, the closest friend of Friedrich Schiller.

Humboldt wrote: "Mankind has now reached a level of culture from which it can progress only through the development of the individual. And therefore, all institutions which *prevent* this development, and which reduce human beings to a mere mass, are now more damaging than ever before."

Humboldt was inspired by Schiller's beautiful image of

man, which was the idea that each human being has the ability to become a “beautiful soul,”—which Schiller described, as a person who no longer feels a conflict between necessity and duty, on the one hand, and his emotions. This person has developed his emotions to such a degree, that he can blindly follow his impulses, because reason and passion are united. And Schiller says, “The only person who is a true beautiful soul, is a genius, because it is only a genius who, in a creative, lawful way, enlarges the laws, and therefore creates new degrees of freedom.”

Now, Schiller and Humboldt had experienced the horrors of the French Revolution, the Jacobin Terror, the chopping off of heads of kings and scientists; which led Schiller to say, that this great historical moment had found a little people. And Schiller then wrote his famous *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*, in which he discussed the reasons why people had failed to match up to the historical opportunity. And he developed the notion of an aesthetical man, who has developed all his abilities to the fullest.

Wilhelm von Humboldt took this idea, and he defined the goal of education to be the highest and most proportionate development of all one’s powers into a unity. Now, Humboldt had had such ideas before, but after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806, in the famous battles of Jena and Auerstadt, educational reform became a question of survival for Germany: because, if the Germans would not draw the conclusions as to why the Napoleonic army was so superior to that of Prussia, then shortly they would not have any country left at all.

So, together with vom Stein, von Humboldt was the most important of the Prussian reformers. Basically, he took the idea of Schiller, and he developed it into a full educational system, where the educational goal was not to win a degree, not some kind of doctorate or anything like that, but the *building of character*; the building of a beautiful soul; and, the development of every person to be a citizen of the nation.

Now, Humboldt argued that *all pupils* must receive the same fundamentals, even if one is to become a manual laborer, and the other a sophisticated scientist. Because, if they don’t have the same development, then the first one will be too harsh, and the second one will be too squeamish.

Humboldt decided that certain areas of knowledge would be better suited than others to have this impact on the character.

First of all, following Schiller, he said people must know the entirety of universal history. You don’t need to know every detail, every footnote, but you have to have a sense about how mankind arrived at the present. What were the struggles, often with blood and tremendous sacrifice, of many, many generations? So that you have an appreciation of what has been given to you, so that you

feel a noble impulse to pass it on, enriched, to the future.

So, universal history is essential.

Secondly, Humboldt argued, that you must gain a command over your own language in its highest form—which means knowing the best Classical poetry of your language, because only if you can think in terms of poetic notions, in terms of metaphor, in terms of poetry and drama, can you really express yourself. Because what you cannot say, you cannot think.

Furthermore, he insisted that it was important to study an ancient, more developed language, such as Greek or Sanskrit, which has a higher degree of expressions and a richer form of grammar; so that, from this more advanced standpoint, you can become self-conscious about your own language.

Then, naturally, you have to study all the natural sciences, because only if you understand the laws of nature of the physical universe, do you have a rational approach to this world.

And naturally, religion was important; but so, too, were geography, music, singing, and gymnastics.

Now, the goal of education was the development of the *entire* human being, not just some parts, into a harmonic totality. Everyone, even the poorest, must be given a complete human development. Every person has to receive a complete education, and no one should find a destination in something *less*, than his own successive development.

It is only after the full personality is developed, that you can have specialization. Humboldt warned, that a merely “drilled” person, a person who merely has a few skills, very specialized, will always be useless, and even dangerous. And, if you think about the computer nerds of today, who are somehow the appendages of their computers, or the poor kids glued to their Game Boys, having lost all sense about the real world and having just this one thing, you can see that Humboldt was on the right track.

Now, for university teaching, which he integrated with basic education, Humboldt demanded that teaching and research be united. Because, you don’t want to have stale teachers, who repeat the same thing endlessly, and put you to sleep. The teacher has to be inspired by his own discoveries, in order to mediate the joy of entering into new knowledge.

And knowledge, for Humboldt, should not be an accidental aggregation of things, but it should be guided by truth-seeking, and by fundamental principles.

Because, only a science which comes out of the inner person, and touches the inner self, will build character. And that’s the only thing which counts, for the nation as much as for the individual. Because it is not knowledge *per se*, or mere verbiage, but character and acting in the real world, which makes the difference.