

Medieval University Readings

Peter Abelard: Prologue to *Sic et Non* (excerpts)

Translated by W. J. Lewis (aided by the helpful comments and suggestions of S. Barney)
from the Internet History Sourcebooks Project

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) was one of the great intellectuals of the 12th century, with especial importance in the field of logic. His tendency to disputation is perhaps best demonstrated by his book Sic et Non, a list of 158 philosophical and theological questions about which there were divided opinions. This dialectical method of intellectual reflection - also seen in Gratian's approach to canon law - was to become an important feature of western education and distinguishes it sharply from other world cultures such as Islam and the Confucian world. Abelard's mistake was to leave the questions open for discussion and so he was repeatedly charged with heresy. For a long period all his works were included in the later Index of Forbidden Books.

Prologue to *Sic et Non*

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 judgment 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), and again "*You also shall sit as judging*" (cf. Matthew 19:28). Let us not presume to declare them liars or condemn them as mistaken – those people of whom the Lord said "*He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me*" (Luke 10:16). 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?

(11-18) The unfamiliar manner of speech gets very much in the way of our achieving understanding, as well as the different meanings these words very often have when a given word is used with a particular meaning only in that particular manner of speech. Indeed, each man is as well-stocked with words as he is with sense. And since according to Cicero (De Invent. I, 41, 76), "A sameness in all things is the mother of weariness" (that is, it gives rise to distaste), it is fitting to vary these words used on the same topic and not to strip everything bare with casual and common words. Such topics, as blessed Augustine said, are veiled for this reason, lest they become cheap, and the greater the effort it takes to discover them and the more difficult it is to master them, the more precious they are.

(18-43) Likewise, 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. Certainly if we wish, as is fitting, to speak to these people, to teach them, we should strive after their usage, rather than after proper speech, as that leader in the grammatical arts and instructor of speaking, Priscian himself, taught. Even that most painstaking doctor of the Church, St. Augustine, took this into account when he instructed the ecclesiastical teacher in the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine* and warned him to leave out everything that might hinder the understanding of those with whom he spoke and to scorn elaboration and pickiness in speech, if he could make himself understood more easily without them. He said (De Doct. Christ. IV, ix-x), "As for the one who is teaching, he should not be anxious as to how much eloquence he uses as he teaches, but rather as to how clearly he teaches. A person who is eager to be careful sometimes avoids the more elegant terms. For this reason someone said, when discussing this kind of speaking, that there is in it a certain careful casualness." [...]

(54-85) 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. Whence that most trustworthy author and truest translator, Jerome, warned us in his letter to Laeta concerning the education of her daughter, when he said (Epist. 107, 12), "Let her be wary of all apocrypha; and if she ever wishes to read such works not for the truth of dogma, but for the miracles contained in them, let her know that they do not belong to those men whose names are indicated in the inscription and that it

requires great wisdom to seek gold amid the mud.” The same man has this to say about the 77th Psalm (Tractatus sive Homil. in Ps. LXXVII), concerning the attribution in its title (which is like this: ‘recognized as Asaph’s’), “It is written according to Matthew (cf. 13:34-35), “when the Lord had spoken in parables and they did not understand, etc...”. he said these things happened so that what had been written by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled (Psalm 77:2): “I will open my mouth in parables”. The Gospel has this wording even up to today. However, Isaiah does not say this, but Asaph.” And further: “Therefore let us say plainly that, as it is written in Matthew and John that the Lord was crucified at the sixth hour, and in Mark that it was the third hour — this was a scribal error and ‘the sixth hour’ had been written in Mark, but many scribes thought it was a gamma instead of the Greek episeimon [i.e. a symbol for ‘six’; it resembles gamma, which can be used as a symbol for ‘three’], just as the error was scribal when they wrote ‘Isaiah’ instead of ‘Asaph’. For we know that many churches were made up of uneducated Gentiles. [...] And if in the Gospels some things were corrupted due to scribal ignorance, what is so surprising if it should also happen sometimes in the writings of the Church Fathers who came later, and possessed far less authority? So if something in the writings of the saints should seem perhaps to be deviating from the truth, it is honest and in accordance with humility and appropriate to charity (which ‘believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (1 Corinthians 13:7) and does not readily suspect errors from those whom she embraces) that either we believe that this place in the text may have been corrupted or not translated faithfully, or that we acknowledge that we do not understand it.

