Abelard's Legacy: Why Theology is not Faith Seeking Understanding

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Abstract: *It is often claimed, with reference to Anselm, that theology is faith seeking understanding. This is intriguing, because Anselm never used the word "theology" in any of his writings and was born a generation before the word began to be used in Europe. It was Abelard that introduced the word to the Latin west and gave it a professional and technical meaning: reasoning about faith that proceeds in accordance with the principles of methodological doubt. This method influenced Aquinas, and was harmonized with negative theology in his thought. Such styles of theological method challenge the common acceptance of the Barthian slogan, 'faith seeking understanding', in today's theology.*

Key Words: theology – definition; Peter Abelard; *Sic et Non*; Bernard of Clairvaux; Thomas Aquinas; methodological doubt; negative theology

I n his book on Anselm, Karl Barth identified the task of theology as one of faith seeking understanding.[1] This definition has since met with such approval that it is now difficult to find many professional theologians that would disagree with it. This is intriguing because in the long period between Anselm and Barth the phrase faith seeking understanding is curiously uncommon. Even more tantalizing is the fact that Anselm himself would not have described theology as faith seeking understanding; actually, it would have been impossible for him to do so because he was born a generation before the word "theology" began to be used in Europe. Anselm never used the word "theology". Whatever faith seeking understanding was for Anselm, it could only be described as theology anachronistically and, I think, rather inaccurately. Perhaps the widespread use of this methodological slogan in both protestant and catholic circles today may best be interpreted as evidence of the extent to which contemporary theology continues to be influenced by the remarkable rhetorical power of Barth's work. A closer look at the evidence means that the description of theology as faith seeking understanding is open to some radical questions.

In this paper I will challenge the common definition of the theological task as faith seeking understanding, where the faith of a tradition commandeers the critical enquiry of the theologian. In this model, faith – the axiomatic fides that the theologian unfolds and explicates – is left unquestioned; the propositions of faith are assented to as soon as they are stated, are taken as truth from God, and are not open to critical challenge because of their basis in revelation. I will argue that the theologian should question the fides in *fides quaerens intellectum*, and that this is possible on the basis of a particular reading of

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[1] K. Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London, SCM Press, 1960).

scholastic methodology that highlights its disputative and dialectical elements. I will argue that scholastic methodological rules, that can be summarised as "doubt leads to enquiry, and enquiry to truth" (Abelard), or "wonder proceeds to enquiry, and enquiry to knowledge" (Aquinas) not only challenge the notion that theology is faith seeking understanding, but also allow a more flexible, more critical, approach to the theological task. I also think that these more critical approaches nevertheless remain properly religious because concerned with truth. For even as the theologian, through the critical process, uncovers the ambiguities and uncertainties of the received *fides*, she or he may resolve this uncertainty into the Christian agnosticism of the *via negativa*. There is a link between scholastic methodology and negative theology – between disputation and spirituality – that I will make clear in this essay.

Doubt, Enquiry, Truth

As Michael Clanchy has noted, 'Abelard was the first… "theologian", in the sense that he was the first teacher to promote the word "theology" and to use it to mean the reconciliation of human reason with Christian revelation.'[2] Before Abelard the word "theology" is marked only by its absence from Latin Christian writing. There are merely a handful of instances of its occurrence in Latin texts, and these few occurrences are the exceptions that prove the rule. "Theology" is so uncommon in Latin Christianity that Augustine has to explain to his readers what the word means in Civ. Dei 8.1: 'I take this Greek word to signify reasoning or discussion about divinity'. This discourse about divinity called theology is, for Augustine, a pagan enterprise that has little connexion with Christianity. It is used with reference to the writings of Varro, not the writings of the Saints (see Civ. Dei 6.5). After Augustine the other instances of "theology" in the first millennium of Latin Christian writing as restricted to Boethius' *Dialogues on Porphyry* (1.3) and Isidore's *Etymologies* (2.24.13). To make a crude semantic point, there was no Catholic theology for the first thousand years of Catholicism! About 1100, a member of Anselm's school,*Honorius Augustodunensis* refers to a work of his own – the *Elucidarius* – as a *summa totius theologiae*, but it is unclear what he might mean by the word in this context because at this stage "theology" has no technical meaning and it is clearly not part of a shared Latin vocabulary.

