

2007

Divine love in the writings of Heloise of the Paraclete

Carmel Posa

University of Notre Dame Australia, cposa@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/phil_article



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

This article was originally published as:

Posa, C. (2007). Divine love in the writings of Heloise of the Paraclete. *Tjurunga*, 73, 77-90.

This article is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at
https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/phil_article/5. For more
information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



question as to whether prayer and perfection can be identified. His conclusion: "Prayer is therefore the life of the Spirit" (p. 367).

These observations, which are chiefly direct quotes of words and phrases in the Contents, should on their own be sufficient to show what a rich study of Eastern spirituality is to be found here. The author insists that it is a handbook. And that is correct. But it is a handbook that can be read through with profit, and then used with profit to extend indefinitely one's acquaintance with the sources and the commentaries and expositions based on them. And this is where the 171 pages following the text, and particularly the Selected Bibliography of more than 110 of those pages, brims over with possibilities. Chapter One of the text is accounted for by General Bibliographic Entries in Encyclopedias and Prayer Among the Church Fathers. Then begins a series of bibliographies for practically each individual topic dealt with from Chapter Two to the Conclusion, with the name and page number of the topic given. The translator was specifically thanked in the first volume for the trouble he took to find English translations of the works in the bibliography. To either him or the general editor similar thanks are due for the effort made in this connection in this second volume. The Topical Index further contributes to the usefulness of this work, and the impressive Name Index brings home the breadth and depth of learning of the author, who is also committed to bringing theory and practice together.

Divine Love in the Writings of Heloise of the Paraclete

Carmel Posa SGS
Good Samaritan Community
Broome WA 6725
cposa@nd.edu.au

*Stire deum et illi adherere soli necessarium est omni viventi.*¹

Heloise of the Paraclete has appeared in the volumes of *Tjurunga* several times over the years.² Nevertheless, for those readers who know little of this famed abbess of the twelfth century, perhaps it is worthwhile reiterating a little of her story before focusing on yet another important aspect of her fascinating writings. Heloise of the Paraclete (d.1164) is perhaps better known for her brief, yet passionate love affair with Peter Abelard (1079–1142), arguably the greatest intellectual mind of the twelfth century. Briefly stated, in the course of their famous and spectacular love affair, Heloise became pregnant, was eventually married to Abelard in secret and bore a child whose fate, other than through

Letter 112, "To thirst for God and to cling to Him alone is necessary for every living creature", in C. J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). All English translation of the early love letters will be taken from this source. They are indicated using standard numerical notation. Those of the later correspondence are indicated with Roman notation. All references to the later letters of Heloise and Abelard are taken from the Latin edition of the letters in Eric Hicks, ed., *La Vie Et Les Epistres, Pierres Abaelard Et Heloys Sa Fame, Traduction Du Xiiie Siecle Atribuee à Jean De Meun, Avec Une Nouvelle Edition Des Textes Latins D'après Le Ms. Troyes Bibl. Mun. 802.1 Introduction, Texts*, vol. 16 (Paris: Champion, 1991). The English translation is from the revised edition by Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Clanchy Michael (London: Penguin, 2003).
See Deirdre Stone, "Heloise: La Tres Sage Abbess of the Paraclete," *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 37 (1989), Constant J. Mews, "Heloise and Hildegard: Re-Visioning Religious Life in the Twelfth Century," *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 44 (1993), Carmel Posa, "Keeping Vigil on the Edge," *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 57 (2002), Carmel Posa, "Desire: The Language of Love in the Feminine in the Letters of Heloise," *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 69 (2005).

legend and speculation, is lost to us today. The whole situation incurred the wrath of her uncle who set his thugs on Abelard and had him castrated, whereupon Abelard, interpreting this act as a judgement from God, directs Heloise to a monastery and eventually follows her into monastic life himself. Yes, the story does sound rather melodramatic, to be sure, however, Heloise lived the better part of her life as a monastic both before and after her fateful intersection with Abelard. Her early and extraordinary education took place in the Benedictine convent of Argenteuil and later in Paris where she lived in the cloister close of Notre Dame Cathedral. After the tragic affair she returned to Argenteuil (ca. 1117/18), and later become the abbess of the Paraclete Benedictine community located not far from Paris and founded by Abelard himself (ca. 1129).³

As I have noted previously,⁴ when reading the letters that Heloise wrote to Abelard, particularly the later correspondence, one is faced with a considerable amount of difficulty when trying to reconcile the Heloise who is passionately devoted to Abelard, and the Holy Abbess of the Paraclete. However, as Constant Mews asserts in relation to her first letter: "Reading her [Heloise's] letter simply as an outpouring of the 'the heart' ignores the rhetorical skill with which she formulates her ethical argument,"⁵ and this applies to all her letters to Abelard. Thus, a closer analysis of these letters can bring the reader to a deeper understanding of why this twelfth century woman was accorded such extraordinary acclaim by her own contemporaries.

