

Peter Abelard and World Religiosity

--A Study of His *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*—

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I. Introduction

E. Harris Harbison, when discussing the topic of scholarship as a Christian calling before the age of Reformation, singles out Jerome, Augustine, Abelard, and Aquinas as “fundamental prototypes” of Christian scholars especially called by God “in a different way to assume one or more of the three major tasks of a Christian scholar: to restudy the Hebraic-Christian tradition itself, to relate this tradition to secular culture, to relate this tradition to scientific discovery.” To him, the common denominator among them is that they all try to respond to questions which must be answered anew by each succeeding generation of Christians: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, Cicero with Christ? Can a man know unless he begins with belief? Can critical intelligence be safely applied to Christian faith? Is it possible to synthesize Christianity and culture?” Indeed, these questions have been partly the focus of Abelard’s scholarly concern. His major writings, which seem to have grown directly out of his teaching, deeply reflect this concern. *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian* (henceforth cited as *Dialogue*), one of the most intriguing books among them, has to a great extent represented the sentiments of this deep concern, as this paper will try to demonstrate.

In the opinion of C. H. Haskins, the first half of the twelfth century was the most stimulating fifty years since the fall of Rome. The intellectual movement of Western Europe crystallized itself in Paris, which soon became the “city of teachers.” Among the teachers, Abelard was the one who had caused most intellectual debates, infuriated most fellow-teachers, however attracted most students. He has been certainly the most influential as well as controversial figure of his time:

What Abelard did through his teaching and writing was to make his generation think—and think hard—about the Christian faith at a very important moment in Western history. This was the moment when a young European society was awakening to self-consciousness and to the awareness that there were alternatives to Christianity, in Islam, and back of Islam, in ancient Greece. Abelard argued that the Christian faith must be able to defend itself, must be reasoned, if not also reasonable. . . . one could argue that he thought of himself as a sort of Socratic gadfly commissioned by God to stir the noble steed of Christendom to life.

However, this Socratic spirit causes great horror in the minds of people like Bernard of Clairvaux, who complained that “when Abelard sweats blood and water to

make Plato a Christian, our theologian has only succeeded in proving himself a pagan” and finally brought Abelard into condemnation. In view of this, one may wonder whether it is proper to apply the term “theologian,” in addition to logician, dialectician and philosopher, to Abelard? If he is truly a theologian, in what respect do we mean that? In other words, what is the nature of his theology?

The aim of this paper is twofold: first of all, to discern the nature and purpose of the *Dialogue* by examining the intention of the author as it was reflected in this writing and to represent him as a theologian. Our analysis will focus primarily on the preface of the *Dialogue*, however, the text will be consulted as an auxiliary source as long as it is related to our discussion.

II. The Nature of the *Dialogue*

1. The Current Situation of the Problem
2. Analysis of the Preface
3. The Intention of the Author

III. The Theological Significance of *Dialogue*

1. The focus of Theology
2. Its Theological Implication

IV. Conclusion