(86-148) 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, just as Ecclesiastes often brings in conflicting ideas from different people, whence ‘Ecclesiastes’ is translated as ‘provoker’, (as St. Gregory asserts in his fourth Dialogue, or whether they left such statements under investigation as they were examining them rather than concluding with a confident solution [...]. By the evidence of St. Jerome, as well, we know that this was the custom of the Catholic teachers — that in their commentaries they would insert among their own thoughts even some of the worst opinions of heretics, while, in their pursuit of perfection, they rejoiced in omitting nothing of the ancient authors. [...]

Even in the Gospel, some things appear to be said according to human opinion rather than according to the

truth, as when, following common opinion and custom, Joseph is referred to as the father of Christ by the mother of the Lord, when she says (Luke 2:48), “*In sorrow thy father and I have been seeking for you.*” [...]

(176-187) What is so amazing, then, if some things are proposed or even written by the Holy Fathers sometimes based on opinion rather than on the truth? When conflicting things are said about the same topic, one must carefully distinguish that which is offered with the stricture of a command, that which is offered with the lenience of indulgence and that which is offered with exhortation to perfection, so that we might seek a remedy for the apparent conflict in accordance with this variety of intents. If indeed it is a command, we must distinguish whether it is general or specific, that is, directed toward everyone in general or toward certain people in particular. 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. It is very necessary to distinguish these things in the statutes of the Church decrees or canons. 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.

(188-194) The reader who is eager to resolve conflicts in the writings of the holy ones will be attentive to all the methods described above. If the conflict is obviously such that it cannot be resolved by logic, then the authorities must be compared together, and whatever has stronger witnesses and greater confirmation should be retained above all. [...]

(195-208) Indeed it is established that the prophets themselves at one time or another have lacked the gift of prophecy and offered from their habit of prophecy some false statements, derived from their own spirit, while believing that they were in possession of the Spirit of prophecy; and this was permitted to happen to them so as to preserve their humility, so that in this way they might recognize more truly what sorts of things come from the Spirit of God and what sorts from their own spirit, and recognize that when they possessed the Spirit of prophecy they had it as a gift from the Spirit Who cannot lie or be mistaken. For when this Spirit is possessed, just as it does not confer all its gifts on one person, so does it not illuminate the mind of the inspired one concerning all things, but reveals now this and now that, and when it

makes one thing apparent it conceals another. Indeed, St. Gregory declares this with clear examples in his first homily on Ezekiel. And it did not shame even the very chief of the apostles, who shone so greatly with miracles and with the gifts of divine grace after that special effusion of the Holy Spirit promised by God, who taught his students the entire truth — it did not shame him to abandon a harmful untruth, when up to that point he had fallen into a not insignificant error concerning circumcision and the observance of certain ancient rites, and when he had been earnestly, wholesomely and publicly corrected by his fellow apostle Paul.

(209-304) When it is clear that even the prophets and apostles themselves were not complete strangers to error, what is so surprising, then, if among such manifold writings of the Holy Fathers some things seem to be handed down or written erroneously, for the reason given above? But just as these holy ‘defendants’ should not be charged with lying if at one time or another, not from duplicity but from ignorance, they make some statements other than what the real truth would have them think; so in the same way something that is said for love while giving some instruction should not be imputed to presumption or sin, since it is well known that all things are distinguished by God according to intention [...]

However, so that the room for this freedom is not excluded, and that very healthy task of treating difficult questions and translating their language and style is not denied to later authors, the excellence of the canonical authority of the Old and New Testaments has been distinguished from that of the works of later authors. If there should be something in the Old or New Testament that seems as if it were absurd, you may not say that the author of this work did not possess the truth, but that the manuscript is corrupt, or the translator has made a mistake, or that you do not understand. But in works of later witness, contained in innumerable volumes, if perhaps some things are thought to deviate from the truth because they are not understood as they have been expressed, in these works the reader or listener has the freedom of judgment to approve what seems good or disapprove of what offends, and therefore when it comes to things of this type, unless they are supported either by sure reasoning or canonical authority, so that what is either argued or narrated there may be shown either to be entirely so or to be potentially so, if it does not seem good to someone or they do not wish to believe it, they are not reproached.”

And thus [Augustine] calls the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments documents about which it is heretical to say that something in them contradicts the truth. [...]

