

The Challenge of Héloïse— Language, Truth and Logic Revisited

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Introduction

Latin-American, Asian, black and feminist Liberation theologies have in common that theology becomes re-defined from and by the perspective and experience of the oppressed group. The hope was that through doing theology from the margins—or from the ‘underside of history’—the central models (paradigms) of traditional theology would be transformed: ethics becomes Liberation Ethics, concepts of God, Christ, and Spirit are grounded in the experience of the struggle for justice, the Bible is read as a text of Liberation, and a new readiness would appear to dialogue with the ‘submerged’ faiths of oppressed peoples.

My argument here is that the paradigm shift did not go deep enough. Looking around at the worsening crises of the world—African famine, environmental disasters, structural violence and the ineluctable spirals of poverty—it seems to me that Liberation Theology has not succeeded because it has not as yet tackled the roots of oppression in language and logic itself. Tracking the roots of oppression to their theological and philosophical sources is a necessary activity of liberation. It means questioning the foundational myth on which our western civilisation is based. Even the feminist attempts to construct a new ethics have not gone far enough. For example, American psychologist and educationalist Carol Gilligan attempted to construct an ethics of care and responsibility, based on her research, as opposed to an ethics of justice and fairness, (the categories of her colleague, Lawrence Kohlberg). She and those who follow her claim that girls make decisions from a different ethical base and form a concept of self which is more relationally based than that of boys. This notion of the ‘relational self’ or the ‘connected self’ (Catherine Keller) has proved inspirational in Feminist Theology. But unless this can be shown to furnish another vision of truth and logic which challenges the dominant model, it will simply marginalise women—and other oppressed groups—more acutely.

For Christian *Theology* there is a particular problem. ‘In the Beginning was the Word’—the Prologue to the Gospel of John—expresses the creative fiat of God. But those words from the book of Genesis—‘God spoke and so

it was'—have come, in our post-Enlightenment times—to be associated more with the discourse of power, with ideology and with a dominating logic. This is the logic of the separate or disengaged individual, the disengaged rationalism of Descartes, Locke, the liberalism of the 19th century revolutionary movements. The Father, says Julia Kristeva—Professor of Linguistics in Paris—is authoritative word, sign and time. He represents the symbolic order of our society: and the ultimate guarantor of this social order is the transcendent God the Father. But what and whom does this word of power exclude? What does Michel Foucault mean when he called for 'the rising up of the subjugated knowledges'? What else but that these subjugated knowledges, issuing from the discourse of oppressed peoples, offer an alternative vision of truth and logic which could ground an effective liberation ethics?

I wish to explore this through the contrasting logic of two famous mediaeval characters, Héloïse and Abelard. I will then open up an alternative 'logos', pointing to a more liberating vision of truth.

I

Héloïse and Abelard Re-visited

The story of the ill-starred love-affair between Héloïse and Abelard in 11th century France is well-known, well-documented and never ceases to attract attention. Here I focus on the different notions of logic at play in the way they related to each other. What makes this so significant is the part which Abelard played in the development of western logic itself, and the way his achievements continued to be influential in legal and theological controversy.

Abelard himself made the connection between logic, discourse and the Logos, Christ. Contrasting with the gentler methods of his predecessors Anselm of Canterbury and Lanfranc of Bec in showing the usefulness of logic to the faith, Abelard used logic as a weapon. His own story 'Historia Calamitatum' relates how he 'attacked' his teacher William of Champeaux with the result that eventually William was held in contempt by the students and forced to retire from teaching. Though Abelard died a broken man, humiliated by Bernard of Clairvaux, condemned for heresy, yet his logic of dialectic transformed the mediaeval schools. For Abelard, logic was the science of truth, the ruler of the other disciplines. Hence his logical reconstruction of dogmas brought down on himself the fury of the churchmen.

