

Communication

Abelard: Celebrity and Charisma—A Response to Dickson

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Abstract: One might think that Peter Abelard (1079?–1144?) would be the best example of a medieval charismatic teacher. But his rival and prosecutor St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090?–1153) fits the criteria rather better. Unlike Bernard, Abelard denied that he had sought out disciples. Nevertheless, he can be shown to have had student followers, even though some of them repudiated him. Abelard is most important as a public intellectual who depended on public institutions (the incipient university of Paris) rather than on private or monastic patronage.

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‘Celebrity’ is more straightforward than ‘charisma’. I think the concept of ‘celebrity’ (*fama*) is evident in Heloise’s praise of Abelard and similarly in Peter the Venerable. Heloise asks: ‘What king or philosopher could equal your fame?’ ([1], p. 1; [2], p. 115, ll. 186–93). This is extravagant of course; but the idea of fame is there. It is also present in Peter the Venerable’s letter to Heloise, when he says of Abelard that ‘he was known throughout almost the whole world and was famous everywhere’ (*toti pene orbi terrarum notus, et ubique famosus erat*) ([1], p. 96).¹ But Peter goes on to modify this by referring to Matthew’s gospel (11, 29): ‘Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.’ ([3], letter 115, p. 307). So Peter the Venerable has Abelard famed for his humility, whereas according to St Bernard (his prosecutor at the council of Sens in 1140/1141) he was notorious for his pride. By likening Abelard to Goliath, who was thought of as the epitome of pride, Bernard signified this deadly sin in Abelard ([1], p. 311; [4], VIII, letter 189, p. 14, l. 1). In his letter to Pope Innocent II, Peter the Venerable compares Abelard’s disposition to that of a sparrow or turtle-dove, which was perhaps taking the rhetoric of understatement and humility too far ([1], p. 323). Yet in his epitaph for

¹ All Latin translations are by the author.

Abelard, Peter describes him as ‘the world’s acknowledged prince of learning’ (*studiorum cognitus orbi princeps*) ([5], p. 103; [1], p. 324). The idea of fame is alluded to in my essay on ‘Abelard and the individual in history’ ([6], p. 294). The medieval concept of *fama* has also been recently surveyed, although chiefly in legal and literary terms [7].

‘Charisma’ is more complicated. Abelard denied that he sought out followers. In his ‘General Confession of Faith’ dating from the time of his condemnation following the council of Sens, he says: ‘Whatever I have written I have shown freely to everybody, so that I should have judges and not disciples’ (*quaecumque scripsi libenter omnibus exposui ut eos iudices non discipulos haberem*) ([8], p. 133). Nevertheless, as Dickson indicates, in Abelard’s autobiography (his *Historia Calamitatum*) he does indeed describe students seeking him out, when he was at his hermitage of the Paraclete near Troyes ([9], p. 92, l. 1045). Abelard likewise describes, a year or two earlier, when he was a monk of St Denis, how ‘such a multitude of students’ (*scolares*) followed him to his ‘cell’ that lodgings and food were inadequate ([9], p. 82, ll. 666–67). Abelard maintains that students sought him out because he argued things from reason ([9], pp. 82–83, ll. 690–701); he does not say that they necessarily found him a pleasant person. Reasoning is consistent with Peter the Venerable’s epitaph, where Abelard is described as ‘overcoming everything by force of reason’ (*omnia vi superans rationis*) ([5], p.103).

When Abelard was teaching at the hermitage of the Paraclete, one of his students, Hilary of Orléans, a distinguished Latin poet, was prompted to write a poem describing a crisis at the school. The students had evidently misbehaved. Abelard ordered them all to take up lodgings in a nearby village. The Latin verses of this poem each have a French refrain: ‘the master has done wrong to us’ ([1], pp. 240–41; [10], pp. 30–31). The poem claims that rumor is leading to hatred of Abelard ([10], pp. 30–31, l.7); he is a ‘hard master’ (l.21). ‘We are the many (the poem declares) who have come together from all over the place, for whom the fount of logic was overflowing; but the greatest and the least [of us] may depart, if what we have sought here is denied us’ ([10], pp. 30–31, ll. 36–40); ‘if you wish to deny us help, this place will not have the name of a place of prayer (oratory) but a place of tears (ploratory)’ ([10], pp. 30–31, ll. 47–49). As described in this poem, the students are fickle in their loyalties; they will leave, if Abelard fails to satisfy them.

