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To their readers, or rather their judges; the authors of this humble work

As you, dear reader, are about to start reading our work about Peter Abelard, we wish you patience along the way, as the medieval time moves differently from ours and you might think us to be slow and sluggish in presenting facts and drawing conclusions. That, however, is not our intention, as we are merely following the rules of the era, so do not judge us too harshly before you have reached the end of this paper.

We have written a work about Peter Abelard, a man from the twelfth century, who also happened to be a famous scholar of his time and whose fame as a lover has even reached our time, but who first of all was a human like we all, with his thoughts, feelings, joys and disappointments. If you have read our work through, you might possibly say to yourself, that he could have just as well lived in the twenty first century. That is the essence of history, showing us the human nature that, although so variable in its appearances, can create a bond between centuries and enable us to understand the people that have lived, loved and suffered before us.

We appeal again to your benevolence and good mind, dear reader, so that you would not only take our work at face value, but also take time in order to read between the lines.

We have begun our work and we have finished it.

Fare well.

1.1 Problem Definition

In our project we are going to investigate **the role of the individual in the twelfth century society on the basis of the life and writings of Peter Abelard**. We will discuss the question of individuality, its definition and characteristics in the twelfth century. Furthermore, we intend to understand whether Abelard can be perceived as an individual in the twelfth century. For that purpose we are going to examine Abelard's autobiography, his correspondence with Heloise and some of his philosophical works.

1.2 Methodology

Our expectations are that this project will hopefully also be read by people who are not very knowledgeable in medieval history. Therefore we have included several introductory chapters, because Europe has changed enormously since the days of Abelard. Transferring the modern mindset into medieval scenery would result in several misunderstandings and misinterpretations. In the chapter about the historical background of the period we are mostly introducing the history of the Roman Catholic Church and the factors that led to changes in the practice of worship. Those aspects contributed to the rise of religious conscience in the twelfth century. We also touch upon the world-view and social structure of the medieval society, but our main focus will be twelfth century France.

By seeing the historical development of the Roman Catholic Church from the “church of people” to an institutionalized church, one can understand the attempts of Peter Abelard to make religion more intelligible and bring it closer to people again. The part about the medieval world-view enables us to see the reasons for several decisions Abelard and Heloise undertook. The knowledge about social structure in

the Middle Ages gives another key to understanding the relationships between Abelard and other people and his own background.

We have dedicated some space to the topic of heresy in the Middle Ages, since Abelard was condemned for heresy twice and personally suffered much due to the trials. By knowing how the opponents of the orthodox church (orthodox here meaning mainstream Catholicism, not Eastern Christianity) were dealt with in general, we are able to see, whether he was treated according to the usual norms.

The chapter about the perception of individuality in the twelfth century is supposed to help us to see whether we can speak of Abelard as an individual at all. In order to do this we will use theories proposed by two historians, i.e. Colin Morris and John F. Benton.

The main body of the project that deals with Peter Abelard as a person is divided into four main parts: firstly we present short biographies of him and his wife Heloise and the story of their relationship.

Secondly, we investigate his person through his autobiography *Historia Calamitatum* and the first part of his correspondence with Heloise (the first four letters), that are generally called the *Personal Letters*. To the part of the project that deals with the letters of Abelard and Heloise, we have added a short chapter about the letter-writing in the Middle Ages.

Thirdly, we use the second (and less known) part of Abelard's and Heloise's correspondence, called the *Letters of Direction*, in order to see his opinions about the correct monastic life.

Fourthly, we introduce Abelard as a scholar, showing the essence of his greatest achievement, the theory of universals and introducing his work on ethics. As far as the philosophy of Abelard is concerned, we will also discuss whether some of his theories still can be applicable nowadays.

1.3 Delimitations

We are going to offer our interpretation of the character of Peter Abelard and discuss his fate. Of course one could ask here – and what about Heloise? Isn't she worth a study? Our answer is yes, definitely, but due to the lack of material about her, we decided that it would be more fertile to concentrate on Abelard as we are able to see the different facets of his personality from his different writings. Further along we decided to put more emphasis on primary sources, as we believed that they would give us a better overview of the life of Peter Abelard. So we did not use a lot of secondary literature about Abelard, as we thought that it would only influence our own view on him. We also decided not to use *The Lost Love Letters* (ed. Constant J. Mews), a controversial collection of lately discovered letters. Some historians believe that they were written by Abelard and Heloise, but many others including our own supervisor consider them either a forgery or written by somebody else. In the philosophical part of the project we chose not to use Abelard's work *Dialogue of the Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian*, which explains his views on different religions. Since we decided to use the *Letters of Direction* in order to get an overview about Abelard's view on Christianity, there appeared to be little need for the aforementioned book.

In our analysis we will not include *Letters of Peter the Venerable and Heloise* as we do not find them relevant for the project. We will also exclude *Letter 6* in the *Letters of Direction*.

1.4 Dimensions

Throughout our project we intend to cover two dimensions: History and Philosophy. We will cover the history dimension by examining the primary sources concerned with Peter Abelard and providing an account of the period he lived in. Our main sources are going to be *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* and *Abelard's Ethics (Scito te Ipsum)*. The last mentioned work will provide us with Abelard's views on moral philosophy and thereby be used in order to cover the philosophy dimension. We will analyse Abelard's theory of universals and intentionalism and discuss them both.

1.5 Motivation

Each member of the group had a different motivation for writing this project. Some of us wanted to write a purely historical project, while others were more interested in philosophy. In the end we found the middle way and decided to write a project about a medieval philosopher. On our supervisor's suggestion, we decided that to be Peter Abelard. Some of us had never heard of him before, while others had some elementary knowledge about him, mostly about his correspondence with Heloise. As we read more about him, mainly the primary sources, we became more and more fascinated about his personality. We found that there was so much about him that was unique, significant and at the same time, irritating, and those factors kept us motivated throughout the whole writing process.

2. Introduction to the Historical Background of the Period

In this chapter we are going to give a short overview about the life and political situation of the Western European Christian community in the eleventh and twelfth century. Although our project is mostly focused on the twelfth century, it is necessary to mention both some events that happened before and after the twelfth century in order to gain a greater understanding of the issues that are dealt with.

2.1 The Christian Church and the Medieval Society

As “A History of Medieval Christianity” mentions, the prevailing world view up till eleventh century was that everything was created by God and thereby everything was also an expression of Him, which created a paradox considering that not all things in the world were good and some were very harmful indeed. That was (at least temporarily) solved with the theory of original sin – it was not only that Adam and Eve (and due to them the whole mankind) were corrupt, but after the Fall Nature had also become corrupt.¹ Human life in general was considered to be a pilgrimage - *peregrinatio*. The proper order of the world was already set in Heaven and it would be wrong to tamper with it. Society was imagined to be static and the political and legal systems as mirroring the divine way of things. The sense of progress was in a way turned upside down – once there had been a Golden Age (with a pure apostolic church and glorious Rome) and since that time the order of the world had steadily become worse. Men who wanted their writing taken seriously indulged in a kind of reversed plagiarism and presented [their works] as a newly discovered work of one of the ancients.² As, like mentioned before, the society was imagined to be set in a proper way to reflect the divine order of affairs, “it was not the person who changed the world who was great, but the one who in his/her proper place contributed to its

¹ Russell, Lumsden (2000), p. 75

² Ibid., p. 77

order or the one who learned to rise above it.”³ The most admired people of the Middle Ages were saints, as worldly fame and power was not a virtue. For example architects and painters often did not sign their works, offering it as praise to God.

There were three main social categories: the workers (*laboratores*), the warriors (*bellatores*) and the ecclesiastics (*oratores*). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the explosive growth of towns and cities took off, a fourth category – the urban worker - seriously appeared. Everybody in medieval society had *libertas* that meant a right and duty to occupy one’s proper place in society.⁴ However, it was possible to change one’s social status and mainly it happened within the church hierarchy, as the Church often provided scholarships for poor boys of good intelligence.

The feudal mentality and its code of ethics called chivalry somewhat coloured the classical Christian values, placing for example treachery in the first place in the list of vices instead of pride. However, it did not clash with the teachings of the Church. In the peasant lot, Christianity remained for quite a while mixed with age-old superstition and agricultural customs. The essence of chivalry, however, made its way to other fields of life besides war and vassalage. Since 1100, the tendency was that more and more noblemen learned to read and write and new genres of literature were born, such as romances, where the feudal relationship between the lord and the vassal was transferred to a love relationship: the lady (usually married) took the role of the master and the knight became her true vassal. It is also noted though, that the romances were rather a form of revolt against the sexual morality of the feudal world, showing other possibilities of relationships between sexes than the ones based on interest, instinct, force and conformity.⁵ So in the romantic poetry of the time, the knight was not only a tough and loyal warrior, but also a gallant admirer

³ Ibid., p. 76

⁴ Ibid., p. 78

⁵ Le Goff (1988), p. 352

with complicated emotions.⁶ Abelard is showing his knightly heritage by writing poetry and songs to his beloved Heloise, who, however, does not fill all the criteria of being a lady on a pedestal. One can also spot some echoes of the knightly woman-worship in the letters Peter the Venerable wrote to Heloise.

The medieval Church and state were more or less identical. It is often supposed that the Church concerned itself with spiritual things only and the temporal ruler with secular things. This, however, was not entirely true, as the kings or princes often dictated religious matters in their states and the Church dealt with administration and other worldly affairs. In spite of power struggles between secular and papal authority, both had to depend largely on the support of each other.⁷ Church had inherited the tradition of administering its surrounding areas from the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, when the priests, often the only literate people, had to take over the bureaucratic matters, so for centuries priests and bishops were frequently chosen for their administrative abilities instead of their religious devotion. Being the local authority in both religious and temporal matters added to bishops' wealth and strengthened their ties with the secular world and secular rulers. Due to the fact that the local priests were often legally or illegally appointed by the feudal lord (according to his own interests), the clerics were seldom an example of good Christian men to their community, being frequently illiterate and infamous for a lax moral conduct, which resulted in despise from the congregation.

In fact, the people's dissatisfaction with the Church had more reasons than illiterate priests only. The early Mass had been the centre of the religious worship, as it was a simple and understandable ceremony – the community of Christians gathering around a table of Lord, offering bread and wine and receiving them as the blood and flesh of Christ.⁸ In the early Church Mass was also said in Greek, but it

⁶ Esmark, McGuire (1999), p. 198

⁷ Moriarty (1989), p. 22

⁸ Ibid., p. 89

was changed into Latin in the fourth century in order for the people to understand it.⁹ However, by the end of seventh century Latin had become as unintelligible for uneducated people as Greek had been before the fourth century. This coincided with the growing wealth and status of the clerics causing their wish to separate themselves from the peasant community, so “the table was removed from the centre of the congregation and placed at one end of the Church, where the priest said Mass with his back to the people”¹⁰, sometimes the priest was even separated from the people by a choir screen. The crowd also stopped making responses to the priest as the altar boys took over that function, and the processions, where people brought voluntary gifts to the Church, ceased.

Many monasteries had become rich and worldly by the eleventh century owing to the gifts and protection of lords and other powerful people, who invested a part of their fortune into the convents, but thereby also gained increasing influence over them. Also due to the good reputation of monasteries as centres of holiness (owing to the religious ignorance of the local priests), settlements arose around the monasteries as their inhabitants wanted to participate in the holiness of the convent and receive the greatest protection from Satan. Abelard laments the fact of monasteries becoming parts of towns and villages instead of remaining isolated in his letter of direction to Heloise.¹¹

Since 816, only *The Rule of St. Benedict* had been allowed in the Frankish kingdom thanks to the efforts of Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious, and first in the twelfth century new rules started to appear. Mid eleventh century witnessed the greatest crisis of monasticism as the development of the society had speeded up tremendously in the eleventh century and the functions the monasteries had fulfilled before were all taken over by some other institutions: the education given in the monasteries had become old-fashioned compared to the teachings of the Episcopal

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 90

¹¹ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 195

schools in towns, treating the sick was taken over by the professional physicians (whose abilities should not be overestimated), aid to the poor was not so necessary anymore, as the growing economy offered more jobs and reduced the numbers of the needy, lodging for the travellers was now provided by the roadside inns and the widows and orphans were mostly taken care of by the guilds or other voluntary Christian organisations.¹² So the monasteries stood before a great challenge: to reform themselves to answer the needs of the new order of the society. The reforms undertaken mostly included eliminating lay influence in the monasteries and returning to the spirit of prophecy – to asceticism, isolation and contemplative spirituality.

