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*HUMILITAS – AN INTELLECTUAL PROGRAM.
WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY’S COMMENTARY
ON ROMANS AND HIS EVALUATION
OF EMERGING SCHOLASTICISM*

Preliminary questions

It is the purpose of this volume to present the many facets of medieval humility. The following paper hopes to contribute to this project, by not only offering the perspective of a particular medieval author, but also by giving voice to the multidimensionality of the concept within this one author’s thought. The author in question is William of St. Thierry (1075–1080),¹ one of the first generation Cistercian authors, along such figures as Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred Rievaulx.² As humility is one of the most central concepts of Christian monasticism, it is hardly surprising that the notion takes a special place in William’s own spirituality. That alone would however hardly qualify him as a particularly interesting object of research for the study at hand, since the emphasis on his own humility is a characteristic he shares with most medieval – and even contemporary – monks. The significance of humility for his personal religious practice demonstrates primarily an adherence to a shared communal ideal and discipline. While examples of individual spirituality are certainly worth discussing, William’s oeuvre is specifically suitable

1. The Brill Companion to William of St. Thierry (F. T. Sergent (ed.), *A Companion to William of Saint-Thierry*, Leiden 2019) is the most recent and comprehensive reference work on William.

2. E. R. Elder, «Early Cistercian writers», in M. Birkedal Bruun (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order*, Cambridge 2013, 199–217.

for a study on the concept of humility's medieval iterations for a different reason.

As the title of my paper suggests, I am arguing that William used humility as the prime virtue, on which he not only based his personal morality, but formulated a systematic ethics of theological work. In his exegetical and spiritual writing William develops an intellectual program of sorts; a vision for the theological endeavors of future generations of students. It is intended as an ideological alternative to the developments that simultaneously took place in the cathedral schools of the time: The emergence of scholastic thought. In fact, it was one of the central purposes of William's literary life to rebut the scholastic method and its epistemological prerequisites. This is evidenced most explicitly by his infamous conflict with the equally as infamous theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142).³ In the figures and works of these two authors we can witness two strongly opposing concepts of human intellect. As I will discuss, the notion of humility – and pride (*superbia*) as its traditional counterpart – play a significant role in their respective definition. It is the thesis of this paper that the conflict between these two authors revolves mainly around their differing views on the appropriateness of God as an object of human intellectual reflection. The crucial point of contention could be reduced to the following questions: How far may the human mind dare to reach? When is the pursuit of knowledge still an acceptable expression of the human desire to get closer to God, and when does it run danger to grossly overestimate the human claim to insight?

My focus will lie on William's rather than Abelard's perspective, fully aware of the one-sidedness that might result from this limitation. It can therefore not be the stated intention of this paper to offer a comprehensive portrayal of Abelardian theology, or the broader dynamics between conservative and innovative

3. The Cambridge Companion to Abelard (ed. J. E. Bower, K. Guilfoy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, Cambridge 2004) provides a thorough biographical account. The conflict between Abelard and William was often analyzed as a conflict between Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux. The conflict's historiography is poignantly illustrated by Wim Verbaal in his «The Council of Sens Reconsidered: Masters, Monks, or Judges?», *Church History*, 74/3 (2005), 460-93.

forces in the 12th century.⁴ Rather, I hope to present some thoughts on the meaning of humility for a Christian understanding of human intellectual potential, as it is exemplified in William's life and work. Two works in particular will serve as my main sources for this study: The *Disputatio adversus Petrum Abaelardum*,⁵ William's list of doctrinal accusations against Abelard, on the one hand, and the *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*,⁶ William's Commentary on Romans, on the other. The first can provide insight into William's critique of Abelard's proto-scholastic method. His Commentary on Romans will then concretely exemplify his vision of authorship based on the virtue of humility, constituting a constructive alternative to the kind of approach he rejects.

William's offensive against Abelard's 'theology of pride'

The *Disputatio* was originally written in 1139 as a letter to William's close friend and powerful ally, Bernard of Clairvaux. At the time William had already spent several years at the abbey of Signy, retired from his duties as an abbot. Long before his move to Signy in 1135, William had desired to leave his position of power in favor of a reclusive life. Unlike Bernard, William preferred the life of simple monk to that of a public figure.⁷ William's intention for these later years of his creative period was to devote them to the Cistercian reform movement and his

4. One of the most comprehensive work, discussing these dynamics is certainly Martin Grabmann's *Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*. Rather than reinforcing a contrasting opposition between monastic and scholastic literature, he studies the mutual influences of these tendencies, understanding the monastic interest in patristic authority as the «levees, regulating the torrent» of scholastic innovation, M. Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*, vol. 2: *Die Scholastische Methode im 12. und beginnenden 13. Jahrhundert*, Basel 1961, at 108.

5. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum et de fide*, ed. P. Verdeyen, Turnhout 2007, 13–58.

6. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, ed. P. Verdeyen, Turnhout 1990.

7. See E. R. Elder, «Bernard and William of Saint Thierry», in B. P. McGuire (ed.), *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux*, Leiden 2011, 108–32, at 109.

personal spiritual growth. Given his long-standing and often expressed wish to leave the stage of public discourse, the fact that he felt prompted by Abelard's work to re-enter it speaks to his level of outrage and the nature of his concern.⁸ Unlike other critics of Abelardian theology, such as William of Champeaux or Alberich of Rheims, William's reaction was hardly motivated by any kind of political calculations, seeing that he had no interest in a magisterial career at one of the prominent theological schools. Abelard, in other words, was not a threat to him personally. However, William believed, he was going to be a threat to the integrity of Christian thought and the Church as a whole.⁹ As Constant Mews showed in his comprehensive study on Abelard's heresy trial in Sens in 1141, William's position was rather unique: Most protagonists of the *Casus Abaelardi* were in some way incited by particular political interests.¹⁰ Bernard, for instance, had initially refused involvement after receiving William's call to action. Only when he was urged by the royal advisor, abbot Suger of St. Denis, to dedicate himself to the matter, he did so.¹¹ William's relatively a-political position in this otherwise highly delicate diplomatic affair suggests a rather authentic spiritual and theological motive on his part. The arguments he invokes against Abelard can thus be understood as accurate reflections of his inner conviction.

The extent to which William had already read Abelard's works when composing his pamphlet is not entirely clear. Interestingly, he admits that he had not read one of Abelard's otherwise most controversial books, the *Sic et Non*, of which he simply believes

8. In his earlier years, William had not been opposed to public dispute and political involvement. Notable are for instance William's efforts to introduce elements of the Cistercian reform into the hierarchies of the Benedictine order, resulting in the publication of his *Responsio abbatum* around 1132, in which he defended his reform work against critics, such as Cardinal Matthew of Montalbano. See T. F. Sergeant, «A Chronology and Biography of William of Saint-Thierry», in Id. (ed.), *A Companion to William of Saint Thierry*, 11–34, 22–23).

9. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 13: «Dico uobis periculose siletis, tam uobis quam Ecclesiae Dei».

10. C. Mews, «The Council of Sens (1141): Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval», *Speculum*, 77/2 (2002), 342–82.

11. *Ibid.*, 371.

that it is ‘as dogmatically monstrous as its name suggests’.¹² William felt he had every right to be suspicious of Abelard’s choice of titles. The work on which he based most of his critique was a work he called the *Theologia Petri Abaelardi*.¹³ Just as much as its doctrinal contents, the work’s titular concept, *theologia*, had provoked William’s criticism.¹⁴ The notion that one of his contemporaries would arrogate for himself the task of developing a systematic, all-compassing theology was disconcerting to him.

In his own oeuvre, William noticeably refrains from considering his own work ‘theological’ in any way. In fact, he seems to entirely reject the task of theology, as it started to emerge at the cathedral schools of the time. Theology, as the notion of human speech about God, or more particularly, the triune nature of God, seemed to William like a gross overestimation of the mind’s potential. Spiritual reflection could not be pursued, in his view, as an intellectual exercise.¹⁵ Throughout his *Disputatio* he refers to Abelard as «this theologian» (*hic theologus*), suggesting that his inappropriate self-perception could be reason enough to dismiss his work. Abelard’s attitude, which had often been described as arrogant, had earned him many critics. However, William’s dismissal of Abelard’s

12. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 14–5: «Sunt autem, ut audio, adhuc alia eius opuscula, quorum nomina sunt: Sic et non, Scito te ipsum, et alia quaedam de quibus timeo, ne sicut monstrosi sunt nominis, sic etiam sint monstrosi dogmatis [...]».

13. No work by that title exists. This could suggest that William did not feel the need to clarify that the work he was actually addressing was officially called the *Theologia* ‘*Scholarium*’, because it would be very obvious to his addressees, which version of Abelard’s *Theologia* he considered an urgent concern. Abelard’s *Theologia* ‘*Summi Boni*’ had, after all, been condemned at the Council of Soissons in 1121; J. Marenbon, «Life, milieu, and intellectual contexts», in J. E. Brower, K. Guilfooy (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 2004, 13–44, at 19.

14. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 13: «Casu nuper incidi in lectionem cuiusdam libelli hominis illius, cuius titulus erat: Theologia Petri Abaelardi. Fateor, curiosum me fecit titulus ad legendum».