I want to approach this present investigation, from simply one perspective and a theological one at that. I would like to suggest that "Absence" is not only a metaphorical theme, but also a theological theme, which underscores both the context of, and expression within Heloise's writings to Abelard. In these writings we discover an absent Abelard; an absent monastic rule suitable for women; an absent motherhood due to the absence of the curiously named Astrolabe, their son;⁶ and, as I will demonstrate in this paper, the implicit sense of an absent,

³ A full account of the story was recorded by Abelard himself, in his aptly titled: *Historia calamitatum*, "The History of Calamities", which can be found in Radice's collection of the famous correspondence between Heloise and Abelard. See footnote #1.

⁴ Posa, "Desire: The Language of Love in the Feminine in the Letters of Heloise," p. 57.

⁵ C.J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 152.

⁶ An astrolabe was an astronomical instrument. See Clanchy's explanation in Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 253, note 28. Ruys has provided us with an extended discussion of the presence and absence of Astrolabe in connection with Heloise's motherhood. See, Juanita Feros Ruys, "Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae: The Rhetorical Struggle over the Meaning of Motherhood in the Writings of Heloise and Abelard," *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

though not insignificant God. All of these moments of "absence" culminate in the "absence" of the particular identity of Heloise as she takes on the universal identity of the Christian subject in her role as Abbess of the Paraclete.

The platonic temptation, pervasive through the history of Christian theology, is to abstract the body in the discussion of the soul's journey towards God and this has been particularly detrimental to women's bodies and their "otherness" in relation to men, symbolically considered more capable of imaging God in their bodies than are the bodies of women. God, the "irreducible Other", is not found in abstraction, but in and through loving relationships with other bodies who are also "other".

Twentieth century French philosopher, Michel de Certeau maintains a sort of ontological necessity for this sense of absence in the human person.⁷ It is, in fact, the ground of possibility for the human person, without which personhood in terms of community and integrated relationship to the "Other"/God and "others", eludes us. This absence is precisely where we come to recognise our own being as incomplete without others, yet, paradoxically, we can never attain full access to this other. They will always remain, to some degree at least, "other", absent, or "different" in relation to us.

The writings of Heloise reveal a woman, determined to struggle with her own difference, and with this fundamental sense of absence of others and God. As such, Heloise's spirituality can be located in Certeau's identification of the subject who is,

... a believer who must find a way to believe in a world from which God has become absent, one who seeks an excessive *modus loquendi* in order to reach beyond the limits imposed by a given language and society to speak of and to a God who is irreducibly — even cruelly — other.⁸

The excess in avenues of "absence" in Heloise's rhetoric, absence of Abelard, of Astrolabe, of a rule for women, of God, marks this *modus loquendi*. It is a mode, as I shall argue, of embodied or incarnational speech and perhaps it is this feature that can be defined as especially feminine speech.

In Etienne Gilson's classic study of Heloise and Abelard, he states unequivocally the popular claim that God is absent in the letters of Heloise.⁹

⁷ Michel DeCerteau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael Smith, vol. One (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp. 70–90.

⁸ F. C. Bauerschmidt, "The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel De Certeau and Theology," *Modern Theology* 12.1 (1996): 3.

⁹ Etienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard* (Chicago: University of Michigan Press, 1982), p. 88.

However, this claim runs counter to the whole project of Heloise's intentions in writing to Abelard, at least as she states it. God is at least as pervasively present, even in his absence, in her writing as is her focus on her undoubtedly less famous yet extensively discussed emphasis on Abelard. Heloise's is indeed a "love story" but one often not taken to its ultimate end, that of Divine Love.

1. The Early Letters

In Heloise's early love letters to Abelard before their entry into monastic life, references to, and about God abound. As scholars note, Heloise's profound use of religious vocabulary throughout these early letters is much more pronounced than that of Abelard's.¹⁰ She expresses God's absence in a desire for his presence through her use of the subjunctive.¹¹ For example she expresses her hope that it will be God who is present to them, with them in their love for each other, and in protecting all aspects of Abelard's life: "May the Ruler of heaven mediate here between us. May he accompany our faith, which stands firm in mutual love ... and may the nurturing right hand of God protect you within and without."¹² It is this desire in absence that drives her rhetoric and thus, her relationship with Abelard is simultaneously a relationship with God, and she claims that their love actually resides in God: "Beloved to Beloved: whatever there can be more blessed in God, whatever more honest and joyful among mortals"¹³ There is no division between her love for Abelard, and for God. One is contained within the other.