Dickson needs to make it clear that Abelard was accused of heresy twice (in 1121 and 1140/1141), on both occasions because of his book *Theologia* [1], pp. 266–72, pp. 289, 307–10, 317–19). These accusations were not connected with his flight from the abbey of St Denis in 1121, which was occasioned by his questioning the identity of St Denis. Regarding Abelard’s *fama*, the first condemnation in 1121 did not destroy him, as he describes in *Historia Calamitatum* how he recovered ([2], pp. 82–83). Similarly, the second papal condemnation in 1140/1141 did not destroy him everywhere, since Peter the Venerable protected him. As abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable was powerful enough to arrange a settlement in Abelard’s favor.

One reason why Abelard was accused of heresy is because he had a following. In the *Historia Calamitatum* he describes coming to his trial at Soissons in 1121 with ‘our disciples’ (*discipulis nostris*) ([2], p. 83, l. 724). Abelard may have been seeking comparison with Christ here, with whom on more than one occasion he likens himself, whether in suffering, experiencing persecution, or in showing fortitude ([1], pp. 125, 145, 183, 216–17, 312). Similarly at the council of Sens in 1140/1141 the archbishop of Sens describes Abelard coming with his ‘supporters’ or ‘partisans’

(*fautoribus*) ([1], pp. 312, 391 n. 138). As distinct from propaganda, there is evidence that Abelard had actual followers, which meets the criterion of Weberian charisma ([11], chs. 1 and 2).

St. Bernard, rather than Abelard, is perhaps the best example in the twelfth century of a charismatic teacher, who depended for his reputation on the widespread circulation of his letters and sermons. Referring to St. Bernard in his *Apologia*, Abelard's defender Berengar of Poitiers writes: 'People are astonished that you, who are ignorant of the liberal arts, have so great a wealth of eloquence that your effusions have now covered the entire surface of the earth' (*Mirantur homines in te, liberalium disciplinarum ignaro, tantam ubertatem facundiae, quia emissiones tuae iam cooperuerunt universam superficiem terrae*) ([12], p. 111). Irony or praise? Berengar wanted his readers to decide what he meant as irony and what as praise, though this is difficult for us now because of the barrier of Latin.

Like others accused of heresy, Abelard was alleged to be the leader of a sect: the letter of the archbishop of Sens to Innocent II in 1140/1141 describes Abelard's following: 'throughout almost the whole of France, in cities, villages and castles, disputes are carried on by students—not only within the schools but also in public places—and not by the learned or by those who are most advanced, but by boys and simpletons or even by fools' (*per totam fere Galliam in civitatibus, vicis et castellis, a scholaribus, non solum intra scholas, sed etiam triviatim, nec a litteratis aut provectis tantum, sed a pueris et simplicibus, aut certe stultis*) ([13], 189, ll. 84–5, 190, ll. 94–96). Abelard continued to have followers after his death ([11], chs. 1–2). In 1148, six years after Abelard's death, a presumed former student of his recorded Abelard's opinions on ethics, without disapproval, in the margins and spaces of a manuscript in Old English ([14], pp. 163–86). This raises the question as to whether this writer knew that Abelard was a heretic, whose books had been burned at St Peter's Rome ([1], pp. 304–05).

The above discussion makes clear that Abelard's place as a public intellectual is an important theme. This has not been much examined in the literature, despite St Bernard's accusations that Abelard was a self-publicist. The great medieval schoolmen, like Abelard and Aquinas, were public intellectuals because they taught in public institutions and they published some of their thinking in writings, which were widely circulated.

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