The Church as an institution transformed itself in the period after 1050, turning “from community into corporation”¹³; it was changed into a papal monarchy that became the leading authority in Western Europe in the period between 1050 till about 1300. The doctrines and dogmas were gathered into an ordered system, thereby drawing a sharp line between the heretics and the orthodox believers. The “descending theory” of power prevailed, although its interpretations depended on the concentration of power. If the Emperor was stronger, the version, where Christ gave the power to him to delegate, ruled, on the other hand, when the papacy gained strength, the opposite version was held to be true, which happened in the period of 1125-1300. The compromise, where both the temporal and the spiritual ruler get the power from Christ never became very popular. The growing papal power also produced several (mostly negative) side effects as the growing intolerance of Jews, crusading spirit, founding of military-religious orders and approval of civil war and rebellion as measures against the disobedient kings and emperors.¹⁴

The formalization of liturgy and sacraments continued in the eleventh century, making participation in religion often meaningless for ordinary people. In

¹² Russell, Lumsden (2000), p. 102

¹³ Ibid., p. 109

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 121

the eleventh and twelfth century, however, a great surge of religious enthusiasm took place that resulted in founding a number of new orders, popularity of pilgrimages, and an increasing cult of saints, especially the Virgin. Most of the cathedrals and churches were dedicated to her (Notre-Dame) and also the new areas the military-religious orders Christianized in the twelfth and thirteenth century were dedicated to Virgin Mary (e.g. the area of present Estonia and Latvia). The cult of the Virgin became a part of the religious feeling at the time, where Christ was pictured as a suffering human instead of a heavenly judge. Virgin Mary then took the role of the mourning mother that people found easy to sympathize with as the church liturgy had become more or less an empty ritual. The increasing attempts to humanize the religion also found expression in popular veneration of the saints and relics and pilgrimages to holy places.

Heresy did not become a severely punishable crime until the eleventh century, as nobody had been executed for heresy for five centuries before. *Hairesis* in Greek means to choose and St. Isidore of Seville defined it as “and so heresy is named from the Greek from the meaning of choice since each decides by his own will whatever he wants to teach or believe. But it is not permitted to us to believe anything on the basis of our own will, nor to choose to believe what someone else has believed of his own will. We have the authority of the apostles, who did not choose anything out of their own will to believe, but faithfully transmitted to the nations the teaching they received from Christ.”¹⁵ Some of the most infamous early heresies (second - sixth century) were Sabellianism (Patripassianism) that equalled the Father with the Son, thus saying that the Father suffered the Passion, Manichaeism that suggested the existence of two gods, one good and one evil, Arianism that claimed that Son is subordinated to the Father, Pelagianism that made free will more important than grace and Nestorianism that said that Virgin Mary was the mother of human Christ. The importance of the early heresies is that due to the tendency of the Middle Ages to

¹⁵ Peters (1980), p. 49

look into the past for truth and to believe in resurrection of the old evils instead of the development of the new, St. Bernard in twelfth century is accusing Abelard of being both Arian, Pelagian and Nestorian, whereas the culprit rather likely has very little if any connection to those particular types of heresy. Abelard himself denies Sabellianism and Arianism in his Declaration of Faith. An interesting coincidence is that these three aforementioned heresies are the only ones (except Priscillianism which due to its similarity to Manichaeism does not suit to the list) named in the *Etymologies* of St. Isidore of Seville in the chapter *On the heresies of the Christians*. It is rather likely that those heresies have just become a nominator for all heresy during the centuries and have no individual meaning in the twelfth century.

In a brief period of time from about twelfth till early thirteenth century the Church showed “considerable flexibility and real experiment in dealing with dissident movements”¹⁶ as it used the way of *caritas* (charity). The higher clergy did not suggest using force against the heretics, but converting them if it was possible and the bitterly criticized incompetence of churchmen was largely recognized as being the reason of people straying from the orthodox teachings. The strongest punishments to heretics did not go further than excommunication (Abelard was tried for heresy twice and received no stronger penalty than excommunication). The violence that was occasionally used against heretics can mostly be blamed on mob action of the laypeople. In late twelfth century the ways of the Church had started to change towards harshness and the use of violence and torture against unorthodox believers became more and more commonplace. In the beginning of the thirteenth century pope Innocent the Third developed a doctrine that “temporal rulers were obliged to drive heresy from their lands or risk their lands being declared open to Christians who would do so.”¹⁷ So by the end of the thirteenth century both ecclesiastical and temporal powers had been gathered against heresy in any form. It would probably not

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 165

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 190

be wrong to say that a major change of discourse had taken place: the image of a lamb (heretic) that has strayed from the flock and is brought back by the caring shepherd – “If a man hath a hundred sheep and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, he rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray”¹⁸ - had been replaced by the image of the Mystical Body of Christ (the Christian community) that had been attacked by a disease, and the sick limb (heretic) had to be amputated so that it could not infect the healthy parts – “[...] and if thy right hand or right eye offend thee, cut it off or pluck it out and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.”¹⁹

3. Peter Abelard – Biography

Peter Abelard (1079-1142), the French philosopher, logician and theologian was one of the most significant thinkers of the Middle Ages.

Abelard was born at Le Pallet in Brittany near Nantes in 1079, as the oldest son of Berengar, the lord of Pallet. It was expected that Abelard would be knighted and succeed his father. However, Abelard decided to renounce his rights and to become a scholar in one of the cathedral schools that then flourished in northern France. Having been at various schools, ever since he left home at age 15, he finally went to Paris to study under William of Champeaux, head of the cathedral school and archdeacon of Notre Dame.²⁰ Abelard appeared to have been a somewhat difficult student, as he constantly questioned the method and conclusions of his master and never hesitated to embarrass William in front of his other students.²¹

¹⁸ Matthew 18:12-13

¹⁹ Matthew 5:29-30

²⁰ (Internet 1)

²¹ Radice (1974), pp. 9-11

In 1102 Abelard set up his own school at Melun, which soon gained popularity. He built his own reputation as a skilled logician and teacher and by 1107 he returned to Paris to teach at the cathedral school. Being under pressure from William, Abelard had to leave Paris soon after and move his lectures to the church of Mont Ste Geneviève, located on a hill on the southern edge of Paris.²²

After the public exposure of Abelard's relationship with Heloise, followed by his castration, Abelard decided to leave his teaching career and adopt the monastic life at St. Denis, the famous Benedictine monastery north of Paris. A life at the monastery was difficult, not only because of his disgrace and shame that followed his castration, but also because he found it difficult to subject to the authority of the abbot. His reputation, however, still attracted students, and with his abbot's permission he set up a school in a daughter priory separate from the monastery. This brought attention to his rivals, most notably Alberic and Lotulf of Rheims, who claimed that a monk should not teach philosophy and that Abelard's training in theology was insufficient. The object of Abelard's rivals' constant attack was his work on the Trinity, which he wrote for his students at St. Denis. The ecclesiastic Council at Soissons in 1121 condemned him and placed him under "house arrest" at St. Denis. By the year of 1122, Abelard was given special permission from the abbot of St. Denis to found a hermitage on a piece of land between Provins and Troyes. There he built a school and a church, which he dedicated to the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit. A couple of years later he was able to help Heloise and her fellow nuns expelled from the convent of Argenteuil by the abbot of St. Denis, by deeding to them the hermitage of the Paraclete. In 1136 Abelard returned to Paris to teach. It was during this period Abelard wrote his work on ethics, where he stressed the importance of intention in evaluating the moral or immoral character of an action. He attracted the attention of Bernard of Clairvaux, who was instrumental in provoking a second trial against Abelard. Abelard was condemned for the second time by the

²² (Internet 1)

council, in 1140. Convinced of his innocence he appealed to the Pope. During his trip to Italy his illness forced him to terminate his journey at the Cluniac priory of St. Marcel, which was under the protection of one of his former students Peter the Venerable. He died there on April 21, 1142.²³

3.1 Abelard and Heloise

Heloise was an outstanding young woman who played an important role in Abelard's life. There is not much information about her roots and her family except for her uncle, Fulbert. Heloise appeared in this story at the age of seventeen.²⁴ She was very capable of studying and this ability served as a reason to become one of Abelard's pupils. Her love and passion for Abelard, the desire to sacrifice everything in life for her beloved and her inner strength are really admirable.

Abelard and Heloise met in Paris and fell in love. As Abelard put it in *Historia Calamitatum*: "[...] more words of love than of our learning passed between us."²⁵ Soon their relationship became obvious to everybody and it did not take long before Heloise's uncle became aware of it as well. He made an effort to separate them, but soon afterwards Heloise revealed that she was pregnant. Abelard and Heloise got married in secret. Heloise's uncle did not like it. That was the reason why Abelard send her to the safety of convent. Fulbert assumed that Abelard was trying to get rid of Heloise by making her become a nun and took his revenge. One night his men broke into Abelard's house and castrated him. After this incident both Heloise and Abelard took their vows (Heloise took hers on Abelard's command) and lived monastic lives. All the meetings they had after his mutilation were impersonal, probably in the presence of nuns. However, their love of letters united them once

²³ (Internet 1)

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16

²⁵ Ibid., Abelard, p. 67

again, as they revealed their personal feelings to each other in written correspondence.

4. Letter-writing in the Middle Ages

Letters in the Middle Ages constituted a different communication medium than it is considered to be nowadays. In contemporary times, letter-writing is mostly practiced in the private sphere of life and for intimate purposes, whereas in the medieval period it was (due to lack of other means of communication) used in a much wider range of spheres. Medieval letters were mostly “self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents, often written with an eye to future collection and publication.”²⁶ The style was intended to be correct and elegant as the letter was probably going to be read by or to more people than only the addressee. This seems also to be the case with the letters of Abelard and Heloise, especially the letters of Abelard, whereas it can be doubted whether Heloise’s letters were ever read by anyone except Abelard in her lifetime.

The main incentives for writing a letter, according to historian Giles Constable, were desire to instruct or to convert or friendship. Abelard noted in his *Historia Calamitatum*, that he was happy for Heloise’s cultivation in letters, as so they could write to each other and thereby “never lack the pleasures of conversation”.²⁷ A letter was also supposed to show respect to the recipient and therefore the language of the letter had to be carefully considered in order to avoid offending. It was a gift to the addressee, who after receiving it could modify the text if he/she wished to.²⁸ Most (but not all) medieval letters were not dated.²⁹ As already mentioned above, letters were written for all kinds of purposes, although love letters

²⁶ Constable (1976), p. 11

²⁷ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 66

²⁸ Constable (1976), p. 16

²⁹ Ibid., p. 23

seem not to have appeared until the second half of eleventh century.³⁰ The eleventh and twelfth century are mentioned by Constable as the “Golden Age” of letter-writing and the reasons for this flourishing could be both improved communications and more extensive traveling, which made sending the letters easier.

The form of a medieval letter mostly followed the norms established by *ars dictandi*, which means, that a letter had a certain number of obligatory parts: it started with *salutatio*, a greeting to the recipient that was followed by *captatio benevolentiae*, an attempt to gain goodwill from the addressee, thereafter *narratio* and *petitio* (story and request) and finally *conclusio* (summing everything up).³¹ Of course, the norms were bent after the needs of the author, especially in case of the author being experienced in *ars dictandi*. Most letters in the Middle Ages were dictated to a secretary or a scribe, as writing as a physical act was considered to be troublesome and laborious. Some letters, however, might have been written directly by their authors. It is, for example, difficult to say about the letters of Heloise, whether they were dictated, as their content was extremely private and must have been scandalous considering her social position. Besides, the practice of writing in person might have started slowly in the twelfth century as Abelard mentioned his students taking notes.³² In the thirteenth century ink, pen and parchment were already mentioned as conventional tools of a member of a university.³³ The first variant of a letter was often written down to wax tablets.³⁴

As the letters were mostly written by scribes and writing on the parchment demanded a unified script, the authenticity of a letter had to be proved in a different manner. Several different ways were used, such as subscriptions, seals, special signs and pictures, secret writing, private allusions or private references.³⁵ The most usual

³⁰ Ibid., p. 34

³¹ History notes, Special course in History, Autumn Semester, 2004, Brian Patrick McGuire

³² Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 64

³³ Le Goff (1993), p. 82

³⁴ Constable (1976), p. 45

³⁵ Ibid., p. 46

one of these was the seal that was either used to close the letter, so that the seal had to be broken in order to read it, or in case the letter was sent unsealed, the seal was somehow attached to it to show its authenticity. It was also a relatively usual custom in the Middle Ages that an experienced letter-writer would write letters for other people under their names.³⁶ Sometimes the really important message was wholly omitted from the letter and passed on orally by the messenger instead.

5. Structure of the Main Source: The Letters of Abelard and Heloise

The Letters of Abelard and Heloise is a written work consisting of four parts: *Historia Calamitatum*, *The Personal Letters* and *The Letters of Direction*, *Letters of Peter Venerable and Heloise*.

Historia Calamitatum is an autobiographical letter of Abelard to an anonymous friend where he described the misfortunes he had experienced in his life.

The Personal Letters comprise four letters exchanged by Heloise and Abelard, numbered in the book as letters one to four.

The Letters of Direction are the continuation of their correspondence dedicated to the discussion of the monastic life of the period and are numbered as letters five to seven.

The last section of the book is the correspondence between Peter the Venerable and Heloise. These letters were written after Abelard's death and are not to be used in the project.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 49

5.1 Summary of *Historia Calamitatum*

According to Peter Abelard's autobiography, he was born in 1079, in a small town called Le Pallet. He was born in a family of petty Breton nobility as a first child. He was first intended to be a knight like his father, but as his father had received some education, he let all his sons to be "trained in letters".³⁷ In school young Abelard developed love and talent for study and decided to abandon his military career and become a scholar. He signed over his inheritance and birthrights to his brothers and started travelling around and disputing "wherever he had heard there was keen interest in the art of dialectics".³⁸ Finally, he came to Paris and settled down in the school of William of Champeaux. He proved on several occasions to be better than William himself in debate and thereby aroused the envy of his fellow students and the resentment of his tutor. Considering William to be too little of a challenge, Abelard travelled to Melun to open his own school. He managed to do so despite William's attempts to keep him away.