¹⁰ Constant Mews notes that: "The woman in the lover letters employs religious vocabulary far more often than her teacher." See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*, p. 135. John O Ward also points out that the woman in this exchange emphasises "... a kind of profound religious friendship within the orbit of devotion to Christ." See John O. and Chiavaroli Ward, Neville, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the 'Lost' Love Letters and Their Significance," *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 83.

¹¹ Particularly in Letters 3, 5, 25, 38, 49, 60 and 86.

¹² *Celi regnator sit nobis hic mediator. Sit socius fidei que constat amore duali ... Alma dei dextra te protegit intus et extra.* Letter 38b.

¹³ *Dilecta dilecto: quicquid beatius apud deum, quicquid honestius atque jucundius apud homines esse potest.* Letter 62.

God is thus, all-pervasive for Heloise: God mediates between them;¹⁴ God witnesses to her love on numerous occasions;¹⁵ God is their future;¹⁶ God governs everything;¹⁷ Well-being is in God's survey;¹⁸ God is the bestower of gifts including philosophy;¹⁹ God accompanies their faith, nurtures them and provides for them;²⁰ She sings "Glory to God" for their love;²¹ God is faithful to them even in their sinfulness;²² and ultimately, God has a primary position even in relation to Heloise's love for Abelard: "Since you have become everything to me, except for the grace of God alone ..."²³

Mews maintains that in these letters, "She [Heloise] goes beyond Scripture ... to emphasise that there is no discontinuity between the love which comes from her heart (*amor*) and selfless love (*dilectio*)."²⁴ However, the assumption made here is that the biblical text exhibits this discontinuity. On the contrary, Heloise's inclusion of the "love that comes from the heart" is indicative of an embodied language and thoroughly consistent with the biblical message. The command to love God and neighbour in both the Old and the New Testament, stresses the idea of love from the heart.²⁵ Simply stated, the "heart" here operates as integral to the entire human person, body, mind and spirit.²⁶ Any departure of love from its connection to the heart, from an embodied reality, is not consistent with the message contained within Scripture.

Neither does the Rule of Benedict, a rule with which Heloise would have been familiar, make a distinction between the love of the heart, *amor*, selfless love, *dilectio* or *caritas*, the term used for the general expression of Christian love. All three expressions of love are used interchangeably by Benedict as

¹⁴ See Letter 3, 38b.

¹⁵ See Letters 11, 23, 53, 55, 86.

¹⁶ See Letter 3, Letter 32.

¹⁷ See Letters 3, 49, 84.

¹⁸ See Letters 7, 25.

¹⁹ See Letters 5 and 27.

²⁰ See Letters 38b, 49, 60.

²¹ See Letter 45.

²² See Letter 60.

²³ *Cum omnia factus sis michi excepta solius dei gracia* Letter 79.

²⁴ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*, p. 126.

²⁵ See Deut. 6:5, S of S 3:1-4; Matt 22:37; Mk 12:30, 33; Lk 10:27; John 5:42; Rom. 5:5; 2 Thess 3:5; 1.

²⁶ See John L. McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy Raymond E. Brown (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).

by Heloise.²⁷ The language of the "heart" is markedly evident in this Rule.²⁸ The whole Benedictine project is to come to this love of God from the heart: "But as we progress in the monastic life and in faith, our hearts will swell with the unspeakable sweetness of love, enabling us to race along the way of God's commandments."²⁹ For Benedict, the heart is the area where the person encounters God,³⁰ and one cannot encounter God without a body or the use of embodied language.

2. Later Correspondence

Ward suggests that Heloise starts out the more overtly religious in her writing than Abelard and that "To some extent their later career reverses these positions."³¹ Turning now to this later correspondence, written well after both Heloise and Abelard entered monasteries, it becomes obvious when analysing her letters as a whole, that God is no less prominent in her thinking here than in her previous letters, indeed, God remains central in her rhetoric.

In her first letter to Abelard, her project in replying to his *Historia calamitatum* is, undoubtedly, to re-establish her relationship with him and to experience his presence in his absence, at least in the form of letters. However, this re-establishment is within the context of a larger framework of monastic identity, an identity for which Abelard himself is responsible as founder of her community.