When Peter Abelard (c. 1079 – c. 1142) began to use the word "theology" in Twelfth Century France he appears to have thought that he was introducing a novel term. So too, apparently, did Bernard of Clairvaux who attacked Abelard's theology and mocked it as *stultilogia*, "stupid-ology."[3] Yet despite Bernard's persecution of Abelard and portrayal of him as an arrogant rationalist, Abelard's new theology won wide acceptance from his students and contemporaries and rapidly spread from the Cathedral Schools to the faculties of the new universities that were established in the years that followed. Indeed, it is through the repeated use of the term "Faculty of Theology" in the universities that the word established a lasting position in Latin vocabulary,[4] and because of this it is fitting to say that the primary context of theology is within the academy, not the monastery. All this is due to Abelard. His influence was immense, despite his condemnation to perpetual silence – greater indeed than that of Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard himself. For the

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[2] M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell,1999), 5.

[3] Bernard of Clairvaux, letter 190, lines 24-25, in J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot, H. Rochais (eds.), *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 8 (1957-77), 24.

[4] See W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 8.

methodological approaches that Abelard introduced became the norm for many scholastics, and a century later Thomas Aquinas is arguably using Abelard's methodology more markedly than anyone else's.[5]

What does Abelard mean by theology? According to Constant Mews, his use of the term is narrowly specific: 'Abelard used the word theologia as the title of a treatise about the divine nature.'[6] Mews continues to say that this use of theologia as a title means that the primary definition of theology is not an intellectual pursuit or method. However, as Mews also admits in a footnote, there is one instance of Abelard using theologia to refer to a discussion, rather than the title of a book, recorded in the *Sententie Parisienses*.[7] More recently, Stephen Brown has argued that Mews is wrong; Abelard was not using theologia as a title of specific books because the titles of his works were added later. Rather, for Abelard, theologia refers to 'a collection of questions concerning various areas of Christian teaching.'[8] As such, theologia was used to mean the process of applying rational argument to the doctrine of God, i.e., to refer to a methodological practice.

The first written work of theology became known as the Theologia "*Summa Boni*", for which Abelard was summoned for investigation at the council in Soissons in 1121. In the middle of the 1120s, the second edition of the work, the *Theologia Christiana* appeared, and between 1135 and 1140 the final edition, the Theologia "*Scholarium*" was circulated. Each is chiefly concerned with the Trinity, but what marks them apart is the way in which Abelard explores the doctrine. Far from following a method of faith seeking understanding, rational arguments are used to show the legitimacy of the doctrine. In the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard says that the reason for writing such theological treatises was on the request of his students, who, he says, 'were asking for human and logical reasons on this subject, and demanded something intelligible rather than mere words. In fact they said that words were useless if the intelligence could not follow them, that nothing could be believed unless it was first understood, and that it was absurd for anyone to preach to others what neither he nor those he taught could grasp with the understanding.'[9] Tantalizingly, Abelard's statement here, *nec credi posse aliquid nisi primitus intelligetis*, could well be a deliberate play on Anselm's motto, *fides quaerens intellectum*.[10]

Abelard's theological works must be tied to his groundbreaking *Sic et Non* in which he outlines his methodological breakthrough. The reason for this is straightforward. According to Lauge Nielsen, 'the prologue comes across as Abelard's elaborate proof that the theological method followed in the first version of the *Theologia* is dictated by the tensions inherent in the tradition of the Fathers… the first version [of the *Sic et Non*] dates from the time immediately after the condemnation in Soissons, whereas Abelard prepared the second and final version concurrently with the composition of the *Theologia Christiana*.'[11] If the *Sic et Non* is the demonstration of the necessity of the Theologia, the true reasons for theology can be obtained from this fascinating text.

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[5] See M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 34.

[6] C. J. Mews, 'The Sententie of Peter Abelard' in *Abelard and his Legacy* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 166.

[7] C. J. Mews, 'The Sententie of Peter Abelard,' 166 n.129.

[8] S. F. Brown, 'Medieval Theology' in G. Jones (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 134.

[9] B. Radice (trans.), *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 78.

[10] M. T. Clanchy, 'Abelard's Mockery of St Anselm,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 41.1 (1990): 17.