15. As Clare Monagle puts it, this monastic perspective entailed «a mystically infused view of the world, where meditation upon the Word aroused and nurtured the individual through a spiritual praxis», C. Monagle, *Orthodoxy and controversy in twelfth-century religious discourse: Peter Lombard’s Sentences and the development of theology*, Turnhout 2013, 25.

self-identification as a theologian goes beyond matters of character. The fact that Abelard presented his work as a *theologia*, literally the attempt to explain and analyze the divine mysteries, stood in stark contrast to William's belief in divine ineffability.¹⁶

William's accusations, while they did not overlook matters of content, centered on a fundamental dismissal of Abelard's methodology. «Theological» aspirations, he believed, would prove futile, as they misjudged the position of the human mind in its relationship to God. Even more so, and this explains the urgency of William's *Disputatio*, they display a sinful transgression. The sin in question is, of course, pride (*superbia*), or in other terms, a lack of humility. William believed that knowledge, particularly knowledge of God, could not be achieved by human intellect in an active manner. Viewing theological insight as a divine gift, he understood the task of the Christian thinker as one that consisted in humbly receiving, rather than actively pursuing knowledge. The idea of humble receptivity defined William's intellectual ethics. Appropriate human endeavours drew their legitimacy from the validity of their source, with divine revelation being the only ultimately valid source in regard to theological matters.

Although he considered direct revelation to be a possibility, particularly for those living in a monastic setting, William did not generally push for the kind of immediacy that is often attributed to later medieval mysticism. The revelation of insight could also occur in mediated ways, be it crucially through the study and meditation of Scripture, through the works of the Church Fathers or the orthodox tradition transmitted by ecclesial literature and ordinances. In other words, William advocated for the role of authority within the intellectual process. The kind of humility he hoped to see displayed by Christian thinkers was thus twofold in its expression: Devotional humility towards God on the one hand and literary humility in respect to Church authorities on the other. On those two accounts he found Abelard's theology to be lacking. His attitude towards authorities is hence a core argument in William's *Disputatio*.

16. F. Robb, *Intellectual tradition and misunderstanding: the development of academic theology on the Trinity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*, London 1994, 60.

Innovation and curiosity as symptoms of superbia

The doctrinal result of *superbia*, he claimed, would be theological novelty. One of the most problematic aspects of Abelardian theology, in his view, is its willingness to be innovative: According to his opponent, it is the novelty of Abelard's teachings that renders them more dangerous than their inaccuracy. This becomes clear from William's almost excessive use of the word *novum* to summarize the essence of all of Abelard's alleged offenses:

Petrus enim Abaelardus iterum nova docet, nova scribit, et libri eius transeunt maria, trinsiliunt Alpes, et novae eius sententiae de fide, et nova dogmata per provincias et regna deferuntur, celebriter praedicantur et libere defenduntur, in tantum ut in curia etiam Romana dicantur habere auctoritatem.¹⁷

Not only does he invent new theological assertions, but he teaches and disseminates his ideas throughout Christian territory. His 'new doctrines' – a paradoxical notion in itself – run the danger of poisoning the minds of countless students. Even worse: His revolutionary proclamations seem to find enthusiasts in the Roman Curia, having thus already seduced those who ought to defend orthodox teaching against any such attacks. William believed that novelty, just as human sin itself, is alluring and pervasive. His concern, rather than with his opponent's personal profession of faith, lay with the purity of Christian teaching. What was at stake for him was not a single man's chance at redemption, but the future of theological education as such.

One of the particular issues William had with the introduction of novelty into matters of faith was that any kind of doctrinal variation would inevitably lead to the proclamation of a new kind of faith altogether. A faith that would be fundamentally different from the faith for which the apostles and martyrs gave their lives. A faith, unlike the one, which the Doctors of the Church had defended so arduously. A new faith, that would not

17. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 13.

only uproot ecclesial authority, but the community that was grounded upon it.¹⁸

Establishing a continuous narrative of the history of doctrine is central to William's intellectual ethics. Tradition is not only a term he uses to describe past Christianity, but it is also his vision for the future. William believed that the limitations of the human knowledge of God were drawn up by the Biblical authors and the Church Fathers. Scholars of future generations would have to move within these confines of orthodoxy. He could not accuse Abelard of a complete lack of engagement with Scripture and the Fathers: Particularly in the later phase of his creative period, Abelard moved on to tackle exegetical questions and discuss Patristic opinions. William's point of contention, however, was his motivation to do so and his self-perception in the process. While he acknowledged Abelard's turn from philosophical and logical matters toward exegetical and doctrinal questions, he noted that his methods had remained the same:

Emortuis quippe ex Ecclesia omnibus paene doctrinae ecclesiasticae magistris, quasi in vacuam rempublicam Ecclesiae domesticus irruens, singulare sibi in ea magisterium arripuit, agens in Scriptura divina quod agere solebat in dialectica, proprias adinventiones, annuas novitates; censor fidei, non discipulus; emendator, non imitator.¹⁹

Abelard, he criticized, had given himself the air of an authority in his own right. Applying his dialectic methods to the study of the Bible, he believed he could logically evaluate the Scriptural claim to truth. He had reversed the process of Christian thought, as William understood it; formulating abstract theological questions on the basis of philosophical reflection and apply-

18. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 13-14: «Cum enim fidem communis spei graviter nimis et periculose corrumpi video, nullo resistente, nullo obloquente, quam Christus suo nobis sanguine sacrauit, pro qua apostoli et martyres usque ad mortem pugnaverunt, quam sancti doctores duris laboribus suis et magnis sudoribus defensam, integram et incorruptam usque ad faeces temporum nostrorum transmiserunt contabesco in memetipso, et a frixura cordis et dolore spiritus cogor pro ea loqui, pro qua, si necesse et opportunum, vellem etiam mori».