The reputation of Abelard as a teacher grew in Melun, and so did the number of his students until his health failed him due to overwork and he returned home to Brittany to rest. Back in Paris again, after six years in Brittany, Abelard managed to make William of Champeaux change his standpoint about the question of universals. As the question of universals (terms of species like "human" or "horse") was the most important question of philosophy in the Middle Ages, this victory increased his reputation greatly. Abelard gained even more renown for his skills as a dialectician and obviously got bored with this subject now that the greatest challenge had been overcome. After his confrontation with William, Abelard moved his school to Paris and soon became one of the greatest masters in town. However, he could not enjoy

³⁷ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 57

³⁸ Ibid., p. 58

teaching there for long, as he was called home to help his mother with her preparations to join a convent.

After having returned to France (Brittany was not a part of the kingdom of France then) Abelard decided to study theology. As his former teacher William had become bishop of Châlons and stopped teaching, Abelard joined the school of Anselm of Laon, who had the reputation of being the greatest master in theology. He quickly saw that Anselm owed his reputation more to age than intelligence and started skipping the lectures. Some of Anselm's students interpreted it as a sign of contempt to their master and gossiped to Anselm about him.

Abelard accepted a bet to comment on a text of the Bible, although he was one of the newest students and had not had much training in theology. He set a deadline of only one day, convinced that he could use the methods used in philosophy and when he was warned against rashness, he answered that "either they must come to my lecture at the time of my choosing or I should abandon it altogether".³⁹ The lecture was a success and he was asked to repeat it. That was the last drop for both Anselm and for two of his favourite students Lotulf of Lombardy and Alberic of Rheims and they ordered Abelard to leave the school immediately. Abelard returned to Paris to teach in a school that was offered to him and now taught both philosophy and theology. He stayed in his place for several years and enjoyed huge popularity.

While he was teaching in Paris, Abelard heard about a girl named Heloise, the niece of one of the canons named Fulbert. She was probably one of the most educated women in Paris at that time as Abelard said about her in *Historia Calamitatum* that "a gift for letters [...] had made her most renowned throughout the realm".⁴⁰ Abelard was possessed, "all on fire with desire for this girl"⁴¹ and started planning how to get to know her better. The main reason why Abelard fell in love

³⁹ Ibid., p. 63

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 66

⁴¹ Ibid.

with her was obviously her “gift in letters”⁴², her cultivation that also made him confident that he was going to win her heart.

After Abelard had become Heloise’s teacher and lover, they soon became the talk of the town, but it took quite a while for Heloise’s uncle to believe the gossip. Abelard’s students started to complain, as Abelard was unable to concentrate on his lectures and repeated his old material and as he said himself: “It was utterly boring for me to have to go to the school.”⁴³ Finally, Fulbert discovered what was going on under his roof and showed Abelard the door. Lovers still found ways for meeting and lovemaking and soon Heloise found out that she was pregnant. One night, when Fulbert was not home, Abelard kidnapped Heloise according to their plan and brought her to his sister in Brittany until she gave birth. While Heloise was living with his sister’s family, Abelard could teach in Paris without being too much afraid of Fulbert’s vengeance as “if he killed me or did me personal injury, there was the danger that his beloved niece might suffer for it in my country.”⁴⁴ Still Abelard said that he was on his guard, just in case. In the end he took pity on Fulbert and went to him to apologise and actually offered to marry Heloise on the condition that the marriage was kept secret. Fulbert agreed. Unexpectedly Heloise turned out to be the greatest opponent of the marriage, arguing that it would bring only shame and ruin to them both, but finally she obeyed Abelard’s wish, saying that “We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been.”⁴⁵ After she had given birth to their son Astralabe, she left him to Abelard’s sister’s care and returned secretly to Paris. They got married a few days later with only a few people present. Unfortunately, Fulbert did not intend to keep his part of the deal in keeping the marriage secret and he started spreading the news, although Heloise swore the

⁴² Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 66

⁴³ Ibid., p. 68

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 69

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 74

opposite. That caused Fulbert to “heap abuse on her on several occasions.”⁴⁶ When Abelard heard about it, he immediately removed her from her uncle’s house and took her to the convent of Argenteuil near Paris, where she had been educated as a little girl. Fulbert interpreted the events in a different way, imagining that Abelard had found a convenient way to get rid of Heloise by sending her into a convent. So, in order to get revenge, Fulbert and his kinsmen bribed one of Abelard’s servants one night to let them into his house and castrated Abelard and the servant who had let them in.

Next morning all the town seemed to know the news and gathered in front of Abelard’s house to show their sympathy, which even increased his embarrassment. In his shame and confusion he first persuaded Heloise to become a nun in Argenteuil and then took monastic vows in the monastery of St. Denis. Many people tried to make Heloise change her mind, because they felt pity for her youth, but she took up the veil herself and publicly took the vows.

After both Abelard and Heloise had entered monastic life, their ways parted for ten years, during which they had no contact with each other. Abelard said in *Historia Calamitatum* that his wound had hardly managed to heal, when clerks came to pester him with their pleas to take up teaching again and so he did. He found the monastery to be worldly and corrupt and did not hesitate to voice his opinions, so that the other monks and the abbot were only too happy to keep him busy with his studies and students. Abelard’s students asked him to provide intelligible teaching about the Trinity, so he composed a treatise on “divine unity and trinity”⁴⁷ and at first everybody seemed to be pleased with it.

However, Abelard’s old rivals and enemies from his days at Anselm’s school, Alberic and Lotulf, managed to stir enough unrest among the higher officials of the Church about the treatise, that a Council was summoned in the city of Soissons.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 78

Abelard was invited to defend his treatise in front of other theologians and clerics, but such rumours were spread about him before his arrival that he and some of his students narrowly escaped stoning by the mob on the first day they arrived at Soissons. As soon as he got to town Abelard contacted the members of the Council and gave them a copy of his treatise to read. It was examined for several days and nothing especially heretical was found by the theologians. Moreover, Abelard spoke in public every day before the Council meetings and explained his views, which were accepted with appreciation and praise. One day during the Council Alberic of Rheims came to Abelard and picked a fight, saying that he had found a rather questionable point in Abelard's book, and he would only be satisfied with a backup from an authority, not Abelard's own explanation. Luckily for Abelard that particular paragraph was based on the authority of Augustine, so that he could not be accused in any way, but he just could not help provoking Alberic. In the presence of Alberic's followers Abelard stated that "if he [Alberic] was willing to hear an interpretation and a reasoned argument [Abelard] was ready to prove him that by his own words he had fallen into the heresy of supposing the Father to be His own Son."⁴⁸ That was asking for trouble. "On hearing this he [Alberic] lost his temper and turned to threats, crying that neither my explanations nor my authorities would help me in this case."⁴⁹ On the last day of the Council nothing had been found in the treatise to serve condemnation and the bishop of Chartres tried to tame the hostility of Abelard's rivals by promising them a new and more thorough assembly on the same topic soon in the future. The decision made about Abelard was that he had to return to St. Denis and wait for the final assessment. Meanwhile Abelard's rivals, Alberic among them, convinced some of the higher members of the clergy that it would be a shame to them if Abelard got away so easily and that he should be made an example to other possible heretics in the name of the Catholic faith. They persuaded the legate that the book should be

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 80

⁴⁹ Ibid.

condemned and burned publicly and Abelard himself should be condemned to be a perpetual prisoner in another monastery. The legate was not a scholar, so he trusted their advice.

So, Abelard was again brought before the Council and without any questioning or trial he was asked to throw his book into the fire with his own hands. His rivals had fabricated some accusations so that the process would not seem too awkward, but those appeared to be too thin even for the same legate that had agreed with their advice to condemn Abelard. Then Abelard was ordered to profess his faith before the whole Council, and as he stood up and prepared for his speech, his enemies declared that the Athanasian Creed (standard profession of faith from the fourth century) would fully suffice and had even the text put before him, just in case he might plead ignorance. Fully humiliated Abelard read the text, crying at the same time and after that he was handed over to the abbot of St. Médard as a prisoner.

Strangely enough Abelard found more friendliness and warmth in St. Médard, where he was staying as a prisoner, than in his own monastery of St. Denis. Abelard's "imprisonment" did not last longer than a few days and after that the legate had him sent back to St. Denis. There he was greeted with hostility from the monks and a few months later it burst into a huge quarrel. Abelard had jokingly questioned the origin of the patron saint of the monastery and this aroused the passions so high that the abbot threatened to send him to the king to be punished for "having designs on the royal dignity and crown"⁵⁰ and had put him under close surveillance until then. Horrified by this treatment, Abelard escaped the monastery one night with the help of some monks and some of his pupils and took refuge in the lands of the neighbouring count. There he lived with a community of monks from Troyes, whose prior had been his friend for a long time. Once when the abbot of St. Denis came to see the count who owned the land, Abelard approached the abbot, offered an apology and wanted permission to be released from St. Denis in order to join some other monastery of his own choice. The

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 86

abbot refused bluntly as although he couldn't stand Abelard personally, he recognized that Abelard had brought fame to the monastery and it would be a shame to them if he left. He even threatened Abelard with excommunication if he did not return immediately. The abbot died a few days later. So, after his successor had been chosen, Abelard pleaded to him and received a refusal at first, but then some friends persuaded Abelard to appeal to the king and his council. That was a clever move. He said in *Historia Calamitatum*: "I knew that the opinion of the king's council was that the more irregular an abbey was, the more reason why it should be a subject to the king and bring him profit, at least as regards its worldly goods, and this made me think that I should easily win the consent of the king and his council – which I did."⁵¹ He was finally allowed to leave the monastery of St. Denis "on the condition that he will not come under the authority of any abbey."⁵²

He was given a piece of land by the local bishop on the territory of Troyes, where he built a small oratory from reeds and thatch. The place was given the name Paraclete, the Comforter. Due to his poverty, Abelard took up teaching again and the students flocked to him as they had always done. They provided him with food and clothing, worked on the land and paid the building expenses for rebuilding the oratory of wood and stone. But soon the malicious gossip about his way of life and his faith appeared again, stirred up by his old rivals, and made his life bitter.

In order to escape the rumours Abelard accepted the position as the abbot in a monastery in Brittany, St. Gildas and as it happened, escaped from the frying-pan and tumbled into the fire. The monks were leading worldly lives living together with their mistresses and children and answered any attempt of correction from Abelard's side with hostility. At the same time, the community of nuns Heloise was prioress for, was expelled from Argenteuil and Abelard gave them the Paraclete as a present. After Heloise and her fellow nuns had settled down, the neighbourhood started accusing

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 88

⁵² Ibid.

Abelard that he was not doing enough for the community of the sisters. So he started to visit them more often and rumours appeared that he still could not bear to stay away from Heloise.

At the same time Abelard's relationships with the monks in St. Gildas had got even worse than they had been - and they had never been good. As the abbot of St. Gildas, Abelard faced several attempts on his life by his own monks; once the monks even poisoned the wine in the chalice, when Abelard was celebrating Mass. On one occasion he almost fell victim to an attempt of poisoning, but escaped it almost miraculously. While he was visiting his brother, a servant had been bribed to poison his food, but for some reason Abelard did not eat it. Another monk who was accompanying him ate his food instead and died on the spot. The servant fled immediately. That was a pitiful end of *Historia Calamitatum*.

5.2 Summary and Interpretation of *The Personal Letters*

Since we decided to take the point of departure in the letters of Abelard and Heloise, it could seem to be an easy task. It does not demand any other effort than pure pleasure of reading, one might think, and suggesting the latter would be nothing but jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Therefore we have decided to present the following interpretation of the above mentioned letters.

5.2.1 Letter 1. Heloise to Abelard

The first of the four personal letters was addressed to Abelard and from its very start one can determine Heloise's strong and clever nature. In the first paragraph she referred to Abelard's consolation sent to a friend, i.e. *Historia Calamitatum*. What was the purpose for writing the consolation - comforting a friend or hiding the real reason of recounting his own misfortunes? According to Heloise, Abelard's consolation referred to "the pitiful story of our [Abelard and Heloise] entry into religion"⁵³ and Abelard's endless sufferings. His body had been severely damaged by castration, while his mind had been mutilated by condemnation and destruction of his theological work.

Heloise was deeply moved by the words of the man she called her "husband", her "brother" and her "master". Despite her own sorrows, she was first and foremost interested in his life. She was ready to share everything with him, be it the outburst of joy or the burden of sadness. Very mature and forceful in the choice of her words, Heloise reclaimed her love to him. One hardly doubts her feelings, considering Heloise's choice of a passage written by Seneca: "Thank you for writing to me often, the one way in which you can make your presence felt, for I never have a letter from

⁵³ Heloise in Radice (1974), p. 109

you without the immediate feeling that we are together.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, she hardly lost her dignity when pointing out that Abelard had caused new and reopened the old wounds.

Heloise’s thought stretched from accusation to admiration, underlining Abelard’s achievements in founding the oratory and gathering the public. She expressed it as follows: “To build it you drew nothing from the riches of kings and princes, though their wealth was great and could have been yours for the asking: whatever was done, the credit was to be yours alone.”⁵⁵

Further on Heloise put it metaphorically, comparing the group of nuns neglected by Abelard to plants in need of nutrition: “And so it is yours, truly your own, this new plantation for God’s purpose, but it is sown with plants which are still very tender and need watering if they are to thrive.”⁵⁶ In other words, she was literally saying: “Look at me! I still need you, and you, who showed me the path to bodily pleasures, are obliged to show me the path to God!”