[11] L. O. Nielsen, 'Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers' in The Medieval Theologians, ed. G.R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 107

The *Sic et Non* serves as a damning attack on creating a Christian world-view based upon the unquestioned authorities of the Fathers. No longer could traditional teaching be regarded, unexamined and untested, as an unconditionally binding *auctoritas*. This has grave consequences for faith seeking understanding, because it questions the binding authority of the *fides* that is to be expounded. The teaching of the Church is ambiguous and equivocal, for, says Abelard in the first sentence of the Prologue to the *Sic et Non*, 'in the vast amount of writings which exist, some statements, even those of the holy Fathers, appear not only to differ from each other, but even to be contradictory.'[12]

He assembled, in coherent order under 158 headings, hundreds of quotations from the Church Fathers, particularly from Augustine and Gregory the Great, in order to highlight and sort out the inconsistencies between them. Abelard was not intending to bring the Church Fathers into disrepute by minutely examining whether they said 'Yes' or 'No' (*Sic et Non*) to his 158 questions. He was confident that the discrepancies in the quotations which he had amassed would readily disappear, once scientific methods of criticism were applied to them through the linguistic arts like logic in which he excelled.[13]

The first four questions concern faith. Thus number 1 is, tellingly, "That faith is built up by reason, and the contrary". Numbers 5-25 concern the Holy Trinity, followed by a section on creation that deals with angels and human beings, illustrated by number 51, "That Adam and Eve were created mortal, and not." Abelard then turns his attention to Mariology and Christology, reaching the ascension of Christ at question 90. This is followed by questions on Pentecost, the Church and sacraments (thus number 121 is "That one should not celebrate Mass before 9am on Christmas day and the contrary"). The collection ends with ethical questions, illustrated by number 154 "That one is permitted to lie, and contrary".

In the *Sic et Non* he revealed that the traditional stock included material of great diversity, much of it contradictory. Thus, for instance, St Augustine may have taught such and such, but in another of his writings he undermines himself by teaching an opposite position. Which statement from Augustine is to be accepted and believed? Abelard showed that the old authorities - including the bible - could no longer be accepted uncritically as they stood. Some other authority would have to be appealed to to demonstrate the truth of a doctrine, and Abelard saw that that authority would have to be reason. Hence his use of the word theology – reasoning about God. Faced with the confusing mass of Christian teaching, humble reason would be used to decide which sacred authority was more authoritative than another. Reason would be used to help sort out which of the conflicting authorities should be believed.

Abelard may have been taking a hint from the early Augustine. For although Augustine usually argued that reason should not challenge the authorities of Christian teaching even he saw the problem of the presence of conflicting authorities within Christianity. 'Authority demands belief', wrote Augustine, 'and prepares man for reason… But reason is not entirely absent from authority, for we have got to consider whom we have to believe.'[14]

Abelard purposely leaves these aporia unresolved in the *Sic et Non*, and his reason for doing so is of paramount importance. The task of "theology", according to Abelard's

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[12] For an English translation, see A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (eds.) *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 87.

[13] Clanchy, *Abelard*, 34.

[14] Augustine, *On True Religion*, xxiv.45. The translation here is from J. H. S Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 247.

programme, is identical with the task of education. This is because it takes for its subject matter the teachings of the Christian tradition and uses them to provoke critical reflection, intellectual debate, and a better understanding of said tradition.[15]

Abelard and the Divine Mystery

Bernard's accusations were straightforward. Abelard was a rationalist using reason to stamp all over the gospel because he was arrogant enough to suppose that his brain was big enough to exhaust the mystery of God. He wrote to the Pope about Abelard that:

> This man disputes concerning faith to attack faith. He sees nothing as reflection and parable; he looks at everything face to face. He goes farther than is meet for him… Of all that exists in heaven and earth, he maintains, nothing is unknown to him unless it be himself. He shifts the boundary stones set by our forefather by bringing under discussion the sublimest questions of Revelation. To his totally unseasoned students, mere beginners in theology, who have scarcely outgrown dialectics and are barely qualified to grasp the elementary truths of religion - to such he exposes the mystery of the Trinity, the inner sanctuary and royal tabernacle. He presumes to imagine that he can entirely comprehend God by the use of his reason.[16]