But it was his triumph, the work '*Sic et Non*', which proved the most influential. Here he set out—according to the logician's task—an amazing list of the Bible's inconsistencies with no attempt at reconciliation. Hence

he was accused of removing *theological truth*. But it was his attempt to solve the problem of universals without falling into radical nominalism, (think of the concluding sentence of 'The name of the Rose') which is crucial. 'Universals', said Abelard, are actually human *institutions*, but are connected with ideas in the mind of God. These ideas in the Divine mind correspond to general notions. It is this pragmatic understanding which was so influential. The feminist philosopher Andrea Nye wrote:

Not only could Abelard's logic provide a tool by which theology could be made into a coherent body of dogma which the faithful could be commanded to believe, but also logical consistency could become a principle of legal order in the relations between rulers and subjects, Pope and believers.¹

Thus the metaphysical underpinning becomes less important than rational coherence: the textbook for the Church's codification of Canon Law becomes Abelard's *Sic et Non*.. More influential still was the use of dialectic in the form of rationalised and codified law as the concrete substance of an exercise of power, where the claim to speak for God was only symbolic.² Now the Divine Logos does not need to be invoked—logic can stand on its own feet.

Hence universities developed adversarial techniques and a scholar became recognised as such by his ability to refute a position or interpretation of a text. And most serious of all, logic developed a notion of truth which was devoid of substantive content. 'The claim to produce an unassailable truth independent of all contingencies is the very substance of logic'.³ Such a universalist logic is not bound to any one person, but referable to all times and places -and its ultimate authority is the implacable will, infallible and absolute, and immune from the weaknesses of the flesh.

It is possible to see how this works in Abelard's exchanges with Héloïse, (in the testimony of their personal letters). Let us not imagine that this is an exchange between the Great Master of Logic and an unlearned woman. Abelard himself says 'that he was attracted to Héloïse because of her looks but also because of her great learning, where 'she stood supreme'. Peter Dronke calls it an intellectual partnership that was not one-sided.⁴ The exchange of Letters took place about eleven years after their marriage when Héloïse was Abbess and administrator at the Abbey of the Paraclete, and happened to read Abelard's account of their relationship—(the 'Historia was probably written about 1132). What is important for my argument here is that she was clearly distressed by his account of events, and reveals that she is working from a far different notion of truth, particularly of truth in relationships,

First, Héloïse faces up to the fact that what happened between them was

a question of desire and not love. What is remarkable are the very clear-sighted ideas on love, the economic basis of marriage, the superficial notions of sin which prevail, and her more nuanced concept of truth. 'The anguish of Héloïse', wrote the Irish scholar Helen Waddell, for whom these two summed up the meaning of life as separation and sacrifice, '*was to know herself at the end not loved*'.⁶

For Abelard does not 'hear' the truth of Héloïse. It is as if her protestations of love and grief are unwritten. His concern is not to acknowledge the truth of what passed between them but to reduce her to submission. In the 'Letters of Direction' he insists that the sole essential element of Christian discipleship is renunciation of self in complete renunciation of one's own will.⁷ This is incompatible with any admission of carnal desire. (Here we see the logic of 'Sic et Non' at play). But the purpose of this logic is that he and the Church should regain power and control over Héloïse. But Héloïse is not taken in. She rejects false compliments of holiness in obeying Abelard by taking the veil of monastic life. She declares—in Letter 1—that this has nothing to do with the love of God! ('In this I can expect no reward from God, for whose love it is clear I have as yet done nothing!').⁸ The honesty she displays in the use or misuse of the Bible is reflected in the struggle to discern exactly where sinfulness lies, (even though Héloïse herself has accepted the common mediaeval view of the greater blame for sin ascribed to women because of their supposed weaker nature). In her constant references to the superiority of wisdom to philosophy she seems to intuit another logic. (This is very clear in her criticism of the Rule of St Benedict: Héloïse's gender awareness questions the applicability for women of the rules concerning the habit, diet, hospitality and the logic of taking permanent vows).

Where the foundation of Abelard's logic is challenged is in the supremacy given to the annihilation of the will. Submission to the will of another in itself can be no guarantee of holiness—for, says Héloïse, I would have cheerfully followed you to the flames of Hell!⁹ The only logic—annihilation of pride—which Abelard understands is based on a kind of epistemological blindness.

Héloïse goes further: chastity, she says, is a question of the mind, not the body. How can there be any talk of repentance towards God, when all she feels towards God is a sense of outrage, at what has been done to Abelard? ('How can it be called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains the will to sin, and is on fire with its old desires?')¹⁰ In fact, the only comfort which she dredges from the whole situation, is that in her anguish she is atoning for what was done to him.