Heloise makes quite a memorable impression on the reader while talking Abelard to his senses. Her view on marriage was unusual for a woman representing the twelfth century. She did not want to be his wife preferring to remain his “whore”, “concubine” and “mistress”. “I found strength at your command to destroy myself”⁵⁷, as she put it, referring to the fact that despite her views she submitted to his will and became not only his wife, but a nun. Desperately seeking Abelard’s gratitude, obeying not God, but her lover, Heloise eventually “quit” the world and agreed to dedicate herself to the life in a convent.

Heloise was everything but meek, i.e. waiting for the master to give further orders for her to follow. On the contrary, she was a real fighter; even when her happiness did not turn out the way she wanted. As we have mentioned before, she

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 110

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 111

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 113

demanding attention from Abelard, at least as a reward for what she had sacrificed for his sake. Her choice of language was rather particular taking into consideration that those letters were written for public usage. For example: “Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence; queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed.”⁵⁸

It is also here, in the first letter, the reader is introduced to the idea of pure intention shared by both Abelard and Heloise: “It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it is done.”⁵⁹

As to Abelard, Heloise pictured the following pattern, which was rather trivial: lust led to desire, desire led to seduction, and after the fulfilment of his desire she was completely forgotten. What made it even more bitter was Abelard’s preoccupation with his own misfortunes rather than support of the one who was suffering no less than he did.

While rounding up the letter, Heloise repeatedly expressed her love and hope for some consolation from Abelard.

5.2.2 Letter 2. Abelard to Heloise

In the second personal letter addressed to Heloise, Abelard pleaded his case. He was making a statement of what he believed to be true, namely, Heloise’s gift and ability to understand and comfort those in need of guidance. It becomes clear to the reader that Heloise has been appointed the prioress of the convent as her sisters in Christ have become her daughters: “So if you still watch over your daughters as you did previously over your sisters, it is sufficient to make me believe that any teaching or

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 115

⁵⁹ Ibid.

exhortation from me would now be wholly superfluous.”⁶⁰ Hence, Abelard found the necessity of his advice or encouragement to Heloise inappropriate. Further on, as if refusing to accept Heloise’s doubt and confusion, Abelard almost accused his beloved and demanded from her accuracy and precision: “[...] write to me what you want, so that I may answer as God permits me.”⁶¹

Abelard, in his turn, did not find inappropriate to share his insecurities and hesitations. He mentioned continuing dangers, sufferings, and desperation prevailing in his existence and expressed the endless gratitude to Heloise for the support shown through her prayers.

Abelard was strong in his belief in the power of prayer. He provided a rather explicit example of how prayers of the faithful and the obedient put a stop to the Lord’s anger. Moreover, he encouraged those having power – “the lords of the earth” - to follow the example and not to be afraid of showing mercy, as mercy did not necessarily mean lack of control. On the contrary, an act of mercy could empower the one committing it.

“Here you have an example, sister, and an assurance how much your prayers for me may prevail on God”⁶², said Abelard, and it can be interpreted as a request to pray for his salvation, for God’s mercy upon him. Abelard was certain that the power of prayer was even stronger because holy devoted women surrounded Heloise and the collective prayer should have a greater effect.

Abelard underlined that women had a special role: “For if you turn the pages of the Old and New Testaments you will find that the greatest miracles of resurrection were shown only, or mostly, to women, and were performed for them or on them.”⁶³ He kept mentioning the danger of the situation he found himself in and

⁶⁰ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 119

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 121

⁶³ Ibid., p. 122

begged for her prayers. He was desperate for her support, if not by her presence as they were apart, then by her prayers.

Abelard got slightly carried away in his speculations. It did not seem enough for him to appeal to Heloise's compassion on several occasions throughout the letter. He proceeded and gave instructions as far as which action to take in the worst-case scenario – his death. As he painted a mental picture, Abelard went so far as to almost draw a comparison between Jesus Christ and himself.

Despite the fact that Abelard gave quite a number of examples from the book of Proverbs on wife's importance, we see him as a selfish man. His lack of interest in Heloise's destiny and feelings can be exemplified by the sentence rounding up his second personal letter: "Live, but I pray, in Christ be mindful of me."⁶⁴

5.2.3 Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard

Before scrutinizing the essence of the third personal letter one should pay attention to the remarkable change in the way Heloise saluted her addressee. The literary pattern behind the letters is very powerful indeed, leaving no doubts in the mind of the reader as far as the importance of rhetorical forms in the Middle Ages is concerned. In comparison to the first letter, Heloise was stressing her certainty and ambition to keep their relationship on spiritual track. From now on Christ was primary, Abelard – secondary. Above all, however, she was stressing the power of her feelings, as one can only imagine the inevitable contradiction that tore her apart.

Nevertheless, the letter preserved intimacy. She was deeply moved by reading Abelard's reply where he wrote openly about his enemies and the prospect of his death. So, she asked of him not to bring that subject up ever again, as it "can only intensify our [Heloise and other nuns] existing unhappiness".⁶⁵ Heloise hoped that

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 126

⁶⁵ Heloise in Radice (1974), p. 128

Abelard would outlive her and her sisters and wrote of the unbearable pain which life without Abelard would bring upon her.

Abelard's reference to his possible death awoke Heloise's passion, which in its turn added drama and beauty to the letter. Her words were chosen with care and tenderness as she went on describing how empty her life would be without Abelard, as there would be nothing left for her to hope for. She begged of Abelard never to mention those words again, as they "pierce through our hearts with swords of death".⁶⁶ Heloise wrote in the plural form, referring to the sisters at the convent as well, but it seems that the feelings described were mainly her private: "But if I lose you, what is left for me to hope for?"⁶⁷ It can be stated with certainty that Heloise's fellow sisters fully shared great respect for Abelard's personality, but it is not doubted that she would be the one to suffer most in case of his sudden death.

Heloise was tortured by guilt, as she felt Abelard had been punished for the sins he committed with her: "You alone were punished although we were both to blame [...]".⁶⁸ Heloise felt she was supposed to be punished more than Abelard, as her guilt was greater than his. Abelard "raised her on his own level"⁶⁹ by making her his student and therefore he deserved less punishment than she did. She was deeply tortured by this guilt and blamed herself for ruining Abelard. She even went one step further by wondering if women in general were meant to destroy great men: "Is it the general lot of women to bring the total ruin on great men?"⁷⁰

One might as well conclude that Abelard's reference to death shocked Heloise – she could not restrain herself any longer as she embarked on giving God the blame. The range of considerations was quite broad - from accusations to unhidden irony. As far as irony was concerned, it underlined the peculiar detail – they

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 129

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 130

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

had been spared God's rage while enjoying bodily pleasures as merely lovers. As soon as their relationship had become lawful, the Lord showed no mercy.

One of the paragraphs is especially interesting, as the choice of words mirrors the intensity of her desperation. The narrative is brought to the extreme in that particular passage. Here are some vivid examples: "the higher the ascent, the heavier the fall", "the saddest of all women", "the most wretched", "unhappiest", etc. "The glory" is opposed to "the ruin", "good" to "evil", "joy" to "sorrow" and "the happiness of supreme ecstasy" to "the supreme bitterness of sorrow".⁷¹

Heloise admitted in this letter that she committed herself to the monastic way of living not for her love of God, but at Abelard's command.⁷² She considered herself to be a great hypocrite, as instead of groaning over the sins she committed, she only sighed for what she had lost.⁷³ Her mind and soul were still "on fire with old desires"⁷⁴ and she felt that she could not repent for her sins as long as she felt that way. She deeply missed Abelard and kept all the memories of their love close to her heart. She had a great love for him and she would have done everything just to please him. She was even more eager to please Abelard than to please God.

5.2.4 Letter 4. Abelard to Heloise

The salutation of the fourth personal letter signals the mood of its content: Abelard addressed her as "the bride of Christ".⁷⁵ This time he got straight to the point and directly referred to the issues raised by Heloise in the previous letter. One can sense a bit of impatience, but at least he did not complain about his own misfortunes throughout the entire letter. Abelard was irritated over Heloise's "old perpetual complaint against God concerning the manner of our entry into religious life and the

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 129-130

⁷² Ibid., p. 134

⁷³ Ibid., p. 133

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 132

⁷⁵ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 137

cruelty of the act of treachery performed on me”.⁷⁶ Therefore he wished for Heloise to get rid of bitterness and to accept God’s will.

Abelard was not recalling the past with nostalgia, as she did, but rather with regret. He reminded Heloise about certain events and asked her to look upon them as episodes which called for an act of God’s mercy. Abelard referred to their sexual escapades on the premises of a monastery, to his deceit of Fulbert, and to Heloise’s disguise as a nun during her pregnancy. At this point, Abelard admitted that what he had felt for Heloise and what had brought him to sin together with her, was lust, not love. Eventually he came to terms with his castration. He put it as follows: “[...] it was wholly just and merciful [...] for me to be reduced in that part of my body which was the seat of lust and sole reason for those desires, so that I could increase in many ways [...]”.⁷⁷ Hence, Abelard tried to make his castration appear as a divine blessing.

Abelard’s intention was to strengthen Heloise’s dedication to religion. He stressed that she ought to think about the love of Christ only, as it was Jesus who truly suffered for her, not Abelard. As he wrote: “Think of him always, sister, as your true spouse and the spouse of all the Church. Keep him in mind. Look at him going to be crucified for your sake, carrying his own cross.”⁷⁸ Abelard was convinced that a martyr’s crown was awaiting Heloise, as only those who kept to the rules deserved it. Abelard in his turn was not worthy of it, as his thorn of desire was “pulled out”; hence, he did not have reasons for fighting.⁷⁹

Abelard concluded his letter with a prayer meant to be offered to the Lord on their behalf. He was convinced that from that moment on he could not be of any help to Heloise, as her road was the road to God. “Farewell in Christ, bride of Christ; in Christ fare well and live in Christ.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 147

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 151

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 154

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 156

5.3 *The Letters of Direction*

The further correspondence between Abelard and Heloise will help us to look at the other side of their relationships. These letters will help us to examine Abelard not only as a person but as a theologian as well. In the further analysis letters five and seven will be used.⁸¹

5.3.1 Letter 5. Heloise to Abelard

The fifth letter is considered to be the turning point of correspondence between Abelard and Heloise. She addressed Abelard, as the founder of the Paraclete and the director of her own community, not as her husband and lover.⁸²

In her letter Heloise asked Abelard to tell about the origin of nuns and their authority and requested to prescribe a Rule for her own community of nuns: “And so all we handmaids of Christ, who are your daughters in Christ, come as suppliants to demand of your paternal interest two things which we see to be very necessary for ourselves. One is that you teach us how the order of nuns began and what authority there is for our profession. The other, that you will prescribe some Rule for us [...], a Rule which shall be suitable for women [...]”⁸³

In her letter-request Heloise relied on *The Rule of St. Benedict*⁸⁴ that was professed in the Medieval Church both by men and women. She pointed out, however, that the Rule had been written for men and could only be obeyed by them.⁸⁵ “[...] those who laid down rules for monks”, said Heloise, “were not only completely silent

⁸¹ Letter five is the first in *The Letters of Direction*; Heloise’s request for the rules for the community of nuns. Letter seven is the third in *The Letters of Direction*; Abelard’s response to Heloise that contains a detailed Rule for observance at the Paraclete.

⁸² Heloise in Radice (1974), p. 29

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 159-160

⁸⁴ See appendix

⁸⁵ Heloise in Radice (1974), p. 160

about women but also prescribed regulations which they knew to be quite unsuitable for them [...].”⁸⁶

While carefully observing the Rule, Heloise criticized what she believed was inappropriate for women. She pointed out strictness and rigor of the monastic life, presented in the Rule, and suggested fewer demands be made upon women’s physique:⁸⁷ “No one would lay on an ass a burden suitable for an elephant, or expect the same [...] from the weak as from the strong [...] from women, the weaker sex, as from men, the stronger one”. “[...] men are to be admonished in one way, women in another; for heavy burdens may be laid on men and great matters exercise them, but lighter burdens on women, who should be gently converted by less exacting means.”⁸⁸

On the other hand, Heloise, when discussing eating and drinking, emphasized that women’s weakness was actually their strength. Women demanded less food than men and they were not so easily intoxicated, because of their physiology.⁸⁹ Heloise strengthened her words, quoting Aristotle: “A woman’s body which is destined for frequent purgations is pierced with several holes, so that it opens into channels and provides outlets for the moisture draining away to be dispersed. Through these holes the fumes of wine are quickly released.”⁹⁰

Thus, discussing the difference between women and men, Heloise insisted on the dispensation of women from some of the strictest measures in the Benedictine Rule.⁹¹ Accordingly she asked Abelard for instructions on issues, such as Abbess’s duty, clothing, eating and fasting, so that her community could devote itself more to “the offices of praising God”.⁹²

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 162

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 29

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 162

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 165-166

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 166

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 164

⁹² Ibid., pp. 160-178

Our next step is to look at the Abelard's response to Heloise. We will dwell on the questions of abbess's duty in the monastery, questions of eating and clothing and compare the rules, given by Abelard, with *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

5.3.2 Letter 7. Abelard to Heloise

The seventh letter did provide Heloise with the information that she had asked for in the fifth letter. As it has been mentioned before, Abelard formulated the new set of rules on the base of the Rule of Saint Benedict. The purpose of the following chapter is to examine the selected recommendations in order to understand and analyze Abelard as a theologian and a caring human being.