This portrayal of Abelard as a rationalist led to his condemnation. Yet it is an inaccurate portrayal, for Abelard always retained a strong sense of the mystery of God. He writes in the *Theologia Christiana*, 'It should suffice for human reason to know that human intelligence cannot comprehend him who so far surpasses all things and completely exceeds the powers of human discussion and comprehension.'[17] Abelard certainly has more of a sense of the mystery of God than the rationalist St Anselm did. Abelard knew that God was always beyond and above his theology. His theology was only ever a stop-gap between the time of the ascension and parousia, a human attempt at sorting through conflicting Christian doctrines, seen in a glass darkly. Abelard says his theology is provisional. Theology is always nothing more than attempt by finite human reason to contribute to an on-going discussion about Christian talk about God and how it addresses Christian life, ethics and liturgy. No theology is, as Abelard recognised, the last word on the issue.

> Whatever, therefore, I advance in this highest of philosophies will be a shadow, and not the truth itself, a similitude and not the thing itself. The Lord alone knows the truth. I consider that I shall set forth that which is like the truth and most agrees with philosophical reasons. If in doing this, owing to my own short-comings, I diminish catholic understanding or expressions (which God forbid!) then let God, Who judges works by their intentions, pardon me. Should any of the faithful by reason or authority of Scripture show me to be in the wrong I am ready to offer every satisfaction as regards what is in any way defective or needs correction.[18]

> For Bernard, faith is a simple, certain, assured conviction. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the certainty of things unseen (Heb 11.1). How can one, like Abelard, treat faith as if it is uncertain without missing the heart of faith entirely? Indeed, Abelard

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[15] See M.T. Clanchy's comment that Abelard 'used the most sacred texts and mysteries of the Christian religion as exercises in comprehension' (*Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 7). The *Sic et Non* provided the stimulus for the medieval compendia of sentences that became the staple of Christian education. Peter Lombard raided the Sic et Non for his own compendium of Sentences which, in the course of time, became the standard textbook. Nevertheless, Lombard conceals 'all sorts of difficulties' that Abelard had uncovered (Clanchy, *Abelard*, 269).

[16] Bernard, Letter 190, in PL 182, 1055.

[17] Abelard, PL 178, 1124.

[18] Abelard, *The Christian Theology*, trans. J. Ramsay McCallum (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), 69.

does not speak of faith as something certain; he defines faith as an "estimate". It is not clear whether that means of a word in Latin precisely corresponds with the modern English meaning of "estimate", but it is nevertheless highly suggestive. If one encounters a number of equivocal and conflicting presentations of the faith the theological task becomes one of evaluating which position is most likely to be true. The theological task becomes one of weighing up different presentations of doctrines, and this process of informed evaluation may fairly be described as estimation. One evaluates the conflicting authorities and estimates which is to be accepted and which rejected. The theological position one comes to concerning the object faith is nothing other than an estimate. Abelard is a theologian because he stands back from faith - refuses to adopt a faith position - and assesses the faith of others.

Bernard's close friend William of Saint-Thierry pressed forward the conservative line: 'Whatsoever we may say, we wish to be in conformance with the fathers of the church, our teachers and guides, following in their footsteps and not pushing on ahead on our own'. He commands that the Christian should 'disregard human reason… force it like a captive to serve faith, to acknowledge the boundaries of faith drawn by our fathers and not to overstep them in any way.'[19] Faith, he says succinctly, is based on authority alone.[20]

In Rheims in 1148, Gilbert of Poitiers was tried on suspicion of heresy. The prosecution produced a sheet on which were written the traditional authorities which, they thought, would unquestionably show that Gilbert had departed from the traditional faith. Gilbert's supporters, however, provided a defence by reading from the unwieldy volumes they had with them a series of contrary authorities that showed the orthodoxy of Gilbert's position. Eventually the pope was forced to abandon the reading of authorities and questioned Gilbert himself.[21]

Alan of Lille complained that authorities had noses made of wax that could be twisted to support anyone's argument.[22] And Adelard of Bath dared to call them 'a trap.'[23]