The most remarkable illustration of Abelard's adversarial logic also

shows it to be the basis for sexist and racist dualistic oppositions. Héloïse should rejoice in the black habit, accepting the marriage with Christ it symbolises, he writes,¹¹ modelling herself on the Ethiopian woman in the Song of Songs, who accepted the marriage-bed of Solomon. Because she is black, she is less lovely than any other woman, just as all daughters of Jerusalem are weaker in faith than the sons. Yet she is lovely within, not only because of teeth and bones, but because of the afflictions which she must inevitably suffer in this life. With one fell swoop Abelard has not only condoned racism and sexism, but written these dualistic oppositions into the very structures of logic itself. No reply from Héloïse is preserved.

II

Seeking a Logic Which Liberates

In the first place we have to cast a hermeneutic of suspicion at the connection between truth and power. It was the French philosopher Simone Weil who at the very end of her life wrote that 'In Shakespeare, only the fools tell the truth'.¹² By 'the fools' I mean here those whose discourse is unheard or excluded by the powerful. Secondly, we have to question the adversarial roots of Abelard's dialectic. It was the German philosopher Gadamer who said that dialectic depended on preserving an orientation to openness, an openness limited not by dualistic opposition, but by the horizon of the question we put to a text.¹³ This openness in turn must be supported by a logic promoting an understanding alternative to the dominant.

From many different starting-points—philosophical and theological—a 'listening logic' is being developed. The Italian philosopher Gemma Fiumara traces this back to the original Greek meaning of 'logos', 'legein', not just as speech, discourse, but as a 'gathering-together', a laying-side-by side, and a safe-keeping.¹⁴ Heidegger declared that 'proper hearing belonged to the Logos', (Fiumara, p.14) and called for a logic that was 'co-existence with', rather than 'knowledge-of', with all the detachment and objectivity which this latter implies. This is akin to the 'caring knowing', 'connected knowing' or even 'passionate knowing' called for by the authors of *Womens' Ways of Knowing*. It is the 'maternal thinking' being developed by Sara Ruddick.¹⁵

Instead of a cult of speech, says Fiumara, evoking a forgotten notion of Socrates, we should cultivate a 'maieutics of listening', and we would begin to perceive the lost connections, 'even in the midst of the waves and storms of cultural to-existence'.¹⁶ Then we would recognise that genuine thought—far from being a weapon—is in fact 'midwife thinking', the risky venture of giving birth to an idea, which may involve loss to both the one-

giving-birth and to what is born. The task of the 'midwife philosopher' says Fiumara, is the nurturing of the nascent thought before it is irremediably shaped by culture.¹⁷ Conversely, the snuffing out of philosophical midwifery is the precondition for the spreading of our thinking in repetitive, unrelated forms, contrasting only in appearance.¹⁸ In other words, the logocentric model of the labyrinth, where Ariadne's thread represents the sole linear model of escape.

So, if 'In the Beginning was the Word' has come to be associated not with the Incarnate love of God, but with the power of a logocentric culture, 'In the Beginning was the Relation' represented Martin Buber's attempt to restore mutuality and relational qualities to the Word. But I believe 'In the beginning was the listening, or the hearing' takes us one stage further. Only with the creation of a culture of a listening logic is it possible to begin to eradicate the roots of oppression in the structures of logic itself. The desperate dying cry of Simone Weil—'I am outside the truth!'—where truth meant total identification with action for justice, could also be the predicament of Liberation Theology, unless it attempts to eradicate the origins of this oppression from the very metaphors of our coming to know.

- 1 Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic*. (London and New York, 1990) p.94.
- 2 Nye, *Words of Power* p. 95.
- 3 Nye, *Words of Power* p. 96.
- 4 Abelard and Héloïse: *The Letters* tr. by Betty Radice (London, 1974) p. 66.
- 5 Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 1984) p. 112.
- 6 Felicitas Corrigan, *Helen Waddell: A Biography* (London, 1986) p 257.
- 7 *Abelard, The Letters*, p. 186.
- 8 *Abelard, The Letters*, p. 119.
- 9 *Abelard, The Letters*, p. 117.
- 10 *Abelard, The Letters*, p. 133.
- 11 *Abelard, The Letters*, pp. 138–141.
- 12 David McClellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (London, 1989) p. 265.
- 13 H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London, 1979) p. 330.
- 14 Gemma Corrada Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: Philosophy of Listening*, (London and New York, 1990) pp. 4–5.
- 15 Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, (Feminist Studies no 6, 1980).
- 16 Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, p. 162.
- 17 Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, p.159.
- 18 Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, p. 158.