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

ing them to the Bible, rather than allowing Scripture itself to determine the kinds of questions he should ask.

In his *Disputatio*, William illustrates this point in a very cunning and creative way. Calling on the authority of Ambrose of Milan (and thereby demonstrating his own reverence to Patristic tradition), he dismisses any desire for knowledge that goes beyond what Godself freely reveals. Quoting Ambrose, William rhetorically asks Abelard:

Quid te quaestionum tormenta delectant? Mihi licet scire de Filio Dei quod natus est, non licet scire quomodo natus est.²⁰

The notion of «tormenting questions» is particularly explosive in regard to Abelard's proto-scholastic approach, which consisted, very simply put, in asking *quaestiones*. Interesting is especially the wording «non licet scire» that suggests that certain questions should never be raised. Ambrose's example, the doctrine of incarnation, suggests that these 'forbidden' questions concern the metaphysical particularities of divine activity. While it is a sensible spiritual task to ponder the meaning of divine mysteries, the attempt to explain them or to understand how they were possible is ultimately harmful.

By quoting the Milanese Father's statement without customizing it to his own context in any way, William implies that Ambrose had addressed the very same problem, he himself is addressing now. The choice of authority is not coincidental: Ambrose had in his own time fought the Arian heresy;²¹ only one of many, of which William accused Abelard.²² Although William tackles specific 'heretical' passages in Abelard's *Theologia*, what he seems much more interested in is the root of heretical thought. Along with Ambrose he asserts that it is vain curiosity

20. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 21.

21. *Ibid.*: «Contra hoc uero quod dicit impropria esse in Deo nomina Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti, tamquam aliud significantia quam quod in nominibus ipsis sonat, hoc est contra Arianos beatus Ambrosius in libro De Spiritu sancto dicit: [...]».

22. Throughout the *Disputatio*, he believes to detect Arian, Sabellian, Manichaean and Pelagian heresy in Abelard's works.

(*curiositas*) that leads the mind astray.²³ Curiosity, for William, is a particular expression of *superbia*, as it bases its self-justification on a false assessment of human potential. It wrongly seduces the mind into believing that it deserves more than God had offered. Intellectual curiosity is a dissatisfaction with divine revelation.

William saw this kind of dissatisfaction displayed in Abelard's treatment of Scripture and tradition. Alluding to Rom. 1:16 he accuses him of being «ashamed of the gospel of God» and having «devalued the simplicity of Christian faith».²⁴ His principle argument for such an accusation is Abelard's penchant for pagan philosophy, or as William puts it, his «love of Plato»; a love that conflicted, in his eyes, with the devotion only God was entitled to. Instead of pursuing the *imitatio Christi*, he hoped to emulate the philosophical greatness of Platonic thought.²⁵ The confrontation between two opposing intellectual ideals is impressively illustrated here, as William postulates the mutual exclusivity of a theology based on philosophical ambition and a humble spirituality. Humility, in this case, is defined as contentment with Scriptural truth. The ideal Christian thinker, for William, prefers the plainness of Scriptural truth to the sophisticated complexity of dialectics.

Strategies of critique and defense

Although the question, whether William himself adheres to this theoretical ideal will have to be addressed as we move on to

23. As quoted in Grabmann, *Geschichte der scholastischen Methode* (2), 1961, 106: «Sunt namque, qui scire volunt eo fine tantum, ut sciant; et turpis curiositas est. Et sunt qui scire volunt, ut sciantur ipsi, et turpis vanitas est. Et sunt item, qui scire volunt, ut aedificent, et caritas est. Et item, qui scire volunt, ut aedificentur, quod prudentia est».

24. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 43: «Erubescit evangelium Dei; vilvit apud eum christianae fidei simplicitas».

25. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 43: «Qui utinam vel ea benevolentia legeret evangelium Dei, qua Platonem legit. Platonem cum legit, ut eum intelligit, sensum in eo philosophicum magnifice praedicat et extollit; ubi uero non intelligit, uel secundum spiritum huius mundi secus eum aliquid dicere deprehendit, in meliorem semper partem interpretari conatur. Utinam et in hoc imitaretur Platonem, quem amat, quod ille cum de Deo agit [...]».

the discussion of his own work, it is important to note at this point that his use of an intellectual virtue ethics marks a strategic shift in the kind of public scrutiny Abelard faced from his contemporaries. William was by no means the first reader of his work to raise suspicion and express critique, and not the first to do so successfully. When it came to public debate, however, Abelard's logical skills had often earned him an advantageous position and left several contenders humiliated by his supremacy in the field of dialectics. Abelard recounts a few of these instances in his *Historia calamitatum*.²⁶ Although his autobiographical account is certainly biased in many ways, it provides interesting insight into the tactic of his earlier opponents, as well as his own strategy of refuting them.

Abelard seemed to have used doctrinal accusations against him as opportunities to provoke. Most often he was accused of contradicting Patristic assertions and thus demonstrating a lacking deference to spiritual authority. Abelard's knowledge in matters of Patristic thought was, however, extensive. He was able to pinpoint particular references for even the most outrageous of theological claims, mostly from some obscure or long-forgotten passage in the Fathers' works. Clearly enjoying his opponents' confusion, he liked to point out contradictory opinions within the Patristic corpus and surprise his contenders with lesser-known citations from the Fathers' works. During his time in the monastery of St. Denis, for instance, he had managed to antagonize his own subordinates, when challenging the commonly held view that Dionysius the Areopagite, the monastery's patron saint, had been Bishop in Athens. Quoting Bede as his witness in a dispute he himself instigated, he was able to both defend his own opposing position and compromise his brothers under the guise of adhering to authority.²⁷

Similarly, he publicly embarrassed Alberich of Rheims – at least according to his own account of the conflict – when he was able to substantiate his claim that God is not able to beget Godself by quoting Augustine's *De Trinitate*.²⁸ In other words:

26. Petrus Abaelardus, *Historia calamitatum*, ed. D. Haage, Berlin 2001.

27. Petrus Abaelardus, *Historia calamitatum*, 58.

28. Petrus Abaelardus, *Historia calamitatum*, 46–48.

He strategically used the most prominent authority of Catholic orthodoxy to argue for the position his contemporaries identified as the very heresy, Augustine had fought against during his own time. More often than not, Abelard's overt provocations hit their mark. In his *Disputatio* William noted, albeit with dissent, that Abelard seemed to challenge the doctrine of divine omnipotence *quasi ex auctoritate beati Augustini*, and had very few arguments to employ against him.²⁹

It is unsurprising that Abelard left most of the early conflicts in his life a victor. He himself was a proponent designer of the dialectical game he drew his adversaries into; a game William refused to play. He explicitly did not intend to surpass Abelard on the grounds of philosophical virtuosity or innovation, since, despite his education in the dialectic arts, he would have risked coming up short in such a confrontation. Instead, he proposed to change the rules entirely. In his *Disputatio*, he not only challenged the content of Abelard's work, but its method and foundation. Establishing humility as a required virtue in matters of theological reflection disqualifies Abelard's confident approach at its roots and the critique of particular statements becomes secondary.³⁰

Paul and the ideal of the humble Christian thinker

William's *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos* is one of his attempts of exemplifying the ideal of the humble Christian author that he wages against Abelard. Although one could likely argue that all of William's works display at least implicitly the intellectual principles he upheld, his Romans Commentary is an especially well suited source for gaining a better understanding of his systematic concept of humility. Firstly, exegetical commen-

29. See Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 18.

30. Although that is not to say that William does not engage with particular doctrinal claims as well. His *Disputatio* is structured as a list of thirteen concrete accusations of heresy, ranging from his definition of faith, to his assertions about the Devil and his harmatology, see Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 14.

taries on the Pauline epistles were a popular genre at the emerging cathedral schools.³¹ William's commentary digresses from the kind of exegesis he became familiar with during his own education in Rheims. Being the first Cistercian author to show exegetical interest in the Epistle to the Romans, his Commentary is representative of the way he conceptualizes monastic exegesis vis-à-vis the standards of scholarship that were being established in the context of school theology.³² Written in 1137, two years before the *Disputatio*, the Commentary can be read as the «doctrinal foundation with which he opposed Peter Abelard».³³ Here he unfolds what he considers original Christian literature within an orthodox framework. He provides both an implicit reflection and an explicit discussion of Christian epistemology, revealing what he considers a faithful pursuit of knowledge; one that is grounded on the virtue of humility.

This is a focus he did not have to force onto the Biblical text. Humility is an important theme of the Pauline corpus and was a traditional association of the figure of Paul himself.³⁴ The Epistle to the Romans lends itself to William's vision of virtuous intellectual work particularly because of Paul's exemplary status, that was upheld both in the schools and the monasteries of the time. While Paul exemplified for Abelard the first truly systematic theologian, William considered him a monastic writer like himself,³⁵

31. P. Hawkins, B. Schildgen, «Introduction: Paul's Letter to the Romans in the Middle Ages», in W. S. Campbell, P. S. Hawkins, B. D. Schildgen (eds.), *Medieval Readings of Romans*, New York 2007, 1–10, 1.

32. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Exposé sur l'Épître aux Romains*, vol. 1, ed. P. Verdeyen, Paris 2011, 16.

33. S. R. Cartwright, *The Romans Commentaries of William of St. Thierry and Peter Abelard: A Theological and Methodological Comparison*, Western Michigan University 2001, 20.

34. According to William, the name Paul signifies puniness, humility and composure («quasi paululus humilis ac quietus»), a name, William states, which Paul had assumed to mark the significant shift of identity he had experienced. See Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, 6. This is an etymology he most likely drew from Augustine, see Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Exposé sur l'Épître aux Romains*, vol. 1, 120, fn. 3.

35. J. Doutre, «Romans as Read in School and Cloister in the Twelfth Century: The Commentaries of Peter Abelard and William of St. Thierry», in Campbell, Hawkins, Schildgen (eds.), *Medieval Readings of Romans*, 33–69, at 37.

revealing that for both authors Paul served as a projection surface for their own intellectual ideals. William's Commentary on Romans therefore does not only set up the narrative of the historical Paul, but paints his life and mission as a model for his readers to actively follow.

A large inspiration of William's understanding of humility is the Pauline biography itself. Just as Paul had undergone a personal development from sin to virtue, so those who follow his example will have to experience a redemptive transformation. Beginning his journey as Saul, a known persecutor of Christians, Paul had received the revelation of divine grace, causing him to change both his name and his faith. The archetypes of the 'proud' and the 'humble' are immediately juxtaposed within the narrative of Paul's life, allowing William to present humility as a direct result of divine intervention, rather than an innate human quality. It is central to William's theology to emphasize the necessity of grace over human achievement. While human discipline as a way of sustaining a humble attitude remains important for William at a later point (especially in regard to the particularities of the monastic life) the kind of humility he discusses in his *Expositio* is one that requires a divine act of humiliation first. The figure of Saul exemplifies this need unlike any other:

Tu enim humiliasti eum sicut vulneratum superbum et in brachio virtutis tuae et spiritu gratiae tuae de Saulo fecisti Paulum, Benjamin adolescentulum in mentis excessu caelos penetrantem et in paradiso Dei audientem verba arcana, quae non licet homini loqui; lupum olim rapacem, sed ad vesperum praedam dividentem.³⁶

It becomes clear from this passage that pridefulness is a default state of the fallen creation. It is here described as a wound that requires healing attention. Only those who had received healing through humiliation will be granted access to higher knowledge. Humility, or rather the willingness to be humbled by God, is a prerequisite for theological insight. Paul's apostolic authority is grounded in his embrace of lowliness.

36. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, 6.

Paul's self-identification in the first few verses of the text, which provides William with a starting point for his exegesis, is indicative of the way he perceives and presents himself: «Paulus servus Iesu Christi». What shines through in his discussion of Paul is an acute awareness of the ancient Roman context and the historical dimensions of the Biblical text. Paul introducing himself as a *servus*, the lowest possible social class within Roman society, marks for William a conscious decision to subvert the Imperial virtue system.³⁷ When viewed through the lens of divine grace, humility transforms from a social curse into a spiritual blessing.

Wisdom and folly in contrast

Reversely, the values that guarantee high social esteem, become a hindrance of the spiritual journey. In the context of William's ethical reflection on human intellect, pride and curiosity come to mind. Since humility is the epistemological basis for any understanding of God, the sinful state of pride prevents the mind from receiving such insight. William's prime examples of intellectual pride are what he calls the «philosophers of this world» («philosophi huius mundi»).38 William refrains in this case from mentioning any of his contemporary opponents by name, but his critique pertains both to ancient philosophers and his contemporary opponents.³⁹ The criticism he raises against them is interestingly not intellectual but moral in kind. While their curiosity had earned them remarkable insight, they failed to attribute their knowledge to its proper source. Rather than

37. *Ibid.*: «Servitutis huius professio et humilitatis est, et gloriae, et auctoritatis eximiae, cum se servum eius quasi gloriabundus profitetur, qui dicit: Magnum est tibi vocari servum meum, cui, sicut ipse dicit, serviebat in evangelio Filii eius».

38. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, 19.