Contradictions between authorities were sometimes insuperable, and the only possible resolution was by declaring the unsolvable problem a mystery. The conflict, the paradox it produced, was taken as a sign that pointed to the limits of human reason vis-à-vis the divine. Such examples are readily available from the twelfth century.[24]

A negative doctrine of God that stresses the divine unknowability fits easily with this understanding of the difficult content of tradition. Once one is conscious that there is conflict in tradition between different dogmatic certainties, all such certainties are relativized. Dogmatic relativity means dogmatic uncertainty, and uncertainty is an awareness that ultimately one does not know what God really is. However, this not knowing corresponds happily with the unknowing explicit in the via negativa of mystical theology. This, then, is the merit of negative doctrines of God when viewed relativistically alongside other doctrines of God: they already contain within themselves a reflection of the relative uncertainty of all doctrine. From the options given by tradition, negative theology is the only theology which reflects the relativity of teachings within the tradition:

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[19] William of St-Thierry, *De erroribus Guilelmi de Conchis*, c. 2, 384 cited in H. Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages 1000-1200* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 216.

[20] William of St-Thierry, *Liber de corpore et sanguine Domini*, P.L. 180, 345 in Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 216-17.

[21] See Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 217.

[22] Alan of Lille, *De fide catholica*, I, 30, PL 210, 333.

[23] Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 221.

[24] See the reference to Gilbert Crispin in Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 225.

all other models must necessarily make some positive claim of knowledge of God (*gnosis*) which is compromised by tradition. This can be employed to elucidate why so many scholastic theologians found negative doctrines of God the most persuasive.

The superiority of negative theology is therefore guaranteed by the relativity of the very tradition through which it is mediated, for only a negative theology fails to conflict with the uncertainty endemic to Christian teaching. Negative theology is reinforced by the qualities of the mediating tradition itself.

From Doubt to Wonder

Thus far we have seen that the doubting of authorities was key to scholastic methodology and that this doubt reinforced negative theologies in the twelfth century. This process of doubt, enquiry and truth is obviously at odds with the idea of theology as faith seeking understanding, and yet it was this very methodology that fuelled the spread of theology in the schools and universities. To give an example of the dominance of this methodology I now want to show how it was crucial to scholasticism in the thirteenth century. I will do this with reference to the particular example of Thomas Aquinas. As Harbison has pointed out, in terms of the methodology of theology, Abelard 'forged the weapons which Aquinas tempered and used so effectively.'[25]

The most prominent similarity between Abelard and Aquinas consists in their shared Aristotelianism. The influence of Aristotle on Thomas means that the latter can never accept the legitimacy of absurd paradoxes as valid statements, even in the sphere of theology. Thomas accepts the fundamental truth of the law of non-contradiction, which he expresses in *de Veritate* 10.12 with the rule (reminiscent of Abelard) that 'Yes and No cannot simultaneously be valid'. In *S.Th.* 1-2, q 94, a. 2 c., Thomas quotes Aristotle: 'The first indemonstrable principle is that "the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time"… on this principle all others are based'. Any truth may not contradict the rules of logic; herein lies the agreement of Thomas with Abelard over the proper value that is to be ascribed to reason. It is axiomatic for Thomas that faith cannot contradict reason but must agree with it. He describes his position in *De Unitate Intellectus*: it is philosophically impossible for divine faith to profess what the reason must regard as false: not even divine omnipotence can make this otherwise. If a theological opinion involves a contradiction, it is false.

It is clear that for Aquinas, Christian doctrine must display coherence. All statements must have an internal suitability, or fittingness. Authorities are confirmed, for Aquinas, by demonstrating the congruity of the results of such statements (S.Th 1.32.1 ad 2).