From the outset, Heloise clearly identifies herself and her community

²⁷ Benedict uses *amor* eight times (See RB 4:21; 4:72; 5:10; 7:34; 7:69; 63:13; 72:3; 72:9), *dilectio* ten times (See RB Prol. 49; 4:1; 4:31; 4:71; 4:77; 5:16; 7:39; 63:10; 64:11 and 72:10), and *caritas* 16 times (RB Prol. 47; 2:22, 4:26; 7:67; 27:4; 35:2; 53:3; 61:4; 64:14; 65:11; 66:4; 68:5; 71:4; 72:8 and 72:10). All references to the Rule of Benedict are taken from the Latin text and English translation in Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000). These references will be designated by the abbreviation RB followed by chapter and verse numeration.

²⁸ See RB Prol. 1, 10, 26, 28, 40, 49; 2:9, 12; 3:8; 4:1, 24, 28, 50; 5:17–18; 7:3, 8, 14, 18, 37, 48, 51, 62, 65; 9:10; 12:4; 20:3; 39:9; 49:4; 52:4.

²⁹ *Processu vero conversationis ef fidei, dilatato corde menarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei.* RB Prol. 49. See heart language in RB Prol. 1, 10, 26, 28, 40, 49; 2:9, 12; 3:8; 4:1, 24, 28, 50; 5:17–18; 7:3, 8, 14, 18, 37, 48, 51, 62, 65; 9:10; 12:4; 20:3; 39:9; 49:4; 52:4.

³⁰ Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Commentary*, p. 6.

³¹ Ward, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the "Lost" Love Letters and Their Significance," p. 85.

as "handmaids of God."³² This phrase of identity is repeated at the beginning of each of her three later letters. It is all very well for him to write a letter of consolation to his friend, but Abelard's primary responsibility is to her and the community as: "For you, after God, are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community."³³ Even here, God clearly takes a primary position in Heloise's life as in the earlier love letters and she expands this with full Trinitarian force in a later letter.³⁴ It is God who helps the community grow in its purpose, but it needs care from its earthly founder, Abelard, who is just as integral to their identity.³⁵ Any absence of God then, is profoundly linked to the absence of Abelard and his neglect of his duty to both Heloise herself and to her community.

As in the early letters, it is God who continues to witness to this love she has for Abelard³⁶ and she gives voice to the selfless nature of this love with blatant honesty:

I can expect no reward for this from God for it is certain that I have done nothing as yet for love of him. When you hurried towards God I followed you, indeed, I went first to take the veil — perhaps you were thinking how Lot's wife turned back when you made me put on the religious habit and take my vows before you gave yourself to God.³⁷

Heloise's rhetoric here, is used to point an accusing finger at Abelard's lack of trust in her devotion, but also to truthfully admit to the distance of God, that is, God's absence, in relation to her entry into monastic life. She moves from her devotion to Abelard, to his devotion to her and the community which longs to serve this God.³⁸

Clearly, Heloise understands her own identity only through her relationship with, and love for, Abelard. Without Abelard, she can have no identity, and particularly no identity in God. Her greeting to this letter attests to this integration of all

³² See *Ep. II*, Hicks, p. 46, (Radice, p. 48).

³³ *Hujus quippe loci tu post Deum solus es fundator, solus hujus oratorii constructor ... solus hujus congregationis edificator.* *Ep. II*, Hicks, p. 47, (Radice, p. 49).

³⁴ Posa, "Desire: The Language of Love in the Feminine in the Letters of Heloise," p. 66.

³⁵ See *Ep. II*, Hicks, p. 48, (Radice, p. 49). "I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." (*juxta illud apostolic: 'Ego plantavi, Apollo rigavit; Deus autem incrementum dedit.'*)

³⁶ See *Ep. II*, Hicks, pp. 49, 52, (Radice, pp. 51, 54).

³⁷ See *Ep. II*, Hicks, p. 52, (Radice, p. 54).

³⁸ *Per ipsum itaque cui te obtulisti Deum te obsecro ut quo modo potes tuam michi presentiam reddas, consolationem videlicet michi aliquam rescribendo, hoc saltem pacto ut sic recreare divino alacrior vacem obsequio.* *Ep. II*, Hicks, p. 53, (Radice, p. 54).

aspects of her identity in her thinking: "To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard from Heloise"³⁹ There is no confusion or division in Heloise here as some have claimed. She is all these identities at once.