Taking into consideration that Heloise was the abbess of Paraclete it would be appropriate to compare the original part of the Rule, written by Saint Benedict and its interpretation made by Abelard.

According to Saint Benedict an abbot should rule in accordance to God's words, showing all good and holy things with the deeds more then by talking about them. An abbot had to be just in his ruling over the other man; no distinctions were to be made between the brothers. In other words, the activity of an abbot should consist of the following pattern laid down by the apostle when he said: "reprove, rebuke, exhort", meaning that every brother should be treated by the way he behaves and performs his duties.⁹³

In his reply to Heloise, Abelard pointed out, that convents of women were subjects to monasteries of men, so that the brothers helped the sisters if there was need for that. An abbot had the power to preside over the nuns, but in reality he should be a "steward", always glad to serve his sisters in God. According to Abelard an abbess should be a woman who was above all the rest in her life and learning; her maturity was judged by her conduct. She should be worthy of giving orders and be very good at

⁹³(Internet 2)

practicing the Rule. Her prerogatives had to be teaching of life and performance of work. An abbess had to be the icon for the other sisters in Christ; her virtues should be regarded as a pattern for the others to follow. An abbess had to be always aware of everything that was going on in the convent and she was supposed to be the first one to correct the evils in her house before the rest knew about it. Bodies and souls of the nuns were in the direct responsibility of an abbess. At the same time she was not to make advantage of the situations where she could profit materially, in other words it was forbidden for an abbess to live in luxury and comfort, while her subordinates led a simple life.⁹⁴

What was interesting in the directions for an abbess was that neither she nor the nuns were allowed to leave the convent for external matters. In this case monks or lay monks had the duty to do that, as Abelard pointed out that it was men's duty to provide for women's needs, so that they could devote herself completely to God.⁹⁵

When we take a look at these two documents it might seem that there is not a big difference between the duties of an abbot and an abbess. At the same time the version proposed by Abelard proves his status as a person who is well aware of the events of the past, who is capable of proving every idea that he proposes with numerous examples and comparisons from different theological sources. The fact that he puts an abbot and the brothers in a position higher to that of the abbess and the nuns shows how much he was concerned with the women's well-being in the monastery and he believed in the words of the Bible, where the man is over the woman.⁹⁶

The next point to be analyzed and discussed is the eating rules in the monastery stated by Saint Benedict and Abelard.

⁹⁴ Abelard in Radice (1974), pp. 200-213

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 200-213

⁹⁶ Corinthians I 11:3

According to Saint Benedict monks were allowed to have food two times a day at the sixth and the ninth hour.⁹⁷ It was also stated that two kinds of cooked food were sufficient; however, if there were fruits or vegetables a third dish could be allowed. The monks were granted one pound of bread per day.⁹⁸ In case of a day of hard work an Abbot had the right to add something to the traditional amount of food. Any meal made out from four-footed animals was strictly forbidden. Concerning the drinking of wine it was mentioned that one hemina of wine (1,5l) would be sufficient for monks; it had to be drunk sparingly. Any excess either in food or drinks was banned.⁹⁹

Abelard in his adapted version allowed for the nuns to eat everything, but nothing should be consumed to excess. Fine wheat flour was forbidden; it had to be mixed with a third part of coarser grain. The sisters were not allowed to consume bread directly from the oven and it was to be eaten the next day. The sisters were allowed to eat meat, but not more than once a day and they were not to use fat for flavouring on Fridays. No sauces were acceptable together with the food and nobody was granted with a possibility of different dishes. No costly food ingredients could be used in the convent and that is why the sisters were supposed to get the best out of the resources of the land they lived on. Fruits were allowed only for supper. The rule for having food two times a day were applied for the sisters as well, except for the time from the autumn equinox until Easter while the days were short, one meal a day was considered enough.¹⁰⁰

Wine was mentioned in the directions as well. Nevertheless, in comparison to Saint Benedict, Abelard allowed the nuns to drink wine undiluted but as a mixture of

⁹⁷ Sixth equals noon and nine equals three p.m, because the day started at sixth a.m.

⁹⁸ A unit of weight equal to 16 ounces (453.592 grams)

⁹⁹ (Internet 3)

¹⁰⁰ Abelard in Radice (1974), pp. 242-248

wine and water for the reason of being weak enough not to hurt the nuns. The sick were allowed to get neat wine, but nobody else.¹⁰¹

After the reading of these chapters it became obvious that the principle proclaimed by the Lord: “see that your heart be not overcharged with surfeiting” is very important both in the original and Abelard’s version. However, Abelard had chosen a milder attitude towards the nuns in *Paraclete*, because he took into considerations not only the physiological differences between men and women (e.g. the dosage of wine), but also found sound reasons for the nuns to do some things that were not acceptable for the monks (e.g. food made of meat).

The subject of clothing seemed to be absolutely essential for Heloise. Arguing on this question, Heloise passed judgment on *The Rule of St. Benedict*, saying that it did not dwell upon women and did not include instructions for them during their monthly periods.¹⁰²

In *The Rule of St. Benedict* it was written that clothes should be given to the brothers according to the circumstances of the place and the nature of the climate in which they live. The monks should not worry about the color and material of their dress, the important thing was that clothes could be bought as cheaply as possible. It was more than sufficient to the monks to have a pair of tunics and cowls; extra clothes should be taken away by the abbot. In case of getting new clothes, monks were supposed to return the old ones, so that those could be given to the poor. All the necessary things for the monks had to be given by the abbot. He had to carefully examine the monks’ beds in order to check for an excess in personal goods; if any were found, the monks would be punished.¹⁰³

Contrary to St. Benedict, Abelard’s response contained some practical direction for women. The nuns should have clean underwear next to the skin and wear woolen gown with a cloak on top, so that it would keep them warm in cold weather.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 243

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 160

¹⁰³ (Internet 3)

The cloaks had not to be made too long to avoid dust on them. All the clothes had to be in pairs in order to wash the dirty ones and prevent infestation by the insects. The nuns had to wear stockings and shoes, never go barefoot on account of religion and have sufficient bedclothes. They could as well wear “a cap of lamb’s wool”, because of their short-cut hair.

Based on *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Abelard stated that costly clothes must be absolutely prohibited. Wearing fine and costly garments was considered to be a sin and a woman who put a costly dress on, would be judged as a whore, not a nun. Besides, the sisters had to share clothes among themselves, think of each other; otherwise they would not belong to the sisterhood of the convent.¹⁰⁴

Giving an answer to Heloise on the issue of clothing, Abelard extended *The Rule of St. Benedict*, taking into consideration women’s physiology. In comparison to St. Benedict he appeared to be more sympathetic to the nun’s needs.

¹⁰⁴ Abelard in Radice (1974), pp. 248-251

5.4 Discussion

In the following chapter we intend to elaborate on our understanding of Peter Abelard's character presented to us through *The Personal Letters*, his autobiography *Historia Calamitatum* and *The Letters of Direction*.

From *Historia Calamitatum: The Story of His Misfortunes* we learn about Abelard's good relationship with his family. He felt gratitude towards his father for allowing him to study. He mentioned in the very beginning of the story: "I was his first-born, and being specially dear to him had the greatest care taken over my education."¹⁰⁵ The idea of Abelard having a solid family background can be supported by several events mentioned in the sources: he handed over his inheritance and rights of the eldest son to his brothers; he returned home for about six years after he had fallen ill due to overwork; together with Heloise he entrusted their newborn son Astralabe to his sister's care.

Abelard showed talent in studying and was inspired by his own success. He was critical towards his teachers. It seems though that he respected William of Champeaux.¹⁰⁶ As he notes that William was the supreme master of dialectics, both in reputation and in fact.¹⁰⁷ Abelard claimed to have defeated William in the course of philosophical disputes on the subject of universals and seemed to be sorry that William's reputation had been destroyed. He wrote the following: "[...] his [William's] lectures fell into such contempt that he was scarcely accepted on any other point of dialectic, as if the whole subject rested solely on the question of universals."¹⁰⁸ Anselm of Laon¹⁰⁹, on the contrary, never earned any positive reference from Abelard. This demanding student believed that Anselm "owed his

¹⁰⁵ Abelard in Radice (1974), pp. 57-58

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. William of Champeaux, well known teacher of philosophy and archdeacon of Paris

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 58

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 60

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Anselm of Laon, Abelard's teacher in theology

reputation more to long practice than to intelligence or memory.”¹¹⁰ Abelard did not compromise and expressed his critical opinion whenever he found it appropriate. In that sense he was a perfectionist and one can imagine him bored without an intellectual challenge. The latter can be illustrated with the following example. Abelard had hardly recovered from castration when he entered the Abbey of St. Denis and embarked on teaching; he passed his judgement on the abbey immediately. As he wrote: “[the abbey] was completely worldly and depraved... On several occasions I spoke out boldly in criticism of their intolerably foul practices, both in private and in public, and made myself such a burden and nuisance to them [...]”.¹¹¹

Abelard must have been an excellent teacher. No matter where he resided, either in Paris or in the countryside, there were always numerous students attending his lectures. Abelard was always very popular with his students. When he realised how successful he was, it had a negative effect on his personality and he described it as follows: “I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh.”¹¹² He indeed considered himself as the best scholar of his day. The latter part of the sentence, namely, “his day”, should be accentuated, as the position of Abelard as a scholar is to be discussed further in the project. Our intention is not to diminish Abelard’s achievements, but to be aware of the bigger scale. The reader can easily be caught in a trap: one starts to form an opinion that the twelfth century society was not tolerant towards innovative scholars and the ideas they tried to promote and establish. We have to be careful in drawing conclusions and to be able to differentiate between Abelard’s claims and the historical reality that might be slightly different, as a lot of discussion and debate took place in the society at that time. We have to strive for critical attitude rather than blindly accept Abelard’s confessions and accusations.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 62

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 77

¹¹² Ibid., p. 65

He was a proud man, if not to say – vain. His confessions in *Historia Calamitatum* and *The Personal Letters* confirm this view on himself. He may, on occasion, appear as a successful and prosperous seducer who knew the taste of fame: “[...] at that time I had youth and exceptional good looks as well as my great reputation to recommend me, and feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honour with my love.”¹¹³ Abelard’s gift of oral expression contributed to his popularity among women, as Heloise wrote him: “[...] you left many love-songs and verses which won wide popularity for the charm of their words and tunes and kept your name continually on everyone’s lips.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, we tend to think that his first sexual experience was probably with Heloise, as Abelard mentioned that due to his studies he had had little contact with women and he had always avoided prostitutes. As he wrote: “[...] indeed, I knew little of the secular way of life.”¹¹⁵ His reputation as a chaste man was taken into consideration when he was hired as Heloise’s teacher. Abelard noted in *Historia Calamitatum* that Heloise did not rank lowest in her looks,¹¹⁶ wherefrom Jacques Le Goff has drawn the conclusion that she was very pretty.¹¹⁷ However, her looks were not of primary importance for Abelard. It was her intellect that charmed him in the first place.

A secret marriage of Abelard and his beloved represented a major disagreement with the philosophical ideal accepted by both Abelard and Heloise, namely, the incompatibility of philosophical study and matrimony. According to their convictions, these two categories are mutually exclusive. However, Abelard was not able to live up to the philosophical ideal and the idea of keeping their marriage secret became relevant for him. On the one hand, Abelard was determined not to damage his reputation. Moreover, Abelard was driven by jealousy and desire to possess Heloise: “God had bound us to one another by the indissoluble pact of the marriage

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 66

¹¹⁴ Heloise in Radice (1974), p. 115

¹¹⁵ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 66

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Le Goff (1993), p. 38

sacrament, while I wished to keep for myself for ever what I loved beyond all reason.”¹¹⁸ On the other hand, he was ignoring possible costs, such as excluding the possibility of becoming a priest. “This he no doubt realized, and *this* therefore is the sacrifice he was prepared to make for his passion.”¹¹⁹ Therefore it would be incorrect to label Abelard as egotistic, but one can certainly claim that he could not run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Abelard was an “awkward dissonance” in the harmony of the conception of the Middle Ages.¹²⁰ By preferring Heloise to God, Abelard broke the established order and represented the utter example of individuality as he took his own path in being fully aware that he is damned by God.¹²¹

As we have mentioned before, Abelard was a proud person. It was extremely difficult for him to face the crowd in front of his house the morning after his body had been mutilated. He described it as follows: “[...] I suffered more from their sympathy than from the pain of my wound, and felt the misery of my mutilation less than my shame and humiliation.”¹²² He could not bare the shame of being exposed in such a way. He was greatly concerned that his personal tragedy would bring sorrow to his friends and parents and would make his enemies happy. Abelard confessed that he had taken vows for the wrong reasons: “I admit that it was shame and confusion in my remorse and misery rather than any devout wish for conversion which brought me to seek shelter in a monastery cloister.”¹²³ It is important to point out that in the course of time Abelard underwent an enormous change of personality. His original motives for entering a monastery might seem doubtful to the reader, but there are no grounds for questioning his sincere conversion to monastic life. Abelard’s transformation into a devout Christian is reflected in *The Personal Letters*.

