

Dialogue Among a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian

(1136/39)

Peter Abelard

PREFACE

I was asleep when three men, coming from three directions, appeared to me. Right away I asked of them their profession, and what the motive was for their visit.

“We belong,” they replied, “to different religions. To be sure, all three of us honor a single God, but we have neither the same faith, nor the same practice in serving this God. One of us is a Pagan, of those who are called philosophers: he is content with natural law. The two others possess the Scriptures; the one is a Jew, the other Christian. We have for a long time confronted our religions and disputed their words, and we are now here to take you as our arbiter.”

Greatly surprised, I asked them what led them to this discussion and this encounter, but above all, what determined them to take recourse in my judgment. The Philosopher replied to me: “It is actually my work which is the source of the entire debate. Is not the supreme end of philosophy, in effect, to search out by means of reason the truth, to surpass human opinions and substitute in their place, the reign of reason in all things? Being attached with all my heart to the opinions professed in our schools, instructing myself in both the reasonings of our masters and of their authorities, I finally arrived at moral philosophy, the final crowning of all science, which I judged preferable to any discipline which might exist.

“Having been instructed as much as possible concerning the supreme good and the supreme evil, concerning all which makes the happiness or misfortune of men, I attached myself right away to the attentive study of the various religious confessions which now divide the world, confirmed to follow that which would be the most reasonable, after a comparative examination of all these confessions.

“It is thus, that I have brought to study the refutations which have been made of the Jews and the Christians, of their doctrines, their beliefs, and their Laws. The Jews appeared to me to be fools, and the Christians insane—

forgive me for saying this to you, who pass for Christian. After disputing a long time with them, since the quarrel born of our confrontation is not yet complete, we have decided to submit the reasons invoked by each of the parties to your arbitration. We know that you are ignorant neither of philosophical reasoning, nor of the armaments by which these two Laws defend themselves. For it is the very Law of the Christians, that which they call the New Testament, which leads them to respect the Old Testament, and to adhere to the readings of both one and the other of these Books with the greatest zeal. It was quite necessary, at last, to take recourse to an arbiter, if we did not want our quarrel to endure without end. . . .”

* * *

PART II

Dialogue Between the Philosopher and the Christian

PHILOSOPHER: Christian, it is now for you, I pray you, to respond to my inquest, according to the rules of our agreement. When the law is posterior, it must be that much more perfect and lead to greater rewards, for it must rest on more reasonable bases. Why else, in effect, would the first lawmakers have published laws for the people, if these laws would not have received complements which may render them more perfect? It is thus, that one of our own, approaching, in the second book of the *Rhetoric*,* the question of contradictory laws, asserts that one must first search out which is the elder; for “the more recent,” he says, “carries more weight.”

CHRISTIAN: I am surprised at the impudence with which you contradict yourself at the outset of your declaration. After having asserted that your studies have revealed to

* Cicero, *De Inventione*, II.49.145 (Translator’s note).

you the foolishness of the Jews, and the insanity of the Christians, you said immediately that you were not aiming at polemical success, but solely at the discovery of truth. How be it, that you expect truth from those whom you at first treat as insane? After your quest, do you think that their insanity could end, at the point that they become capable of giving you the instruction you desire? Assuredly, if you hold that the Christian religion is crazy, and that its religionists are insane, what could you think, O Philosopher, of the great philosophers of Greece, but that the sermons—without art and eloquence—of those simple men who were the Apostles, were able to convert to this faith, making them, in your eyes, thoroughly crazy? Such that, what you call our insanity, has pushed roots so deep with the Greeks, and has found among them such forces, that it is in Greece that the Gospel doctrine and the Apostolic doctrine have been gathered together as writings, and it is in Greece, therefore, that the great Councils take place, and it is by spreading out from there that they have conquered the world, crushing all heresies.

PHILOSOPHER: It happens that men might more be stimulated by debates and insults, than be moved by prayers and supplication, and that those whom one has excited in such a way may have more zeal in battle, than those one has supplicated, and who only do battle to oblige their enemies.

CHRISTIAN: You are to be forgiven, if you have acted with such an aim. But, so that I be not suspected of wanting to put off the contest, let us both pray that the Lord Himself inspire at the same time, both your questions and my replies, for he desires the salvation of all men, and that all learn to know Him.

PHILOSOPHER: Amen.

* * *

CHRISTIAN: I clearly see that it is not your ignorance of our faith which condemns you, but rather the obstinance of your disbelief. You have yourself learned in the Holy Scriptures, the perfection of our Law, and nonetheless, here you are, still hesitating before which road to follow, as if these Scriptures themselves did not afford you the perfected and superior testimony, above all others, of those virtues which, you have no doubt, suffice to ensure blessedness. It was this perfection, that the Lord spoke of when, completing his Old Testament by a New one, He says from the outset to His yet imperfect disciples: "Except your righteousness shall exceed, etc." [Matt. 5:20] And going immediately into detail, He demonstrated the riches of the New Law and all which was lacking of moral perfection in the Old, completing, thus, the edifice of true ethic. In comparing, in effect, the teaching of the Christ, with all which is reported to us on the patriarchs and the prophets in the matter of moral discipline and

judgment, one will easily be convinced, through a careful comparison, that the ancient precepts are nothing compared to the new.

PHILOSOPHER: It is to proceed with this comparison, that I came here, you well know, and that is the very object of our undertaking.

CHRISTIAN: Let us consider, then, insofar as I am able to grasp it, this reality, which is the end and achievement of all science. You call it ethics, that is, morality. We are accustomed, on our part, to designate it with the name of Divinity. We believe, in effect, its object, that is, the very comprehension of God; whereas, you give it its name after the means, which are good morals or virtues.

