

When Books Were Burned

Medieval Condemnations and Intellectual Freedom

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Two Historical Cases

Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142)

Siger of Brabant (c. 1240 – c. 1284)

Three Topics

(1) A clash between faith and reason?

(2) Condemnation of person or their views?

(3) Immediate versus long-term impact

(1) Faith versus reason?

Bernard of Clairvaux



Peter Abelard



(1) Faith versus reason?

Condemnations of 1277

“Some philosophers state things to be true according to philosophy, but not according to the Catholic faith, *as if* there are two contrary truths and *as if* there is a truth in the sayings of the pagans in hell that is opposed to the truth of Sacred Scripture.”

Target

Siger of Brabant

Arts Master

c. 1240 – c. 1284

The World is Eternal

Adhered to the truth of Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity of the world.

Also seemed to give credence to the 'superior truth' of Christian doctrine.

Two truths? Did he hold both? Did he acknowledge both?



(2) Condemn writing, not person

Bernard of Clairvaux's letters to Pope Innocent II about Peter Abelard



Bernard's fear of Abelard's writings

“In cities and castles, darkness is being spread in place of light; everywhere poison is being put forward to everybody in place of honey, or rather in honey.... A new Gospel is being forged for peoples and communities, a new faith is being propounded, a foundation that is different from what has been established. There is disputation that is immoral about virtues and vices, unfaithful about the sacraments of the church, and neither simple nor sober about the depths of the Holy Trinity; rather everything is served up to us as perversity, everything beyond what is normal and different from what we accept. Goliath [1 Kings 17.41] has advanced with his tall body, fortified with his noble weapons of war, with his shield bearer, Arnold of Brescia, going before him. Armor is joined to armor, and there is not a breath that flows through them [job 41.7]. A bee that was in France has hissed to a bee from Italy, and they assembled as one against the Lord and his anointed [Isa. 7.18].... Goliath, therefore, standing as one with his shield bearer between both sides, shouts against the armies of Israel, challenges the ranks of the saints, all the more boldly as he thinks David is not there.”

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistola* 189 to Pope Innocent II

Fears of Abelard's writings

“For Peter Abelard teaches new things again, writes new things; his books cross the seas and traverse the Alps; his new opinions and dogmas about faith are carried through the provinces and kingdoms, are preached with celebration and are freely defended, so much that they are said to have authority in the Roman curia.”

William of Saint-Thierry, from letter to Bernard of Clairvaux and Geoffrey of Chartres, Lent 1140

Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei, Ep. 326 (PL 182:531B)

Effect of Condemnations

Abelard

- 1121 Council of Soissons – books must be burned
- - 1141 Council of Sens - sentenced to “perpetual silence”

1277 Condemnations – proscribed doctrines, suspension of teaching privileges

Abelard's account of Trial at Soissons 1121

"I was then summoned and came at once before the Council. Without any questioning or discussion they compelled me to throw my book into the fire with my own hands, and so it was burnt.

But so that they could appear to have something to say, one of my enemies muttered that he understood it was written in the book that only God the Father was Almighty.

Overhearing this, the legate replied in great surprise that one would scarcely believe a small child could make such a mistake, seeing that it is a professed tenet of our common faith that there are three Almighty.

Abelard's account continued

“Then the archbishop rose to his feet and confirmed the opinion of the legate, changing only the wording, as was needed. ‘Truly, my lord,’ he said, ‘the Father is Almighty, the Son is Almighty and the Holy Spirit is Almighty, and whoever does not share this belief is clearly in error and should not be heard. And now, with your permission, it would be proper for our brother to profess his faith before us all, so that it may be duly approved or disapproved and corrected.’

Abelard's account continued

"I then stood up to make a full profession of my faith and explain it in my own words, but my enemies declared that it was only necessary for me to recite the Athanasian Creed – as any boy could do. They even had the text put before me to read in case I should plead ignorance, as though I were not familiar with the words. I read it as best I could for my tears, choked with sobs. Then I was handed over as if guilty and condemned to the abbot of St. Médard, who was present, and taken off to his cloister as if to prison."

Peter Abelard, *History of my Calamities*

(3) Immediate versus long term impact

Immediate: not always devastating to careers, livelihood

Long-term: preservation of material culture jeopardized