Abelard's response to this letter is a complete misunderstanding of her project. He continues to absent God by absenting himself from her, as he does not recognise himself as necessary to her devotion to God. His focus in this letter becomes himself, not Heloise and her community. Indeed, in this letter, it sounds as if the whole purpose of Heloise and the community is to pray for him, his salvation and protection, and nothing else.

Heloise's Letter IV begins: "To her only one after Christ, from his only one in Christ"⁴⁰ God may well be absent from Heloise's life, however, for better or for worse, God's presence continues to embrace their relationship. Her purpose here is to bring Abelard to recognise her genuine and honest struggle to admit God's presence while he remains absent. She argues that it is Abelard's role to commend them to God not the reverse, as he had suggested.⁴¹

Abelard has so filled them with grief with his emphasis on himself and his woes, that they are now distracted from their primary purpose:

"Besides, what time will there be then which will be fitting for prayer, when extreme distress will allow us no peace... Or when the frantic mind, far from being resigned, may even (if I may say so) rage against God himself, and provoke him with complaints instead of placating him with prayers?"⁴²

This is by no means an attempt to push God out of her rhetoric as Gilson so confidently claims. On the contrary, in a language that moves beyond the boundaries of acceptable rhetoric, an "excessive *modus loquendi*", she presents a series of impassioned accusations against her own bodily incontinence and Abelard's absence in relation to the care he ought show her in the seeking of God under such conditions.⁴³ This desire to seek God authentically provides the complete context for the reading of this letter with its otherwise shocking confessions and brutally honest self-assessment from Heloise.

³⁹ *Domino suo, immo patri, coniugi suo, immo fratri; ancilla sua, immo filia; ipse uxor, immo soror; Abaelardo Heloysa. Ep. II, Hicks, p. 45, (Radice, p. 47).*

⁴⁰ *Unico suo post Christum, unica sua in Christo. Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 61, (Radice, p. 63).*

⁴¹ See *Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 61, (Radice, p. 63).*

⁴² *aut quod orationi tempus tunc erit commodum, quando summa perturbatio nichil permittet quietum... cum mens insane in ipsum — ut ita dicam — deum magis trita quam peccata non tam orationibus ipsam placabit quam quernoniis irritabit? Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 62, (Radice, p. 64).*

⁴³ See *Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 61, (Radice, p. 64).*

Wilson and McLeod suggest that Heloise here claims a position of humility in her honest appraisal of her own sinfulness. They also assert that: "Abelard has presented himself as separated from his past arrogance: physically mutilated but spiritually whole. Now Heloise presents herself as inextricably involved with her past: physically whole but spiritually mutilated"⁴⁴ However, this stance of humility, a very characteristic monastic virtue⁴⁵, affirms Heloise's spiritual superiority over Abelard. It is Abelard who remains both physically and spiritually mutilated in his lack of humble assessment of his life, and it is Heloise who remains both physically and spiritually whole as she never denies her sinfulness nor her body's fragility. In the Rule of Benedict's chapter on humility, the twelfth and final step to spiritual perfection claims that: "*Constantly aware of his guilt for sins*, he should consider himself to be already standing before the terrifying judgment of God"⁴⁶ Heloise reflects this final step in all but her struggle to find a God worthy of her repentance.

She describes an unjust God, a God who was absent in punishment when they deserved it and seemingly present, reaping revenge when they had atoned for their lust through their more than chaste marriage.⁴⁷ She cries out: "O God — if it is lawful to say it — cruel to me in everything. O merciless mercy"⁴⁸ What is so unmistakably absent here is a God of mercy and justice. Heloise confesses having no relationship with such an unjust God, but seeks rather the absent God of mercy. Alluding to St Paul, she cries: "In my utter wretchedness, that cry from a suffering soul could well be mine: 'Miserable creature that I am who is there to rescue me out of the body doomed to this death?' Would that I could truthfully answer: 'the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord'"⁴⁹ Abelard must therefore, not praise her but pray for her, not so that she might be considered holy but simply that: "In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me, it will be enough for me"⁵⁰

⁴⁴ K. McLeod and G. Wilson, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 129.