PHILOSOPHER: What you say is clear, and I agree. I also greatly approve of your choice of words. You judge, in effect, more worthy the object to which we attain, than the routes by which we arrive at this object. You judge as greater, the happiness of having arrived at the end, than the happiness of striving for this end. The terms which you employ, thus aim for the highest realities, and, from the outset, by their intrinsic significance, are more attractive to the reader. Consequently, if your document has as much valor as your vocabulary, I think there is no higher science.

CHRISTIAN: If you would like, let us first define, in its entirety, the object of true morality, let us see what ends this science proposes to us, and to what heights it forces us to attain in obeying its precepts. It seems to me, for my part, that this entire science is summed up thus: the discovery of the sovereign good, and its means of acquisition.

PHILOSOPHER: I am infinitely happy that, with such force and in so few words, you have hence carried forward the essence of such an important reality, and that you have recapitulated with such care the aim of all morality. No sooner expressed, this aim is of a nature to draw the listener toward the study of this science, in such a manner that all the other arts appear, by comparison, unworthy of equal effort. In the same measure that the sovereign good—wherein true blessedness consists in its enjoyment—triumphs in excellence over all other goods, it is outside the realm of doubt that the science which leads to this sovereign good surpass all others, as much by its utility as by its worthiness. . . .

* * *

CHRISTIAN: Precisely, after the conversion of so many philosophers, neither you, nor your successors, have any longer the right to put our faith in doubt, and a debate of this sort has no more reason for being, albeit the example of these men, whose authority you fully accept in profane matters, do not convince you, perhaps, to adhere to their

faith; and you might say with the prophet: “We are not more worthy than our fathers.”

PHILOSOPHER: We do not agree enough with their authority, to accept, out of hand, their reasons without discussion. We would be unfaithful to our philosophical calling, if, having undertaken to examine the proposed arguments, we were to give, for some time, to such portions of those arguments which were discovered inadmissible and perfectly demented by the reality of things, simple opinions rather than verities.

In this case, we would think that, as your very own chroniclers recount, your ancients had rather been constrained to embrace your faith under pressure of force, than through a rational conviction. Previous to the conversion, which you call miraculous, of emperors and princes, your preaching convinced nearly none of the wise, although it had been easy at that time to pull the nations away from the too-evident errors of idolatry, and convert them to monotheism. As well, your Paul was not wrong to harangue the Athenians thus: “Men of Athens, I see you superstitious in all things, etc.” In those times, in effect, the cognizance of natural law and the Divine, was in full decadence, the vulgar failings had entirely submerged the wisdom of a small elite, and, to speak in all conscience, and render due homage to the important fruits of the Christian teachings: we have no doubt, but that it was this teaching, above all, which wiped out idolatry from the world.

CHRISTIAN: Add, that natural law and that perfect moral discipline which is, you say, the sole end of your efforts, and which you hold sufficient for salvation, cannot have—it is evident—any other origin than that God Who, under the title of veritable *Sophia*—that is, of Divine Wisdom—has instructed all those who by the very same are worthy of being called philosophers.

PHILOSOPHER: May it please God that it be as you say, and, that you show yourself to be truly logical and, in the wielding of your arguments, rational, yourselves armed with that Supreme Wisdom which you call in Greek *Logos*, and in Latin, *Verbum*. You do not think that, in my misfortune, I would seek refuge in that assertion of your Gregory: “Your faith is without merit, if it rest its support on human reason.”*

Given that they do not succeed in proving before you what they assert, right away your preachers shelter their own impotence behind that authority of Gregory. But, in so doing, is it not that their sole aim is to force our adherence to everything they preach with respect to faith, whether it be stupidity or truth? For, if faith, in

effect, precludes all rational dialogue, if it have no merit but at such a price, such that the object of faith escape all critical judgment, and all that is preached we must accept immediately, whatever the errors such preaching spreads, in that case it serves nothing to be a believer; for, where reason may in no manner agree, neither may reason refute.

Were an idolater to come to say to us of a rock, of a chunk of wood, or never-mind-what creature: “Here is the true God, the creator of Heaven and earth!” Were he to come to preach to us never-mind-what obvious abomination, who, then, will be able to refute it, if all rational discussion is excluded from the domain of faith? The moment you expect to dispute it (above all, if you pose as a Christian), the other will reply, invoking your own argument: “The faith is without merit, etc.” And there it is: the Christian confounded by the very arms of his own defense, since they refuse to hear his reasons, in the domain where he himself prohibited that they use reasoning, and where he refuses to others to dispute rationally on matters of faith.

CHRISTIAN: As the greatest of wise men says, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” [Prov. 14:12] It often occurs that reasons appear such, that is, reasonable and to the point, while they are not in the least.

PHILOSOPHER: Is that not precisely the case in the authorities acknowledged by believers? Do they themselves not err quite often? Without that, and if they acknowledged the same authorities, would so many diverse sects be opposing each other in matters of faith? In fact, it is in the light of their own reason, that each one determine his own authorities. Would it not be necessary to indifferently accept all the doctrines contained in the holy books of all peoples, were it not appropriate, from the first, precisely for reason, which naturally takes precedence, to exercise, in their behalf, critical judgment? If the authors of these books have merited consideration as authorities—that is, if one judges them worthy of immediate credibility—is it not by virtue of that reason with which their writings appear filled? Your very own theologians bear witness in favor of the precedence of reason with respect to authority, and it is St. Anthony who expresses it thus: “Since it is the perception of human reason which is the source of writings, whosoever possess within himself this perception, has no need of writings.”†

—*excerpts translated from the French*
by Katherine Notley

* Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 26, p. 201 (II.26.1, col. 1197c) (Translator’s note).

† Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 73, p. 84 (45, col. 158c) (Translator’s note).