¹¹⁸ Abelard in Grane (1964), p. 54

¹¹⁹ Grane (1964), p. 55

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 51

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 75

¹²³ Ibid., p. 76

Abelard was very concerned about his reputation. He was absolutely shaken by the decision of the Council of Soissons. It may have been a turning point in his life, for his work was rejected and so he must have suffered tremendously. In *Historia Calamitatum* Abelard compared his condemnation with his physical suffering in the past, and found castration to be less painful: “[...] I wept much more for the injury done to my reputation than for the damage to my body, for that I had brought upon myself through my own fault, but this open violence had come upon me only because of the purity of my intentions [...].”¹²⁴ After the events at Soissons, Abelard was continuously harassed and prosecuted by his rivals. He was desperate and frightened of the gossip which circulated about his faith and his way of life. Several of his friends turned away from him and Abelard was under great emotional distress. He lived in constant fear of being accused by the authorities of heresy or profanity. As he put it: “God is my witness that I never heard that an assembly of ecclesiastics had met without thinking this was convened to condemn me.”¹²⁵ Nevertheless, he received great support from his devoted students. They gave him strength, for he realised that his talent as a teacher could not be challenged by persecution by his contemporaries.

In order to escape their attacks, Abelard accepted an invitation to be abbot of the monastery in St. Gildas de Rhuys in Brittany. The environment in the monastery caused further despair. Abelard regretted his decision and wanted to lead a useful life. He could not do anything to influence the monks, yet he could give so much to his students if he had not retreated from the Paraclete. In his attempt to find meaning in life Abelard decided to do all he could to provide care, management and guidance for Heloise and her fellow nuns to whom he had given the Paraclete as a gift.

By the end of *Historia Calamitatum* Abelard seems to have surrendered to the will of God. He accepted that everything happened with a purpose and for the

¹²⁴ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 84

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 93

best: “[...] God’s supreme goodness allows nothing to be done outside his plan, and whatever is started wrongly, he himself brings it to the best conclusion.”¹²⁶ In the course of time Abelard reached clarity concerning the welfare of his soul. He became a different man and stopped worrying about his death. In *The Personal Letters* he noted that Heloise and he were one in Christ, one flesh according to the law of matrimony, and thereby her merits would plead for them both before God.¹²⁷ Abelard had taken his own advice and found meaning in the words “Thy will be done”.¹²⁸

The Letters of Direction helped us to understand Abelard from a different angle, i.e. as a theologian, and to look at how his relationship with Heloise developed.

The ways of approaching the seventh letter of correspondence between Abelard and Heloise can be different. For some people it might seem to be very practical, lacking any emotions or personal feelings and, of course, full of theological references. On the other hand this letter can be viewed as a manifestation of Abelard as an “improved” man, where his personality and concern with the feelings of others are expressed. Considering the fact that St. Benedict had nothing to say about women, Abelard showed a great sense of respect towards them. In his response to Heloise he made an attempt to adapt the *Rule of St. Benedict* to the needs of women by compiling a new set of recommendations for the nuns. These recommendations seemed to be of importance and necessity for women in the convent.

One might say that it was Abelard’s direct responsibility to do that, because he was the one who granted Heloise and her fellow nuns with their own convent and therefore he had to provide them with the recommendations they required. Nevertheless, it is more likely that he cast himself into a time taking process of adjusting the old rule to the new conditions not only out of the feeling of duty. He did it for Heloise’s sake; he knew for sure the way their life was going to be, that is why he did his outmost to make Heloise’s life in the convent as “comfortable” as he could.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 105

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 154

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 106

We cannot underestimate the role of Heloise in the transformation of Abelard's character. She compelled him to restore the contact and "[...] to look at her problems honestly [...], though not in the way she first hoped."¹²⁹ Their relationship became spiritual; she was longing after the lover, but found a mentor instead.

¹²⁹ Radice (1974), p. 31

6. Philosophy of Peter Abelard

Peter Abelard's love affair with Heloise lasted for only eighteen months compared to his lifelong passion for philosophy. In his time Abelard was mostly famous for his skills in theology and logics. We shall now elaborate on some of his most significant works such as his solution to the problem of universals and his view on the subject of ethics.

6.1 The Medieval Problem of Universals

The discussion about the *universals* was probably the central issue in the medieval philosophy. However, this discussion was not unique to the Middle Ages. The basic issues in the problem of universals are to be found in the debate between Plato and Aristotle, but during the Middle Ages the discussion concerning the question of universals being general or abstract terms, culminated. The different viewpoints in the problem of universals were reflected in the answer that was given to the question to what extent the universals exist. Two terms that were generally used in the discussion are: 1) *universalia*, or universal concepts, that is to say, a door, a horse, etc.; 2) *particularia*, or particular objects, that is to say, brown door, big horse, etc.¹³⁰ Philosophers who took part in the discussion can be classified as being *Realists* or *Nominalists*. The medieval Realists mainly followed Plato and the Neoplatonist Porphyry, and believed in the actual existence of the abstract ideas, even if they are outside our minds.¹³¹ Plato claimed that the ideas (*universalia*) possessed the highest form of existence. This means that universals exist independently of our comprehension. This view is known as extreme realism. Plato argued that the universal of justice, for instance, existed independently of “whether we comprehend

¹³⁰ Skirbekk and Gilje (2001), p. 122

¹³¹ Radice (1974), p. 12

what justice is”.¹³² If a nuclear catastrophe wiped out all people from the planet, the universal of justice would still continue to exist. Another form of realism is called Aristotelianism. Aristotle claimed that the forms (*universalia*) existed in particular things (*particularia*). Only through *particularia* can we recognise *universalia*, but *universalia* do not exist independently of the things.¹³³ Justice does not have independent existence and cannot exist without people and societies. This form is also known as moderate realism, since universals are considered to exist, but here it is not said that universals possess a higher form of existence. On the other hand, Nominalists claimed that *universalia* existed neither in the objects nor independently of the objects. What existed were the abstract names “used for particular reasons to refer to objects that resemble one another”.¹³⁴ Instead of listing the proper names of all horses, we just talk about “horse” – which is a common name, a universal, for all the animals that belong to that certain species.

The conflict whether universal cognition of singular things is possible is just as current today as it was back in the Middle Ages. We shall now try to develop the problem of universals a bit further. Contemporary science, such as biology, for instance, is based on universals. According to definition, biology is “the science that studies living organisms.”¹³⁵ This definition of this particular science would have to follow the presumption that there is something mutual or *universal* among all the living organisms. We can take an example of a person, John. John is a *man*, he can be a father, a tall man, smart or beautiful, for instance. These are all general terms, or the universals, we can use to describe John. They are *general* because we can use these terms to describe someone else than John. The fact that we can use general terms to describe more than one person means that we are detecting the similarities between different things or individuals and we are defining them by those similarities. If we

¹³² Skirbekk and Gilje (2001), p. 122

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 123

¹³⁵ (Internet 4)

compare John to another man, Charles, we can quickly see that they both have two arms, two legs, a head and that they both breathe and think. We call them *humans*. If we compare them to some other living creatures, a dog, a fish or a bird, it is immediately obvious that there are a lot of differences between the humans and other living beings, the animals. At the same time, we also see that there are a lot of differences between the animals as well and we classify them into different kinds of animals. This is the background of the problem of universals. We understand the similarities and differences between the above mentioned and we classify them according to these general terms. But the question that the Nominalists are asking is: Are those terms real? If we see a similarity between John and Charles, is it really *real* or is it something that we came up with in order to understand things better? If these universals are real then we can explore them and use them to understand the world and the things in it. So, the main question of the problem of universals is whether they exist and if we can acknowledge them.

6.2 Universals According to Abelard

Abelard established himself as a logician by offering his own solution to the problem of existence of universals. Abelard distinguished clearly between logic and physics; logic being concerned only with *words* and how we express things in words opposed to the actual *things* (physics) or the ultimate reality (metaphysics). Logic for Abelard was linguistic logic, an essential discipline for understanding.¹³⁶ He solved the problem of universals by finding the middle way which was to be known as *Conceptualism*; universals were neither realities nor mere names but the concepts “formed by the intellect when abstracting the similarities between perceived individual things.”¹³⁷ According to Abelard, universals “are not things, but not

¹³⁶ Radice (1974), p. 13

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 14

nothing, either.”¹³⁸ We can return to John and Charles; Abelard would classify them as humans, although they can have a variety of characteristics that are different. Still, if those differences are eliminated what remains are those features that are common for the human species. Those features can for instance be the fact that they are both able to think rationally, breathe, they are not able to fly, they have one head, etc. This is what Abelard reasoned: that when all those differences are set aside, we are left with a set of features common for the whole species. So, even though John and Charles are different individuals, Abelard claimed that they can be classified as belonging to the human species, because “individual beings share some non-differences in the nature – that is, they share the nature of humanity.”¹³⁹ This nature sets them apart from other living beings who also breathe, have one head and are not able to fly, etc. Rationally, there are many characteristics that humans share with lions, but still in our mind we differentiate between them as species. For Abelard, this was a simple linguistic logic: these universals do exist in our mind as concepts. We see that even though John and Charles are completely different individuals, they still share more similarities than each of them shares with the lion. The name we gave to John’s and Charles’ species, namely human, is a concept that exists in our understanding. This is where Abelard distinguished between logic and physics - “human” is not a thing, but a concept that stands for the individuals sharing certain characteristics, mainly rational thinking.

The difference between Abelard’s and the Realists’ point of view is that Realists believed that John and Charles share the same *essence* with all animals, which was viewed as a piece of wax that could be modelled into a figure of a man, a pig or a bird. Abelard, however, claimed that different animals cannot share the same *essence* and be *different* individuals at the same time. On the other hand, what set Abelard apart from the Nominalists’ point of view was that while Nominalists would

¹³⁸ Luscombe in Dronke, (1988), p. 292

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 289

only acknowledge the existence of the *word* “human”, Abelard went further than that and said that the *concept* of human existed. That would say that humans exist not only as individuals, but as a species as well. In this point, Abelard seemed to have taken something from both sides, namely Realists and Nominalists, and united their points of view.

6.3 Ethics

The subject of moral life and ethical thought was very important in the monastic cloisters in the twelfth century. This subject, however, was not new and exclusive to this period. Ever since Aristotle and his *Nicomachean Ethics*,¹⁴⁰ this kind of moral philosophy had attracted various scholars. Just what is it in us that makes us behave for good or evil and how to exactly distinguish between those deeds we conduct that will earn us a praise or blame from God? These issues were studied closely by various medieval theologians, who usually were monks or canons. Abelard reflected on his view about the subject in his book of ethics, *Scito te Ipsum* (Know Thyself), which is also known simply as *Ethics* (as we will refer to it from now on). *Ethics* consists of two books, the second of which today only exists in fragments. In the first book, Abelard took into consideration the question of sin and also remedies for sin – penance, confession, absolution and satisfaction.¹⁴¹ The centre of interest here is the definition of sin. Abelard stressed the importance of intention in evaluating the moral or immoral character of an action. He argued that God thought not of what was done but with what attitude it was done.

Considering Abelard’s temperament and his way of living prior to his monastic years it might seem surprising that he would dare touch upon this subject. Was he trying to justify his own mistakes in writing his *Ethics*? In writing of this

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was written around 340 BC. It is considered to be his most mature work on ethics. Main themes are justice, law, the good, happiness, virtue, human nature, prudence, friendship and wealth. This work had not yet been translated into Latin in Abelard’s lifetime.

¹⁴¹ Luscombe (1971), xxxi

book Abelard was heavily influenced by his own life. After all, in one place he gave an example of a man having sex in the church, something we at this point are aware he himself conducted¹⁴².

At the same time, Abelard seemed to have had a certain obsession with Aristotle. Most of Abelard's surviving lectures on the subject of logic consisted of expositions of Aristotle's works, which prompted him a reputation for being like Aristotle. According to historian Michael Clanchy, Abelard did nothing to discourage this reputation.¹⁴³ Peter the Venerable wrote of Abelard as "our Aristotle", and it was also recorded that even St. Bernard decisively called Abelard "the alternative Aristotle".¹⁴⁴ In this sense and given the relevancy of the subject of ethics and moral life in the twelfth century, Abelard's intention to have his say about the subject can certainly be understood.

In Abelard's definition morals are "the vices or virtues of the mind which make us prone to bad or good works"¹⁴⁵. He also defined other kind of vices and virtues of the mind, which are not morals, as they have nothing to do with the composition of morality. These vices could be, for example, an ability to learn quick or slow, forgetfulness or good memory and so on. Abelard was not concerned with these vices and virtues when he talked about the bad will and sin. The existence of the mental vice is not the same as sin itself – having a mental vice is just the way one was – it is the nature. But what was important is that one puts up a fight through one's virtues and does not submit under one's vices. The sin is fault of the soul, we sin when the soul is not strong enough to fight and win over the mental vice that prone us to sin.