⁴⁵ See, RB 7 — *On Humility*

⁴⁶ *reum se omni hora de peccatis suis aestimans iam se tremendo iudicio representantem aestimet, RB 7-64, my emphasis added.*

⁴⁷ See *Ep. II, Hicks, pp. 63-64, (Radice, pp. 65-66).*

⁴⁸ *O! — si fas sit dici — crudelem michi per omnia Deum! Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 63, (Radice, p. 65).*

⁴⁹ *O vere me miseram et illa conquestione ingemiscens anime dignissimam: "Infelix ego homo! Quis me liberabit de corpore moris huius?" Utinam et quod sequitur veraciter addere queam: "Gratia Dei per Ihesum Christum Dominum nostrum." Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 67, (Radice, p. 69).*

⁵⁰ *Quocumque me angulo celi Deus collocet satis michi faciet; nullus ibi cuiquam invidet, cum singulis quod habebunt suffecerit. Ep. IV, Hicks, p. 69, (Radice, p. 71).*

Georgiana maintains that here Heloise is, "quitting the battle for perfection"⁵¹ But what I am questioning is the definition of this so-called "perfection" Heloise is not "quitting the battle for perfection" at all, rather, her felt sense of an absent God is thoroughly consonant with the monastic mind which searches constantly, humbly and truthfully for this God. Her, so-called, "rage against God" merely attests to her monastic sensibility particularly in the light of the daily round of liturgy to which Heloise and all monastics were, and still are, exposed. Here, she would have heard the psalmist's own complaints and "rage against God" set in the context of prayer and praise⁵² and these psalms she would have made her own.

In Abelard's response to Heloise's dramatic pleas there is not the particularity of their relationship in God as expressed in the early love letters. He continues to absent God by absenting himself from Heloise's love. In his exegesis of the "Song of Songs", curiously enough, one of the most embodied and passionate books of the Bible, he uses the metaphor of the Black bride to allegorise away the particular body of Heloise. The body and its difference, has no place in any discussion of "longing for God" in Abelard's religious understanding. Justice for the body is not his concern. As such, he effectively erases any possibility of subjectivity for Heloise and her sisters, as well as any possibility of their encounter with God.

Heloise's language will not allow her room to compromise on this subjectivity in her search for a just God, a God of love, and it is in her final letter that this is evidenced in it fullest extent. Heloise absents her particular self with an "excessive *modus loquendi*", expressed here as an expansion of herself into the body of her community as Abbess. The same thoughts and arguments continue to occupy Heloise's heart as in the earlier letters, but now it is a broader canvas on which she paints her understanding of the feminine desire for God.

Beginning, as before, by claiming their identity as "handmaids of God"⁵³ she first asks for a history of monastic women, that is, a history of the search for God by women, a history, interestingly enough, rich in male-female relationships. This request parallels her desire, in the previous letters, that Abelard consider the history of her own relationship with God and with him.

⁵¹ Linda Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), p. 204.

⁵² E.g., Psalms 10, 13, 22, 38, 102, 130 and 142, to name just few.

⁵³ See *Ep. VI*, Hicks, p. 89, (Radice p. 93).

Secondly she requires a Rule suitable for women. To have the needs of the particularity of the body, the female, included in her dialogue with Abelard, has been consistent there throughout her letters. Now she presents it in the communal context. This body cannot be transcended in the monastic search for God and remains central to her communal project, the community's journey, a *different* journey towards God, a journey in the female body, unique, or other, from that of the male.

Again, her purpose, as always, is to make Abelard understand that his presence and relationship with the community, is intimately linked with their ability to seek God. At the end of this letter, she repeats the words as she used in Letter II, when she appeals to him thus: "... for after God you are the founder of this place, through God you are the creator of our community, with God you should be the director of our religious life"⁵⁴

Heloise's spirituality and her critique of the Benedictine Rule must be viewed in the light of various reform movements in monasticism that were in full swing around her at the time. She stands within the midst of the endless controversies between the spiritual interpretation of the Rule by the Black Benedictines of Cluny and the uncritically strict adherence to the demands of this primitive Rule by the White Cistercians, headed by Bernard of Clairvaux. Heloise's attempt to make a case for adapting and even rewriting the Holy Rule for women, is a presentation of a woman's voice about a woman's way to God in the sea of voices from the male monastic world of her times.

Her assertion is that the Rule is not inherently a literalist universal Rule and should not be understood as such. In her commentary and critique of the Rule of Benedict, she seeks to find the God of justice for women, whom she so emotively articulated as personally absent in her previous letters. This justice is expressed in the recognition of their sexual difference: "What, I wonder, when he adapts everything to the quality of men and seasons, so that all his regulations can be carried out by everyone without complaint — what provision would he make for women if he laid down a Rule for them like that for men?"⁵⁵ This is precisely her role as Abbess as the Rule itself indicates: "... he will accommodate and adapt himself to them all in accordance with the disposition and intelligence of each individual ... he must arrange everything so

⁵⁴ *Tu quippe post Deum inquis loci fundator, tu per Deum nostre congregationis es planitor: tu cum Deo nostre sis religionis institutor. Ep. VI*, Hicks, p. 106, (Radice, p. 111). See Letter II.