39. In his *Disputatio*, William uses the term *sapientibus huius mundi* in reference to Abelard, alluding clearly to the «philosophi huius mundi» from his *Expositio*, see Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opuscula adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, 43.

receiving their intellectual successes with gratitude as one would a gift, they misjudged them as achievements of their own human abilities.⁴⁰ As a consequence they lost through vanity what they had come to know through curiosity.⁴¹

William's critique of worldly philosophy provides a general definition of *superbia*, as a failure to understand human accomplishment as entirely dependent on divine grace. In the framework of theological scholarship, William fears that the ultimate consequence of a boastful attitude is an atheistic perspective. Refusing to acknowledge God's role in one's life would result in the denial of God's existence as such. For William, the renunciation of God is the height of stupidity (*stultitia*).⁴² Within his framework of intellectual ethics, William redefines philosophical wisdom as spiritual folly.⁴³

In turns, the willingness to be content with theological simplicity becomes true spiritual wisdom. There is an inherent tension between this theoretical ideal, and the degree of sophistication William himself displays in his works. In the preface to his Commentary on Romans William poetically expresses the tension between the humility he strives for and the literary originality that is a result of his education and exegetical interest. Like many medieval authors, he uses the preface to his work as an occasion to win his readers' sympathy and trust. In a passage that is certainly a strategic *captatio benevolentiae*, and nevertheless reveals a lot about the way he wished to be perceived as an author, he states:

Nemo ergo furti nos arguat: ipsi nos prodimus. Secundum poeticam fabulam aviculam nostrum diversarum plumis avium et coloribus sollemniter vestivimus; quae si venerint et abstulerint singulae quae recognoverint sua, nuda vel nulla remanebit nostra cornicula.⁴⁴

40. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, 18: «Superbi enim facti sunt, dicentes se esse sapientes».

41. *Ibid.*, 18: «superbia perdiderunt quod curiositate perceperunt» and 23: «[...] vanitate perdiderunt idipsum quod curiositate didicerunt».

42. *Ibid.*, 23: «In tantum quippe stulti facti sunt et insipientes, ut dicerent in corde suo, in corde fatuo et penitus a gratia derelicto: Non est Deus [...]».

43. *Ibid.*, 21: «Qui haec saltem viventia melius adorarent, nisi dicentes se esse sapientes, nimium stulti facti fuissent».

44. *Ibid.*, 3.

In a reference to Horace he concedes that his work is but a bird, adorned with the feathers of others, namely the works of the Church fathers. Although this quote expresses a distinct self-depreciation, that is not its sole purpose. In its original source, a letter Horace had sent to his friend Julius Florus, the image is used to criticize a novice author's lack of original thought.⁴⁵ Horace had considered the act of 'plagiarizing' literarily reprehensible. For him, the mark of a great writer was originality and innovation. William, either knowingly or unknowingly, turned the Horatian metaphor upside down. Yet again, the Roman vice becomes a Christian virtue. What the Roman poet had deemed a devastating humiliation is presented here as an accolade of sorts, proving William's allegiance to orthodox tradition.

Towards a Concept of Humble Originality

His preemptive defense against critics, who might accuse him of plagiarism (*nemo ergo furti nos arguat*), suggests that he anticipated such criticism, although no such accusations are documented. The later conflict with Abelard, could however be interpreted as an example of William's literary value system colliding with the opposing ideals of an emerging pre-scholastic environment. While there is no evidence of Abelard responding to William's accusations, as he did to those of other critics, the differences in their exegetical approaches reveal different self-perceptions. William's and Abelard's respective commentaries on Romans show fundamentally different concerns and a different degree of willingness, to develop new theological ideas.⁴⁶ In the passages of William's *Expositio* that contain speculative content, like questions regarding divine metaphysics, he extensively quotes Patristic authorities, mainly Augustine. In matters that had tempted his adversary to transgress the boundaries of tradition, William thus

45. J. O'Neill, «Florus and the "Commendatio ad Gloriam" in Horace "Epistles" 1.3», *Phoenix*, 53/1 (1999), 80-96.

46. Cartwright, *The Romans Commentaries of William of St. Thierry and Peter Abelard*, offers an in-depth comparative study of the two commentaries and their different approaches.

stayed true to his literary ideal of imitation. It is possible to assume that Abelard would have considered this approach theologically simplistic and 'plagiaristic' in a broader sense.⁴⁷

This should not imply, however, that the *Expositio* is entirely free of originality. On the contrary: William's exegesis is particularly creative in its application of Biblical material to the spirituality of the monastic life. He was certainly not content with mindlessly repeating Patristic statements or simply quoting Scripture. He hoped to bring traditional thought to fruition in the minds and hearts of his readers; an endeavor that necessarily entails approaching the text from an unexpected perspective and providing inspiring new points of view. The contrast between William's and Abelard's works is not so much, as historiography has often painted it to be, a conflict between a conservative monk and an innovative scholar. Conservatism for its own sake was not William's cause. Rather, his ethical concern for Christian scholarship revolved around questions of motivation and intention.