The central idea in Abelard's *Ethics* was basically that bad will was not equivalent with sin, nor was good will virtue in itself. He disagreed with the idea that

¹⁴² Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 146

¹⁴³ Clanchy (1999), p. 97

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 96

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 3

God thinks of us as sinners just because we have a will to do something that would displease Him; at the same time, God is not pleased with us just because we have the will to please Him. Aristotle had a similar idea about the notion of virtue, as he did not consider it to be just a good will either. Virtue is a virtuous action, and for Aristotle an action was virtuous *only* if a person conducted it deliberately, knowing what he was doing and doing it because it was a noble action.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, Abelard disagreed with Augustine who, on the other hand, thought of sin as an “evil will”.¹⁴⁷ When Abelard spoke of will in *Ethics* he seemed to identify it with a desire, and not with the act of decision. He gave an example of a slave being chased by his evil master with a sword. Out of fear for his own life the slave unwillingly killed his master. The slave did not have a bad will – he did not have desire to kill, but he did this only because he wanted to save his own life. There was certainly no bad will there whatsoever.¹⁴⁸ But still, nobody put a sword in slave’s hands, and although the slave acted only out of fear of death, he did do wrong in “consenting to an unjust killing”.¹⁴⁹ So, according to Abelard the slave did sin. His consent to kill preceded the killing and in that consent lies the sin. But since the slave did not have bad will as he basically did not want to kill his master, but he rather acted that way because he wanted to evade death, Abelard used this as an argument that sin can be committed without bad will. This further on proves that sin is not equal to evil will!

But can evil will in itself be sin? According to Abelard, if through our virtues we fight bad will and overcome it, we deserve to be rewarded. He gave an example: if a man sees a woman and suddenly becomes affected by the pleasure of the flesh– is that bad will and lustful desire sin? ¹⁵⁰ Abelard stressed the importance of fighting against this thought: he insisted that it was a virtue to overcome this desire, and that

¹⁴⁶ (Internet 5)

¹⁴⁷ Jones (1969), pp. 108-109

¹⁴⁸ Abelard in Luscombe (1971), p. 7

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 9

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 13

the fight was necessary in order for us to receive a reward.¹⁵¹ In order to fight, we have to have an enemy to fight against; this is clearly our bad will. Abelard basically came to a conclusion that the existence of our evil will is not bad in itself but rather necessary; it has to exist in order to provide a material for fighting, and over which we should triumph in order to “subdue it to the divine will”.¹⁵² For Abelard, the idea of struggle against evil will and reward that follows the struggle was central; this view was in great contrast with Aristotle’s idea of a virtuous person who does the right thing without any struggle or reward or merit that follows it. In his own view, Abelard argued that we are doing a greater thing for God because we are fighting against our own will in order to please God. Getting back to the example of a man who lusts after a woman; there is no sin in lusting for a woman, but if a man consents to lust, then he has committed sin. A will to sin is not a sin; it is just a vice of our mind, our bad will, our enemy we are supposed to fight against in order to do good and thus please God. If we consent to that will, then we are sinning. Abelard argued that the moment we decide to consent to this bad will we sin, and that a performance of a deed itself will not increase the sin. If we go back to the example of a man lusting for a woman, if he consents to his bad will to have sexual intercourse with this woman, a certain pleasure would follow his action. Abelard insisted that this pleasure cannot increase the sin, as the pleasure itself is not a sin. For if this kind of bodily pleasure was to be a sin then it is definitely not lawful for anybody to have it, not even spouses.¹⁵³ On the other hand, if this kind of pleasure is not sinful inside marriage, then the pleasure itself is not a sin, inside or outside of marriage. However, if sexual pleasure was to be sinful even inside of marriage, then the conclusion would be that such acts should be done fully without pleasure, which cannot be done.¹⁵⁴ It would be highly unreasonable of God to demand something from a man which cannot

¹⁵¹ I Peter, 5:4

¹⁵² Luscombe (1971), p. 13

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 19

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 21

be done. In his view of pleasure, Abelard agreed with Aristotle, who considered pleasure to be good; if an action we are conducting is good and virtuous, a certain pleasure must follow it. The pleasure completes actions, according to Aristotle.

Abelard concluded that sin is not evil will to do something that can be classified as a sin, nor is it a performance of the sinful deed itself. It is the consent to this bad will and to the desire that is sinful.¹⁵⁵ So, if a man lusts for a woman, this in itself is not sinful, as that is a part of man's evil will, a part of his nature he is supposed to fight against. Intercourse with a woman is not sinful either, as there is no sin in pleasure, as Abelard previously stated. But what is sinful is the fact that he lets his bad will control him and that he does not win over it through his virtues. He does not put up a fight against his bad will; or if he did his virtue did not win.

Abelard used this theory on some more examples. He discussed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as a deed that was done by God, Jesus himself and Judas the betrayer.¹⁵⁶ The Father delivered the Son and the Son delivered himself¹⁵⁷ and it was Judas who delivered Christ to his prosecutors by betraying him. Now, the deed that Judas performed was not a sin in itself, as he did the same as God did. But what was sinful was the intention he performed this deed with. Or to be more precise: the sin consisted in his consent to his evil will to perform the betrayal.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 25

¹⁵⁶ Abelard in Luscombe (1971), p. 29

¹⁵⁷ Romans 8:32, Galathians 2:20

6.4 Discussion

We have so far presented Abelard's view on the theory of universals and moral philosophy, or ethics. Both these subjects were highly important and relevant in the twelfth century France. Some might think of Abelard as a hypocrite for writing his book on moral and ethics, since they might consider him to be a man with questionable moral. However, the question of Abelard's morality is not crucial here; but what seems to be evident is his interest in contemporary subjects. His success in expressing his opinions varied. Abelard's take on the subject of ethics was considered to be quite controversial. This is mainly caused by the example he presented considering Christ's crucifiers, as it was widely understood that he proclaimed them not to be sinners. After this Abelard was constantly under attack of St. Bernard, who found this assertion to be controversial.

It can be considered that Abelard had far more success in his theory of universals. Today he is considered to be the founder of conceptual point of view on the subject, or *Conceptualism*. There are far more web pages dedicated to Abelard and his theory of universals than to Abelard's *Ethics*. In most of the books concerning the subject of ethics we did not find reference to Abelard and his writings about the topic. On the other hand, whenever we came across some general theories about universals, Abelard's name was frequently mentioned.

What happens if we put some of Abelard's theories into a contemporary setup? The notion that God thinks not of what is done, but with what intention it is done can be traced back to Augustine.¹⁵⁸ Abelard certainly took it further by being a radical *Intentionalist* in determining the moral of an action, while insisting on the importance of the person's intention alone behind his/her action. Stated in this way one can certainly ask if in the light of the newest developments in the world we could

¹⁵⁸ Jones (1969), pp. 116-119

consider a terrorist who blows himself up, killing ten persons around him, a sinner. The terrorist did what he thought was good and right for this or that reason and he acted according to his conscience. Abelard stressed that the action is bad if person intends to go against his conscience.¹⁵⁹ Abelard went on saying that we cannot hold those who crucified Christ to be sinners since they did not consent to what they believed they should not consent, they did not act against their own conscience.¹⁶⁰ This was used as one of the charges against Abelard, as the previous statement was considered to be heretic by Bernard and some of the contemporary clergy.

So, does this then mean that according to Abelard the terrorist is not a sinner, since he is not acting against his conscience? Clearly not, since Abelard made a distinction between an act that appears to be good and an act that actually is good.¹⁶¹ The intention can appear to be good but it does not necessarily have to be, just because one believes that it is. Abelard mentioned that there are those who desire to do what they believe to be pleasing God, but they can be led astray in this by “the zeal or the eagerness of their minds: their intention is in error and the eye of their heart is not simple, so it cannot see clearly.”¹⁶² So, Abelard was not considering that a good intention equals a good deed. Sometimes we can believe our intention to be good, but it may not be. So, the crucifiers of Christ were not sinful in their minds, as they were following their own consciences as they thought he should be killed. However, they did sin in deed, Abelard claimed, and added that their sin would have been far greater had they performed this deed against their own consciences.¹⁶³ In conclusion, we do not see Abelard justifying terrorists today. We also find that he was deeply misunderstood about his example of Christ’s crucifiers, as he was quoted for saying that because they followed their conscience and thought at the time that they were doing the right thing, they were not to be considered sinners. However, it is

¹⁵⁹ Abelard in Luscombe (1971), p. 55

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 53-54

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 55

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 67

clear that everything is not black and white in Abelard's point of view. Abelard did call their deed sinful, even though he at the same time proclaimed their intention not sinful. So, clearly in Abelard's world there were some grey areas, as he did not claim that if something is done in good conscience it cannot be a sin. According to Abelard, even though a terrorist's conscience might be good, as he or she did whatever he or she thought was the right thing to do, the deed performed was sinful, since he/she killed innocent people, in the same manner as Christ's persecutors' deed was sinful.

7. Individuality

The following chapter provides a context for the problem formulation stated above and an introduction to the project based on Peter Abelard's life and work. In order to understand Abelard as a person and to find out whether he was an exceptional individual in the twelfth century, it is necessary to comprehend the meaning of the term "individual" at that time. Two approaches in defining the term "individual" proposed by historians Colin Morris and John Benton will be taken into consideration.

According to Morris the period from about 1070-1170 was the time when people became consciously aware of their own identities as individuals and not as members of collective entities (family, corporation, church etc.)¹⁶⁴ In his book *The discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200* Morris argued that individualism appeared during the period called "twelfth century Renaissance". This term is applied to the twelfth century because it was characterized by a rapid development in literature and learning. At the same time men turned to the records of the distant past to obtain knowledge from them: to the Greek and Roman classics, the Bible, the Fathers, the Roman Law, the Canon Law and to *The Rule of St. Benedict*. The return to the documents of the classic past proposed to create new thinking and solutions, where traditional ways were inappropriate.¹⁶⁵

For Morris, an "individual" is one who possesses "the sense of a clear distinction between my being, and that of other people".¹⁶⁶ According to Morris the twelfth-century individual was created as a result of the growing interest in learning and the increasing availability of social options. The latter he explained by saying that in previous centuries, under feudalism "the individual was caught up within the

¹⁶⁴ History notes, Special course in History, Autumn Semester, 2004, Brian Patrick McGuire

¹⁶⁵ Morris (1972), pp. 52-63

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 3

network of loyalties, with little choice about his way of life or opportunity to select his own values.” The only choice he might make was to join the monastic order. However, with the rise of the cities and emergence of new groups and classes in the twelfth century, many people had more options, and so could make more personal choices. They could do so according to their intellectual interest, in terms of pursuing various studies; classics, logic, law or theology.¹⁶⁷ Thus, Morris believed that the individual was formed by his ability to choose.

Another approach in relation to the development of individual consciousness was argued by historian John F. Benton in his article “Consciousness of Self and Perception of Individuality”. He stated that the twelfth century was not a period of “discovery of self” or “discovery of the individual”. The origin of consciousness of self had already appeared in the distant past.¹⁶⁸ According to Benton “there is no medieval word which has anything like the meaning of “personality”, and *persona* was still defined in the twelfth century primarily in its etymological sense as a mask held before an actor [...] a medieval person could never verbalize the idea of having a “personality”. Thus, Benton emphasized that in medieval thought the *persona* was not something inside, but outside oneself, a mask between oneself and the outside world, and “looking behind the individualized mask eventually brought one close to the uniqueness, not of oneself, but of God.”¹⁶⁹ Contrary to Morris, Benton underlined that people in the Middle Ages had a belief in Fate, which could be discovered through magical rituals. Their belief was based on the fact that Fate could determine everything, and individual selves had “no meaning in the world where neither choice nor chance exists”.¹⁷⁰

Benton, however, indicated that the twelfth century was characterized by a much more profound and extensive manifestation of self-examination and self-

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 36-40

¹⁶⁸ Benton in Benson and Constable (1982), p. 264

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 284-285

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 287

awareness of oneself and the others. Both Benton and Morris argued that self-examination and concern with inner life of the self were shown in the appearance of autobiography.¹⁷¹ Abelard served both historians as an example; his *Historia Calamitatum* appeared to be one of the most famous autobiographies since that of St. Augustine. Contrary to St. Augustine, who in his *Confession* addressed himself to God,¹⁷² Abelard wrote his autobiography in the form of a letter to an anonymous friend. St. Augustine claimed he did not seek consolation. The only purpose for writing his *Confession* was to praise God and seek him: “For love of your love I shall retrace my wicked ways.”¹⁷³ Abelard, however, in his autobiography sought sympathy and this desire appeared to be his main purpose. At the beginning of his letter he wrote to his friend: “[...] and so I propose to follow up the words of consolation I gave you in person with the history of my own misfortunes [...]. In comparison with my trials you will see that your own are nothing, or only slight, and will find them easier to bear.”¹⁷⁴ In his work he recounts his misfortunes that he had to face during his life, including his persecution by his teachers, the burning of his book and the castration resulting from his love for Heloise. Abelard wrote his letter in order to console himself and evoke compassion from others. The real value of Abelard’s *Calamitatum* lies in his literary skills and ability to depict his inner thoughts and feelings regarding his misfortunes.¹⁷⁵ We will dwell on this question with more detail further on.