⁵⁵ *Quid, obsecro — ubi iste qui sic ad hominum et temporum qualitatem omnia moderatur, ut ab omnibus sine murmuratione perferri queant que instituntur — quid inquam, de feminis provideret, si eis quoque pariter ut viris regulam institueret? Ep. VI*, Hicks, p. 92, (Radice, p. 97).

that there is always what the strong desire and the weak do not shrink from”⁵⁶ Not to consider “difference”, is totally unreasonable and unjust for Heloise in her times, as it was for Benedict in his times. Without some justice there can be no search for God for women.

Again, Benedict’s virtue of humility is evident as she critiques the Rule with her emphasis on the weakness of women’s bodies. Though perhaps distasteful to us today, we must not be led away from Heloise’s own purpose in her times. As I have suggested previously, she is not presenting a case for women’s inferiority to men, but rather arguing their superiority, particularly in relation to women’s search for God in the living out of the Benedictine life: “Equality, of virtue, for Heloise, should not be judged simply by rigid adherence to the same set of Rules. This is not justice! It is not God. It is not love! This is not even what Benedict himself, intended”⁵⁷ Heloise explains this equality in terms of the life women live as monastics compared to the highest ranks within the Church: “It should be sufficient for our infirmity, and indeed, a high tribute to it, if we live continually and without possessions, wholly occupied by service of God, and in doing so equal the leaders of the church themselves in our way of life”⁵⁸ Accordingly, Heloise sets forth her “ethics of intention” in the seeking of God in the monastic life, using the language of the heart:

Such devotion of the heart is valued the more highly by God the less it is concerned with outward things, and we serve him with greater humility and think more of our duty to him the less we put our trust in outward things.⁵⁹

The Rule is after all only a guide for beginners and Heloise notes this from the exact words of Benedict herself.⁶⁰ The end of monastic life is Love — God. It is this end that Rules should serve not the other way round. Thus, rules can be changed so that God can be better served in love. This is, after all the point of the Christian life, nothing more and nothing less. In an obvious critique of the argued extremes of the monastic reformers of her day, she writes: “Would

⁵⁶ ... *secundum unius (inquit) corpusque qualitatem vel intelligentiam... Hec ergo aliqua testimonia discretioris, matris virtutum, sumens sic omnino temperet, ut ei fortis sit quod cupiant et infirmi non refrigant.* Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 92, (Radice, p. 96–7.) See RB 2: 64ff

⁵⁷ Posa, “Desire: The Language of Love in the Feminine in the Letters of Heloise,” p. 65.

⁵⁸ *Satis nostre esse infirmitati et maximum imputari debet, si continenter ac sine proprietate viventes, ei, officiis occupate divinis, ipsos Ecclesie duces ...* Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 95, (Radice, p. 100).

⁵⁹ *Que quidem animi devotio tanto major in Deo habetur, quanto in exterioribus minus est animus occupatus, et tanto humiliter ei deservimus ac magis debere cogitamus, quanto de exterioribus que fiant minus confidimus.* Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 103, (Radice, p. 108).

⁶⁰ See Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 96, (Radice, p. 101).

that our religion could rise to this height — to carry out the Gospel, not to go beyond it, lest we attempt to be more than Christians!”⁶¹

To find God, for a female, is not so dependent on rules but is thoroughly dependent on love and justice.⁶² After all, in her times men with their rules, rules, rules, fail in their attempts⁶³ and their outward show by rules merely disguises a fundamental absence of God and the absence of love.

3. Conclusion

Heloise’s spirituality humanises the quest for God in line with Benedict’s ideals. It is a corrective to all attempts to ignore, deny, overcome or transcend, the embodied nature of humanity, be that of the male or the female. Her identity is founded on her relationships with others, and she will not speak of God without any of these relationships. In the words of Certeau, Heloise’s language is, “... a new ‘style’ of practice which resists the violence of conceptualisation by seeking to speak of the Other only through particular others”⁶⁴ Her identity is founded on her relationships with others: lover to beloved, wife to husband, mother to son, sister to her religious sisters and abbess to her community and she will not speak of God without any of these relationships. The absence and presence of God is contingent on the absence and presence of these other bodies.