(330-350) With these prefatory words, it seems right, as 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 the weaker readers 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. 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 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.

Statutes of Gregory IX for the University of Paris 1231

Dana C. Munro, trans., *University of Pennsylvania Translations and Reprints*, (Philadelphia, 1897)
from the Internet History Sourcebooks Project

Universities grew up in a number of regions in the early 13th century, and came to provide the institutional framework for the intellectual life of the period. There were two main patterns of organization: the Italian version in which the students employed the teachers; and the Northern European model in which the teachers dominated. The University of Paris was the focus much intellectual activity from its initial evolution from loosely organized collections of teachers and students. The statutes of Gregory IX marked a significant stage in the University's rise.

Gregory, the bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his beloved sons, all the masters and students of Paris—greeting and apostolic benediction.

Paris, the mother of the sciences, like another Cariath Sepher, a city of letters, shines forth illustrious, great indeed, but concerning herself she causes greater things to be desired, full of favor for teaching and students...

...Wherefore, since we have diligently investigated the questions referred to us concerning a dissension which, through the instigation of the devil, has arisen there and greatly disturbed the university, we have decided, by the advice of our brethren, that these should be set at rest rather by precautionary measures, than by a judicial sentence.

Therefore, concerning the condition of the students and schools we have decided that the following should be observed: each chancellor, appointed hereafter at Paris, at the time of his installation, in the presence of the bishop, or at the command of the latter in the chapter at Paris—two masters of the students having been summoned for this purpose, and present on behalf of the university—shall swear that, in good faith, according to his conscience he will not receive as professors of theology and canon law any but suitable men, at a suitable place and time, according to the condition of the city and the honor and glory of those branches of learning; and he will reject all who are unworthy without respect to persons or nations. Before licensing anyone, during three months, dating from the time when the license is requested, the chancellor shall make diligent inquiries of all the masters of theology present in the city, and of all other honest and learned men through whom the truth can be ascertained, concerning the life, knowledge, capacity, purpose, purpose, prospects and other qualities needful in such persons; and after the inquiries in good faith and according to his conscience, he shall grant or deny the license to the candidate as seems fitting and expedient. The masters of theology and canon law will give true testimony on the above points. The chancellor shall

swear, that, he will in no way reveal the advice of the masters, to their injury; the liberty and privileges being maintained in their full vigor for the canons of at Paris, as they were in the beginning. Moreover, the chancellor shall promise to examine in good faith the masters in medicine and arts and in the other branches, to admit only the worthy and to reject the unworthy.

In other matters, because confusion easily creeps in where there is no order, we grant to you the right of making constitutions and ordinances regulating the manner and time of lectures and disputations, the costume to be worn, the burial of the dead; and also concerning the bachelors, who are to lecture and at what hours and on what they are to lecture; and concerning the prices of the lodging or the interdiction of the same; and concerning a fit punishment for those who violate your constitutions or ordinances, by exclusion from your society. And if, perchance, the assessment of the lodgings is taken from you, or anything else is lacking, or an injury or outrageous damage, such as death or the mutilation of a limb, is inflicted on one of you; unless through a suitable admonition satisfaction is rendered within fifteen days, you may suspend your lectures until you have received full satisfaction. And if it happens that any one of you is unlawfully imprisoned, unless the injury ceases on remonstrance from you, you may, if you judge it expedient, suspend your lectures immediately.

We command, moreover, that the bishop of Paris shall so chastise the excesses of the guilty, that the honor of the students shall be preserved and evil deeds shall not remain unpunished. But in no way shall the innocent be seized on account of the guilty; nay, rather if a probable suspicion arises against anyone, he shall be detained honorably and, on giving suitable bail he shall be freed, without any exactions from the jailers. But if, perchance, such a crime has been committed that imprisonment is necessary, the bishop shall detain the criminal in his prison. The chancellor is forbidden to keep him in his prison. We also forbid holding a student for a debt

contracted by another, since this is interdicted by canonical and legitimate sanctions. Neither the bishop nor his official, nor the chancellor shall exact a pecuniary penalty for removing penalty for removing an excommunication or any other censures of any kind. Nor shall the chancellor demand from the masters who are licensed an oath, or obedience, or any pledge nor shall he receive any emolument or promise for granting a license, but be content with the above mentioned oath.

