

It is clear in both of their writings that Anselm and Peter Abelard both have, at least, a partly pastoral aim in their writings. For Anselm and Abelard, understanding is not easily come by, but prized once acquired. Still, the two regard understanding differently, and are especially divergent when it comes to their treatment of people with different understandings of God than their own.

For Anselm, faith is an essential element in understanding. This is, in part, because, according to Anselm, knowledge of God comes solely through revelation. Anselm says, "Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me, when I seek you, for I cannot seek you, except you teach me, nor find you, except you reveal yourself."¹ Because knowledge of God comes through direct revelation, there is but one true understanding of God. When humanity misconceives of God, it is not because of God's error, but because humanity has become distant from God. In fact, Anselm repeatedly acknowledges his perceived distance from God, and one gathers that this "distance" is largely Anselm's catalyst for writing. "What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from you. What shall your servant do, anxious in his love of you, and cast out afar from your face?"²

Peter Abelard is much more ready to acknowledge the human role in the knowledge of God. Like Anselm, Abelard claims that the Spirit through which the scriptures were revealed is absent from his community.³ However, this perceived absence causes Abelard to accept the inevitability of error when it comes to interpreting scripture and doctrine. In response, he calls for tolerance and diversity. Speaking of biblical

¹ Anselm, *Proslogium*, Chapter 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Peter Abelard, *Prologue to Sic et Non*, 1-11.

interpretation, Abelard says, "It is fitting to vary these words used on the same topic and not to strip everything bare with casual and common words."⁴ Further, Abelard acknowledges the influence of context regarding the knowledge of God;

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.⁵

There are several implications for an epistemology of revelation. Most centrally, knowledge of God by way of revelation leaves no room for human error. One either understands or one does not. Anselm recognizes this and thusly distinguishes between two ways of "conceiving" of God: "(1) when the word signifying it is conceived; (2) when the thing itself is understood."⁶ Dubious as the argument is, Anselm's point is to say that those who cannot conceive of God's existence do not *truly* understand God in the first place. Again, the priority is on faith. Faith in God permits the revelation that leads to right understanding. "For, God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived."⁷ And [one] who thoroughly understands this, assuredly understands that this being so truly exists, that not even in concept can it be non-existent."⁸

While Abelard is not ready to accept the idea that the scriptures, themselves, are flawed in their original form, he readily acknowledges the presence of error in the transmission and interpretation of scripture. Even in the works of the patristics, Abelard recognizes flaws and interpretations that stand in sharp contradiction of each other. Still,

⁴ Abelard, 11-18.

⁵ Abelard, 18-43.

⁶ Anselm, Chapter 4.

⁷ This premise is called the ontological argument.

⁸ Anselm, Chapter 4.

Abelard does not regard the presence of such discrepancies as a malicious attempt to dilute God's revelation, but as an inevitability of human finitude.⁹ Finally, Abelard says,

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 weaker readers to the greatest exercise of seeking the truth, and may render them sharper readers because of their investigation.¹⁰

Abelard goes so far as to recognize scripture that acknowledges Jesus' own doubts and questions, then to raise this as a model for Christian inquiry.¹¹

Knowledge of God and Christ is an issue that continues the Christian heritage of anathema. Abelard reflects a culture that was becoming, on the one hand, much more local in terms of political and religious authority. On the other hand, Abelard is clearly aware of the push for Christian unity and the potential persecution of one whom those in authority deem outside orthodoxy. Anyone pursuing ordination in a major American denomination understands the very tenuous balance between unrestricted religious inquiry and the pressure not to step too far outside the demarcations of prescribed "orthodoxy." Those of us journeying in this very uncomfortable position might take minimal comfort when Abelard says, "Anyone lies who says a true thing, while believing that it is false. For insofar as [one's] intent is concerned, because [one] does not say what [one] believes, to that extent [one] does not speak the truth, even if what [one] says may actually turn out to be true... According to this, anyone is guiltless insofar as they think sincerely and without falseness and do not speak deceitfully."¹²

⁹ Abelard, 209-249.

¹⁰ Abelard, 330-350.

¹¹ Abelard, 330-350.

¹² Abelard, 209-249.