As William's own work demonstrates he was not averse to literary creativity per se. He was, however, opposed to an intellectual self-perception that supposes the human ability to learn more about God than God was willing to reveal freely. He believed that the Biblical authors and the Church Fathers were not merely great thinkers, but models of virtue. Their insight stemmed from a willingness to receive inspiration, rather than pursue new and exciting discoveries. William's attack on Abelardian novelty should therefore not suggest that the only kind of theological scholarship he deemed appropriate was the reiteration of Patristic statements. Rather, it was Abelard's *curiositas* – his thirst for novelty – that was suspect to him. As much as it was about the preservation of orthodox doctrine, following the Fathers meant to him an adoption of the Fathers' attitude toward knowledge.

47. Abelard had been disappointed with the level of theological complexity in many of his contemporaries' works, particularly their thoughts on the Trinity. He harshly critiqued for instance the simplicity and resulting inaccuracy of Anselm of Laon's famous 'river analogy', in which he related the three persons of the Trinity to the source, the stream and the pool of the Nile. Robb, *Intellectual tradition*, 48.

William understood humility not as a safeguarding measure against progress, but as the virtue that makes scholarship possible in the first place. He did not intend for humility to stand in the way of knowledge acquisition or hinder the human desire to know God more intimately in any way. This would be a misunderstanding, against which he warns his readers adamantly:

Doctori enim ecclesiae, sicut omnimodis cavendum est ne qua superbiae similitudine auditores a se deterreat, sic etiam ne nimi humilitas remissione verbum Dei in ore eius vilescat. Unde de Samuele dicitur, cum ab omnibus requireretur, quia erat sermo Domini pretiosus.⁴⁸

William's conservatism is motivated by the desire to preserve the preciousness of theological knowledge. A misconceived idea of humility could impel bright minds to hide their light under a bushel, and prevent them to pursue their God intended purpose. Referencing the fathers' extraordinary ability to unite intellectual with spiritual growth, he cautions his readers against compromising the value of divine revelation with an exaggerated self-abasement. Both a kind of pride that overestimates human cognitive abilities and a kind of humility that underestimates the human capacity to understand and love God would ultimately render intellectual endeavors futile. *Humilitas*, as William proposes it, is the foundation of the delicate balance Christian scholarship would thus require.

Reading William's *Disputatio* against the backdrop of his Commentary on Romans hopefully allows us to perceive his call for humility as constructive, rather than as a mere means of moral admonition. Read by themselves, his accusations against Abelard could seem as though he rejects intellectual pursuit in favor of a purely spiritual life. As his exegetical work reveals, however, he does not intend to set up a binary opposition between intellectual and spiritual knowledge, but rather advocates for an integrative approach. Theological scholarship entails the spiritual practice of humility. In turns, the adoption of a humble attitude allows for theological sophistication. This dynamic is expressed by William in his Golden Letter to the Brothers of Mont-Dieu:

48. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*, 191.

Nam etsi sunt aliqui inter vos sapientes, per simplices tamen sapientes aggregavit, qui reges olim et philosophos mundi huius per piscatores sibi subiecit.⁴⁹

God selects the wise amongst the lowly. Fulfilling the monastic ideal of simplicity should not require Christian authors to reject their intellectual ambitions, but will ideally lead them to God as the source of the knowledge they seek. In this sense, William's pastoral perspective on the topic of humility informs his literary self-perception and vice versa. The virtues and vices that determine the success of spiritual ascent are also the driving forces of scholarly integrity. *Humilitas* and *superbia* are, within William's framework, two core motivations for intellectual pursuit that will necessarily produce two very different results.

A comparison between the lifetime achievements of William and Abelard should not lead us to believe that they accurately represent these two intellectual virtues respectively. Yet, the historical conflict does suggest that William evaluated certain tendencies of emerging scholasticism as consequences of a morally questionable motivation. He certainly understood his own approach as an attempt of pursuing knowledge from a place of humility. As much as his perception of the situation does not depict the intellectual environment of the 12th century in an objective light, it does provide us with an interesting representation of William's hopes for the future of Christian scholarship.

49. Guillelmus a Sancto Theodorico, *Opera Didactica et Spiritualia*, ed. P. Verdeyen, Turnhout 2003, 228–29.

ABSTRACT

Delphine Conzelmann, *Humilitas – An Intellectual Program. William of St. Thierry's Commentary on Romans and his Evaluation of Emerging Scholasticism*

In 12th-century France, a new vision for the future of Christian thought emerged. With innovative thinkers like Peter Abelard (1079-1142), theology would take a new course. During the so-called 'scholastic age', however, certain authors campaigned fiercely against its innovations. One of these was the Cistercian writer William of St. Thierry (1075-1148). In his indictment of Abelard, he advocated for an understanding of the theological task that is grounded in humility, and strongly condemned intellectual curiosity as a source of spiritual knowledge. In the paper at hand, I will discuss the importance of *humilitas* in William's conflict with Abelard, and the former's ideal of a humble Christian thinker as presented in his own exegetical work.

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