Of course, it is possible to point to differences between the two thinkers. At times, squaring Aquinas and Abelard might seem difficult. In S.Th. 1, q. 1, a. 8, Aquinas quaestions whether sacred doctrine is a matter of argument. Ambrose is cited, saying that arguments should be put aside where faith is sought, and Aquinas' own reply to the objection (2) that authority is the weakest form of proof is unequivocal:

> This doctrine is especially based upon arguments from authority, inasmuch as its principles are obtained by revelation: thus we ought to believe on the authority of those to whom the revelation has been made. Nor does this take away from the dignity of this doctrine, for although the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest… sacred doctrine… properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an

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[25] E. H. Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1980), 25.

incontrovertible proof… For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles, and prophets, who wrote the canonical books.[26]

The Teaching of Christ is Certain

The gratuitous graces are ordained for the manifestation of faith and spiritual doctrine. For it behoves him who teaches to have the means of making his teaching clear; otherwise the doctrine would be useless. Now Christ is the first and chief teacher of spiritual doctrine and faith… Hence it is clear that all the gratuitous graces were most excellently in Christ, as in the first and chief teacher of the faith.[27]

The above statement should, however, be compared with *S.C.G.* 3.96, where Aquinas says that sense must be exercised in reading scripture. He also says The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice (*S.Th.* 2a2ae, 1.9) Saying that holy scripture is obscure and needs to be examined by the reason undermines its ability to operate as a final authority. The scholarship of the reader is, in the end, the ultimate judge in this life of the truth and falsity of statements that claim to be authoritative, even in the bible. Augustine is, again, lurking in the background, for it was Augustine who said in On Christian Teaching that 'logic is of paramount importance in understanding and resolving all kinds of problems in the sacred texts' (2.117). Dialectics judge authorities, not authorities dialectics.

Further, the position that Aquinas outlines here needs to be clarified by exactly what he thinks the revelation in Sacred Scripture consists of. This is addressed in the following two articles on scripture. Here we find that the literal meaning of the text takes precedence over all others – but what is a literal meaning? The literal meaning is that which is intended by the author, which in this case is God.[28] And yet Aquinas, perhaps more than anyone else, is clear that the essence of God is unknown to us. We could ask, then, can the literal meaning (in the mind of God) be known by mortals? Certainly, this means that even the literal sense has potentially several meanings says Aquinas, taking Augustine as his guide. As Eugene Rogers has shown, Aquinas' hermeneutics are not straightforward.[29] Moreover, we are joined to God by revelation as to one unknown. In this life what God is is unknown to us by the revelation of grace; and so by revelation we are joined to God as to something unknown (*S.Th.* 1.12.12 ad 1).[30] The unknown-ness of God is that which is revealed in Scripture. For Thomas, the typical apprehension of revelation is as a cloudiness mixed with darkness, 'quaedam cognitio obumbrata et obscuritati admixta' (*De Veritate*, xii, 12). Revelation is characterized by its inverse ratio to clear and distinct knowledge.

This unknown-ness of God is another key similarity between Abelard and Aquinas. Both agree that God is an unknown mystery. What was described by Abelard as doubt is re-described by Aquinas as wonder. Aquinas tells us that wonder causes inquiry: 'as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (i.2)… a man… wonders… and from wondering

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[26] *S.Th.* 1.1.8, ad 2.

[27] *S.Th.* 3a 7.7

[28] *S.Th.* 1.1.10

[29] E. F. Rogers, 'How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas,' *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 64-81.

[30] For the negative content of revelation in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and others, see Denys Turner, 'The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ: Negative Theology and Eucharistic Presence,' *Modern Theology* 15.2 (1999): 143-158.

proceeds to inquire. Nor does this inquiry cease until he arrive at a knowledge of the essence of the cause.'[31]

Wonder (*mirandum*) leads to inquiry, and inquiry to knowledge. Wonder or amazement (*admiratio*) includes for Thomas a hesitation of judgment over the object of inquiry. Philosophers are led by amazement to seek the truth: 'He who is amazed shrinks at present from forming a judgment of that which amazes him, fearing to fall short of the truth, but inquires afterwards.'[32] Wonder acts like a shock, it dislocates, and this dislocation includes swimming without authorities. Thus not knowing, suspending judgment, being in awe is the beginning of inquiry, and not a clearly grasped authority. 'Wonder is a kind of desire in knowing. It is a cause of delight because it carries with it the hope of discovery.'[33] God is the ultimate case of wonder because God is fathomless, ineffable, unknowable in essence, and known only through effects in the world:

> We wonder or admire when we see an effect and do not know the cause. A cause is doubly admirable either because it is totally unknown, or because the effect does not produce a perfectly clear cause. God produces an effect (see Romans 1) but not one showing its cause perfectly. Therefore it remains wonderful.[34]

So in the case of God wonder leads to an inquiry, but this inquiry is open-ended in this life before God is seen face to face in the beatific vision. Wonder leads to inquiry, and inquiry leads to further inquiry reaching out to the infinite.