I want to suggest that this spirituality unearthed in Heloise’s writings, is not only relevant to our world today, it is vital. Firstly, Heloise’s spirituality stands in disturbingly stark contrast to a spirituality that piously claims sure knowledge of God’s presence and God’s will in the face of the incomprehensible injustices that our world experiences today. Heloise presents us with a spirituality that can humbly cry aloud with the psalmist of the scriptures, “Where is God?” at the unfathomable mystery of injustice. Natural disasters like tsunamis and epidemics which claim the lives of so many innocent people, cannot be explained away simplistically as the will or punishment of God. Nor can those who claim to be religiously devout preach the presence of a God of love, while at the same time justify complacency and even complicit involvement in racial, ethnic, economic and political oppressions. Heloise refuses to avoid the discomfort that a “cruelly absent God” can cause in the human condition.

⁶¹ *Atque utinam ad hoc nostra religio conscendere posset ut Evangelium impleteret, non transcederet, nec plusquam christiane appetereus esse.* Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 93, (Radice, p. 98).

⁶² See Ep. VI, Hicks, p. 96, (Radice, pp. 100–101).

⁶³ Bauerschmidt, “The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel De Certeau and Theology,” p. 5.

Secondly, Heloise's spirituality is not one blindly dependent on institutions with their doctrines, rules and outward expressions of holiness. Christianity is about the practice of authentic love of others in and through their difference not rules. A rule that negates the particularity of any body, and women's bodies in particular, negates their subjectivity and leaves God, and therefore love, absent in their lives. You cannot find God without a body and you cannot be that body without loving others. Heloise's spirituality speaks directly to religious institutions that claim exclusive right to God through rules and regulations. She resists not institutions and rules, but both the urge to universalise rules for their own sake and the false freedom of individualism.

Both are temptations to exist without others: the former seeking refuge within institutions, the latter seeking it in his or her own interior. The first fears the other which announces the future, the second fears the other which remembers the past.⁶⁴

Thirdly, Heloise's sense of being fully incarnated in the world is a redefining of "spiritual perfection", one that includes rather than excludes. Her spirituality deals with the reality of difference and bodies in a way that demands an authentic love of the other and thus the possibility of really loving the ultimate Other — God. This is not an "essentially non-heroic"⁶⁵ spirituality as Georgianna asserts. Heloise's spirituality demands a level of humility that the modern world, driven as it is by ideals of the autonomous free individual, find very uncomfortable to admit. To admit the other, one must admit to an absence in being, to an incompleteness that recognises the need of the other who is different, not because they are the same, but precisely because they are different. This is a spirituality marked by unity in difference, rather than a fear of difference. Absence, and the experience of absence bring about the ability to recognise and appreciate difference. This is without doubt, a *more* heroic spirituality particularly in our world today, marked as it is by fear of the other, the different, in racial tensions, ethnic divides and radical disconnections between peoples. This is surely a spirituality worth further elucidation.

⁶⁴ Batterschmidt, "The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel De Certeau and Theology," p. 12.

⁶⁵ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," p. 204.

To Put One's Hope in God

David Barry OSB
Holy Trinity Abbey
New Norcia WA 6509
mjab@bigpond.com

The instruction, "To put one's hope in God", features among St Benedict's collection of "tools for good works" (RB 4.41).¹ He wants the monk, like the "workman" whom the Lord seeks "in a multitude of people" (Prol 14), to be equipped with these tools; he exhorts his disciples to use them "without ceasing day and night" in "the spiritual craft", and to hand them in at the end of life's working day — "judgment day" — (RB 4.75, 76). The collection itself is beautifully rounded off with the saying, "And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy" (RB 4.74).

My aim in this article is to look at just some of the Bible's rich teaching on hope, by way of drawing encouragement for myself and offering it to others so that I and they may continue to the end "to put one's hope in God", "and never lose hope in God's mercy"

1. Romans 15 and Hope

One of the basic texts to justify such a use of Scripture is itself very much bound up with the idea of hope. In Romans 15, Paul starts by exhorting those of "us who are strong to bear with the susceptibilities of the weaker ones, and not please ourselves" (v. 1). This reminds him of the example of Christ, so that he goes on in v. 3 to say: "For Christ did not please himself; but as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me'." This quote from Psalm 68[69]: 9 leads him immediately into a general remark on the overriding purpose of the Scriptures in v. 4: "For whatever was written in former days was written

¹ All quotes from the Rule of Benedict except for the title are from RB 1980: *The Rule of St Benedict*, edited by Timothy Fry and others (Collegeville, Mn: The Liturgical Press, 1981).