Also the vacation in summer is not to exceed one month, and the bachelors, if they wish, can continue their lectures in vacation time. Moreover, we prohibit more expressly the students from carrying weapons in the city, and the university from protecting those who disturb peace and study, And those who call themselves students but do not frequent the schools, or acknowledge any master, are in no way to enjoy the liberties of the students.

Moreover, we order that the masters in arts shall always read one lecture on Priscian, and one book after the other in regular courses. Those books on natural philosophy which for a certain reason were prohibited in a provincial council, are not to be used at Paris until they have been examined and purged of all suspicion of error. The masters and students in theology shall strive to exercise themselves laudably in the branch which they profess; they shall not show themselves philosophers but strive to become God's learned. And they shall not speak in the language of the people, confounding the sacred language with the profane. In the schools they shall dispute only on such questions as can be determined by the theological books and the writings of the holy fathers.

It is not lawful for any whatever to infringe this deed of our provision, constitution, concession, prohibition and inhibition or to act contrary to it, from rash presumption. If anyone, however, should dare attempt this, let him know that he incurs the wrath of almighty God and of the blessed Peter and Paul, his apostles.

Given at the Lateran, on the Ides of April [April 13], in the fifth year of our pontificate.

Jacques de Vitry: Life of the Students at Paris

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Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History, (Philadelphia, [1897?-1907?]).

The testimony is unanimous as to the evil life of a large proportion of the students. It was inevitable that young men, in many cases, mere boys living under practically no restraint and not subject to the full penalties of the law, should have been boisterous and obstreperous. Many of the so-called students resorted to the universities simply for enjoyment and with no idea of study. Conflicts between the different nations were every day occurrences. Town and gown rows were frequent. But the citizens as a whole seem to have been favorably disposed toward the students.

In the Chartularium of Paris there are many proofs of the evil lives led a part of students, but Jacques de Vitry is preferred here because of his account of the jealousies among the different nations. The first part of his description is very characteristic, but cannot be quoted.

Almost all the students at Paris, foreigners and natives, did absolutely nothing except learn or hear something new. Some studied merely to acquire knowledge, which is curiosity; others to quire fame, which is vanity; others still for the sake of gain, which is cupidity and the vice of simony. Very few studied for their own edification, or that of others. They wrangled and disputed not merely about the various sects or about some discussions; but the differences between the countries also caused dissensions, hatreds and virulent animosities among them and they impudently uttered all kinds of affronts and insults against one another.

They affirmed that the English were drunkards and had tails; the sons of France proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women. They said that the Germans were furious and obscene at their feasts; the Normans, vain and boastful; the Poitevins, traitors and always adventurers. The Burgundians they considered vulgar and stupid. The Bretons were reputed to be fickle and changeable, and were often reproached for the death of Arthur. The Lombards were called avaricious, vicious and cowardly; the Romans, seditious, turbulent and slanderous; the Sicilians, tyrannical and cruel; the inhabitants of Brabant, men of blood, incendiaries, brigands and ravishers; the Flemish, fickle, prodigal, gluttonous, yielding as butter, and slothful. After such insults from words they often came to blows.

I will not speak of those logicians before whose eyes flitted constantly "the lice of Egypt," that is to say, all the sophistical subtleties, so that no one could comprehend their eloquent discourses in which, as says Isaiah, "there is no wisdom." As to the doctors of theology, "seated, in Moses' seat," they were swollen with learning, but their charity was not edifying. Teaching and not practicing, they have "become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal," or like a canal of stone, always dry, which ought to

carry water to "the bed of spices." They not only hated one another, but by their flatteries they enticed away the students of others; each one seeking his own glory, but caring not a whit about the welfare of souls.

Having listened intently to these words of the Apostle, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work," they kept multiplying the prebends, and seeking after the offices; and yet they sought the work decidedly less than the preeminence, and they desired above all to have "the uppermost rooms at feasts and the chief seats in the synagogue, and greetings in the market." Although the Apostle James said, "My brethren, be not many masters," they on the contrary were in such haste to become masters that most of them were not able to have any students except by entreaties and payments. Now it is safer to listen than to teach, and a humble listener is better than an ignorant and presumptuous doctor. In short, the Lord had reserved for Himself among them all only a few honorable and timorous men who had not stood "in the way of sinners," nor had sat down with the others in the envenomed seat.