Disputation and Negative Theology

Through the universities Abelard's influence was immense. It lead to the development of a theological method not based upon religious authorities but the authority of reason. This was a liberating move that "freed-up" Christian thinking. But it also had its spiritual dimension. Little attention has been paid by scholarship to the relationship between the method of disputation and the flowering of negative theology in the west in this period. For just at the time when the Pseudo-Denys became one of the chief authorities in the west, disputation became the dominant method. This raises the question: does the "agnosticism" over authorities implied in disputation reflect that Christian "agnosticism" beloved by negative theologians? Can a case be made that the sense of uncertainty introduced by the discovery of tensions and contradictions in the tradition reinforce negative theology in the period? Would, for instance, Aquinas have felt that there was something fitting about the fact that the tradition is not neat and tidy but must be disputed because it is self-subverting, and the simplest way of overcoming such disputes is to point towards the infinite unknowability of God? The very method of disputation would then become a form of mystical practice itself.

What I am hinting at is that contra Bernard's criticism of Abelard as a rationalist, disputation is a form of mystical theology that reflects Abelard's appreciation of the infinite mystery of God. As Pieper noted:

> The *Quaestiones* were the fruit of that type of discussion whose guiding principle is not so much to overcome the opponent or reach any "conclusion" as mutually to explore a question as far as possible, to carve a path of knowledge opening out to infinity... the

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[31] *S.Th*. 1-2, q.3, a. 8.

[32] *S.Th*. 1-2, q. 41, a. 4, ad 5.

[33] *S.Th*. 1-2, q. 32, a. 8.

[34] *In Pss 8*, 167.

"disputations"… barred no subject and no partner to the debate. None at all, not even the non-Christians![35]

Theology was not ghettoised. It was not an '"internal Christian" affair limited to a circle of intimates and initiates.'[36] It proceeded only on the basis of natural reason.

True theology collapsed when it became ghettoised. Theology ceased when it became confessional. Piper describes how the condemnations of Aristotelian theses at Paris and Oxford led to the end of the golden age of Scholasticism. Different orders adopted different "schools of thought" as authoritative "party lines"; in other words, theology was fragmented into different ghettos and ceased to be concerned with open, liberal-minded debate.[37]

Conclusion

Thanks to Abelard, for most of its history in the Latin Christianity, theology was not faith seeking understanding, rigidly following dogmatic a priori axioms. It was doubt, enquiry and truth - a liberal programme that rejected religious authorities in favour of an openness to the infinite mystery of God. Despite the frequent quotation of the Vulgate mistranslation of Isaiah 7:9, 'Unless you believe you will not understand', Abelard's legacy in the theology of the universities countered dogmatic interpretations of Christian teaching and insisted on questioning the authorities of faith. This means that theology, properly described, sees that faith does not precede understanding; rather, understanding precedes faith. To quote Augustine, science 'breeds, feeds, defends, and strengthens the saving faith which leads to true happiness.'[38]

When Barth writes in his book on Anselm, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, that 'it is the presupposition of all theological inquiry that faith… remains undisturbed by the vagaries of the theological "yes" and "no",'[39] it seems best to interpret this as little more than curiously unhistorical rhetoric. By this "yes" and "no" Barth must surely be referring to Abelard's *Sic et Non*, yet there is in the whole scope of Barth's writings no serious engagement with Abelard and the problems he uncovered. To employ a colloquial phrase, Barth seems to have 'brushed the Sic et Non under the carpet'. Moreover, in complete distinction to Barth in the twentieth century, Abelard originally introduced "theology" in the twelfth century precisely because he saw the limitations of faith seeking understanding. In sum, Abelard provides us with a near millennium old alternative theological vision to the dominant model of today. What he saw was that an openness of mind and serious, responsible questioning is necessary, intellectually and spiritually, when the mind engages with Christian teaching. Take the wonder out of theology, and you risk being left with mere church dogmatics.

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[35] Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 159.

[36] Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 160.

[37] Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 134-5.

[38] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 14.3.

[39] Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London, SCM Press, 1960), 18.