Morris also argued that an increase of self-awareness was developed by a large interest in personal relationships. Declaration of friendship and love was mainly extended in letters, in which people explored their inner selves and searched for a true identity.¹⁷⁶ Letters between Abelard and Heloise could be regarded as a manifestation of the attempts of those people to understand their “inner” self and the nature of their

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 265; Morris, p. 79

¹⁷² Compendium for Special course in History, Autumn Semester, 2004, Brian Patrick McGuire, Confessions of Saint Augustine, pp. 19-20

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 43

¹⁷⁴ Abelard in Radice (1974), p. 57

¹⁷⁵ Benton in Benson and Constable (1982), p. 266

¹⁷⁶ Morris (1972), pp. 96, 99

relationships. Their letters, very intimate at the beginning, turned out to be more businesslike at the end. Discussing *The Rule of St. Benedict* and dealing with the questions of the monastic life, Abelard and Heloise revealed themselves as two personalities of the twelfth century. The shift in their relations showed the process of realization of their true roles in each others life.

The idea of intention came into focus in the twelfth century as demonstration of self-examination and self - awareness. In the field of moral philosophy, conscience and intention were the topics discussed and debated in Paris and Laon. Morris and Benton emphasized that most remarkable version of intentionalism was found in Abelard's *Ethics*.¹⁷⁷

Both Morris and Benton have presented their interpretation of the term "individual" and explained what process could have affected the emergence of the individual, but they do not give the definition of this term. We will apply these theories and try to see whether we can perceive Abelard as an individual on their basis.

¹⁷⁷ Benton in Benson and Constable (1982), p. 274, Morris (1972), p. 75

8. Conclusion

As we have already presented the society in the twelfth century France, it is clear that major changes were happening in different areas. One of the important issues in the twelfth century was search for identity. With the rise of cities and the great expansion of population the previous hierarchy of three social classes gave way to a more nuanced system. While only a century or two ago an individual could only be a knight, a peasant or a priest, the twelfth century opened up a variety of new options. If Abelard had been born a couple of centuries earlier, it is questionable, whether he could have had an opportunity to become anything else but a knight like his father.

However, what exactly was Abelard's contribution to this change? Was he significant, and if yes, in what way? What exactly was the role of the individual in the twelfth century society? If there was not for Abelard, what would medieval Western Europe have been like?

During his years as a teacher in his school in Paris, he met Heloise, a woman who certainly played a huge role in Abelard's life. Once we examined *The Personal Letters* and *The Letters of Direction*, it became clear to us that she was consciously trying to influence Abelard to consider someone else's feelings but his own. In the end, it can be said that she succeeded in that. Once she did not get the response she was hoping for from Abelard in *The Personal Letters*, she changed the subject and asked for advice, instead of consolation. Abelard accepted "the offer" and devoted himself to advising Heloise's community in his *Letters of Direction*.

Before Abelard met Heloise, he believed that only through mind one could get to the Truth; Heloise might have changed his view. Some of us think that her influence was crucial for his transformation, that she opened his heart and showed him how to deal with his feelings in order to get to the Truth. On the other hand, some of us question the role Heloise played in Abelard's personal development.

What we learned about the twelfth century through Abelard's life is that it was a period characterized by the growing influence of the human emotions, next to reason. Together with all the changes happening in the twelfth century society that we previously wrote about, the expression of feelings became more acceptable. All of a sudden there was a clear path for genuine human emotions, and what is even more important it seems as if people started believing in honest expression of those emotions. At the same time religion was changing in the similar direction, as it embraced human emotions within already existing Christian concepts. Passion and sufferings of Jesus became the center of religious experience, as opposed to previous emphasis that was put on Jesus' teachings and accomplishments. Abelard himself compared his own sufferings with the Passion of Jesus. In this sense it could be concluded that his view on religion was becoming more contemporary in the twelfth century sense.

Abelard for once, was never afraid to meet his emotions, to express them in the letters and even show them publicly. He and Heloise strongly believed in the necessity of self-expression, which was obvious through their correspondence. At the same time, their letters showed us the development of the human emotion in the twelfth century Christian context. The topic about self-expression will necessarily lead us to the question of self-awareness. To us, *The Personal Letters* and *The Letters of Direction* are proofs of self-awareness detected both in Abelard and Heloise. These clearly picture two people conscious about themselves as well as about their relations to other people. They both show their concern for their own needs: often, their own needs are all they consider. Even Heloise, who seemed to be more considerate of other people's feelings than Abelard was appeared somewhat selfish in her letters. She was well aware of her own needs and sometimes inconsiderate of Abelard's as she, for example, wrote about her own sexual frustration to him – a castrate. Of course this sort of prioritization of one's own feelings and needs was detectable in Abelard's letters as well. Abelard also showed a great deal of self-awareness through critique of his contemporaries. Certainly,

in order to criticize others one must be aware of its own abilities, and Abelard never seemed to be lacking this.

On the basis of Peter Abelard's life, we conclude that the individual in the twelfth century certainly had a certain amount of freedom. By saying this, we are putting emphasis on the right of an individual to choose: a shoemaker's son, for instance, could have become a priest or a merchant. The possibilities were getting wider and Peter Abelard certainly took advantage of this. From an early age he decided to become a scholar, but the wide range of topics he managed to touch upon made him more of a humanist than a medieval scholar. Right from the beginning of the writing of this project, we were quite amazed that this man managed to contribute to so many fields: philosophy, logics, theology, the question of moral philosophy, and even to the writing of love poems and hymns. It seems to us that he simply dealt with the challenges and matters in any field that was of his interest. Abelard was a representative of the period full of new possibilities. Moreover, he was rather exceptional, as he took so many turns: from philosopher to abbot, from teacher to love poet, from logician to theologian and so on.

As previously presented, an individual according to Morris is somebody fully aware of his abilities in relation to other people. Abelard in this sense was aware of his abilities and never afraid to express his feelings of superiority towards his contemporaries. This could hardly be tolerated even in the progressive twelfth century as his behaviour attracted plenty of controversy and earned him numerous enemies. From Benton's point of view the concept of individuality was non-existent in the twelfth century, as the word "individuality" was not present in the medieval vocabulary. This is his point of departure for arguing that nobody in the twelfth century could have thought of himself as an individual; as behind their masks of *persona* people were the same in front of God. However, it can be said that Abelard proved him wrong. In his solution to the theory of universals Abelard considered that each human being was unique in relation to others, although they shared a certain amount of similar

characteristics that would classify them as belonging to the same species. This proves that even though Abelard was not familiar with the word “individuality”, he was surely familiar with the meaning of it.

Also as a philosopher Abelard did not rely too much on the heritage of the ancients, but valued his own thoughts. Surely he did take up the subjects that had been explored before him, but he handled them in an original way. Many of Aristotle’s most important works had not been translated into Latin in Abelard’s lifetime, so in dealing with the subject of ethics he was not assisted by Aristotelian ethics. This surely increases his value as a philosopher, as he seems to have handled this subject in a somewhat similar way. In comparison with Aquinas, who is often said to be the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages and who had the advantage of the translated works of Aristotle, Abelard mostly had to find his point of departure by himself. Today Abelard is seldom referred to as one of the most significant philosophers of the Middle Ages; his achievements in the field of logic are considered to be far greater, even though they never surpassed his century.

Abelard was condemned for heresy twice, yet he cannot be considered a revolutionary in any way. As a supporter of *intentionalism*, Abelard could never comprehend the nature of accusations made towards him, since all he ever tried to do was to make religion more comprehensive. Yet he can be considered fortunate to have lived in the first part of the twelfth century, because harsh punishments of the heretics had not become common practice at this point. The most severe punishment Abelard ever faced was the public burning of his book and a threat of excommunication.

In the end, the question left to be asked is: If it was not for Peter Abelard what would the medieval Western Europe be like? According to Jacques Le Goff, Abelard was the first great “modern” intellectual figure and the first *professor* in the twelfth century.¹⁷⁸ Many historians credit Abelard for laying the foundations for the institution

¹⁷⁸ Le Goff (1993), p. 35

that was to become the University of Paris.¹⁷⁹ He set a standard of teaching that was never to be lowered again and thereby contributed to the establishment of the scholastic method. On the other hand, he developed the discipline of logic into perfection, but unfortunately it went out of fashion soon after his death and his other teachings did not suffer a much better fate. Abelard's influence was momentous¹⁸⁰ and he lacked the highest achievement.¹⁸¹ So, it is questionable, whether the face of medieval Western Europe would have been much different if he had not existed at all. Abelard was a part of a general progressive movement in education and religion and thus the societal development would have followed the same direction without him, perhaps slightly slower, but that is impossible to know.

So, Peter Abelard was a remarkable individual of his time, who illuminated a period in history intellectually as well as spiritually. Yet he did not leave a lasting mark to any of the disciplines he was involved with. Perhaps it is even ironical that the man who is thought to have been the first professor in medieval Western Europe is mostly remembered by the period of his life that had the least to do with academic study.

¹⁷⁹ Radice (1974), p. 13

¹⁸⁰ Gilson (1955), p. 163

¹⁸¹ Knowles (1988), p. 118

9. Work Process Description

We started our project by thorough reading of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Despite the small size of the book it took us a lot of time and energy to read and interpret it.

The book presented an amazing love story of two remarkable persons in the twelfth century. Besides, it gave us a picture of the medieval society in France. From the very beginning we wanted to concentrate on Abelard and his personality. That is why, we read other literature concerning Peter Abelard and the period of time he lived in.

We started out by writing the complete analysis of *The Personal Letters* and then agreed that our analysis on Abelard wouldn't be sufficient without examining *The Letters of Direction*.

Considering the fact that Peter Abelard was an outstanding logician and philosopher of his time, we decided to turn our attention to one of his well-known work on ethics and to look at his theory of universals.

From the very beginning the group managed to work as a team, despite some minor troubles, caused by one person. That person left the group after mid-semester evaluation. As for the rest of the group everybody equally contributed to the project work. Besides, three weeks before the delivery of the project a new member joined the group. It was a challenge both for him and for us.

As a result, we ended up with the project that you are reading. It has been an exciting and enlightening work.

10. Resumé

Vores projekt handler generelt om middelalderens historie og i særdeleshed om filosofien og logikeren Peter Abelard som levede i det tolvte århundrede. I den brede offentlighed er han mest kendt for sin passionerede og tragiske kærlighedsaffære med Heloise og deres brevveksling.

I vores projekt betragter vi Abelard som et individ i middelalderens samfund. I denne sammenhæng anvender vi to teorier om individualitet i middelalderens kontekst fremsat af henholdsvis Colin Morris og John Benton.

Projektet vil naturligvis også indeholde vores egne tanker og diskussioner om Peter Abelard. Ydermere har vi dedikeret en del af projektet til introduktionen og diskussionen af Abelards filosofiske værker – hans *Ethics* og hans løsning af universalieproblemet. I forhold til universalieteorien har vi inkluderet et generelt overblik over dette filosofiske problem.

En del af projektet vil også være dedikeret til analysen af Abelards version af Sct. Benedicts *Regula* skrevet til nonnesamfundet og dens sammenligning med den originale version af *Regula*.

Hovedkilderne som dette projekt er baseret på er *The letters of Abelard and Heloise*, *Historia Calamitatum* og Abelards *Ethics* (*Scito te ipsum*).

Resumé af Sct. Benedicts *Regula* er inkluderet som bilag.

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Appendix

St. Benedict and the Rule

St. Benedict of Nursia (c.480-550) was an Italian abbot and the founder of western monasticism. The only biography of St. Benedict contained in the second book of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*, written some years after Benedict's death.¹⁸²

According to Pope Gregory, Benedict was a holy man, who built a new monastery at Monte Cassino, which he directed for the rest of his life. There were many holy men in the sixth century in Italy, but Benedict had been known as the one, who wrote a detailed plan for the organization of a monastic community, the document called the Rule.¹⁸³

The Rule of Saint Benedict was written in the sixth century and constituted the basic guide for Christians who had decided to dedicate their lives to God. For the basis for the Rule Saint Benedict used the ideas and values from the Bible, like prayers, fasting and made them pliable for a life in which these values could be practiced and experienced within a community of monks. The impact of his Rules was so great that a couple of centuries later especially in the ninth century the Church was characterized as monastic.¹⁸⁴

Benedict's Rule consisted of a prologue and seventy-three brief chapters. It was written for an independent house or a complex of houses, under the direction of an abbot. The abbot was elected by the monks, but they could not reject his actions or remove him. The model for the monastic life under Benedict was the family, living under one roof, with the abbot as father and all the monks as brothers. Priesthood was an unimportant part of the community; monks used the services of the local pastors. Those who sought admission to the community had to spend a year as novices, during

¹⁸² Lawrence (1984), pp. 17-18

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ (Internet 6)

which they were tested for their suitability and perseverance, and bound by their vows to remain in the community until death.¹⁸⁵

Benedict's Rule provided detailed instructions for the divine office, consisting of prayers, work and study. It is important to mention that Benedict himself meant no social work for his monks, such as manuscript copying, teaching outsiders, missionary work. He mainly encouraged their monks to supply food and shelter for the travellers. The Rule was distinguished by good sense in a matter of childrearing, care of the sick, diet, treatment of the disobedient and choice of the officials. It gained popularity because of its qualities of moderation, workability and humaneness. Benedict's monastery at Monte Carlo had been destroyed by the Lombards in 577.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Lawrence (1984), pp. 20-21, 23-24

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 34

The Rule of St. Benedict¹⁸⁷

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¹⁸⁷ (Internet 3)

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