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*Between Similarity
and Non-similarity.
The Nature of Theological Language
in the Thought of Peter Abelard*

ABSTRACT

the aim of this paper is to answer to the following question: How should theological propositions, originating from the language used to describe creatures, be understood so as to avoid idolatry, that is reducing God to the category of contingent entities?

Using the theory of similarities formulated by Peter Abelard, I pointed out that the risk of committing theological errors decreases when language formulas are treated as models, and their meaning is understood in a figurative way. Such an attitude enables us to acknowledge the fact that language can be only partially adequate to the subject under discussion, and makes us aware that we describe only one aspect of a given theological phenomenon, as the chosen model may not correspond to other aspects.

Such understanding of the theological language calls for a constant reinterpretation of theological propositions. If images used in theology are linked to the structure of the world, each change in the scientific understanding of this structure brought by empirical sciences, should lead to changes in the language used by theology. Lack of such changes in the system of religious beliefs will lead to a decrease in the credibility of theology and push its truths towards the category of myths and fables.

KEYWORDS

abelard, faith and reason, theory of similarities, hermeneutics, theological language, theological method

New Atheism manifestos provide us with some direct observations on the nature of the religious language. In his book *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* Sam Harris claims:

We have seen that our beliefs are tightly coupled to the structure of language and to the apparent structure of the world. Our “freedom of belief,” if it exists at all, is minimal.

Is a person really free to believe a proposition for which he has no evidence? No. Evidence (whether sensory or logical) is the only thing that suggests that a given belief is really about the world in the first place. We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them “religious”; otherwise, they are likely to be called “mad,” “psychotic,” or “delusional.”¹

What can we infer from an analysis of the above fragment? Harris constructs a certain triangle whose vertices are: religious beliefs, the structure of language and the perception of the world. According to Harris, believing in the truth of linguistic propositions for which there is no logical or empirical evidence in the outside world is a sign of mental illness. Thus, he views the affirmation of the truths of faith, which seem impossible to verify, as an element of delusion, claiming that they are not treated as madness only because a large group of people believe them to be true. Consequently, the difference between opinions commonly treated as absurd and the truths of faith can be seen only at the level of reception; we label utterances as irrational gibberish if they are delivered by a few people, but if crowds believe in them, gibberish becomes truths of faith.

1 S. Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, New York 2005, p. 70–71.

While confronting Harris's statements with the objectives of the Catholic theology, it is worth revisiting the medieval concepts on the language of theology. This association stems from the fact that both the quoted atheist and many scholastics have constructed the triangle: a truth of faith – a linguistic proposition – the structure of the world; but their interpretations of it are different. Therefore, it can be claimed that already in the middle ages, theology posed questions which bother the modern adversaries of Christianity, and answered them.

The aim of this paper is to show the specificity of theological terms which, on the one hand, carry references to the created world, but on the other hand describe a subject eluding empirical experience. I chose Peter Abelard – a 12th century thinker – to be a guide in the present reflection. Together with him I will search for an answer to the following question: How should theological propositions, originating from the language used to describe creatures, be understood so as to avoid idolatry, that is reducing God to the category of contingent entities?

A comprehensive study of the analyses presented in this paper can be found in my monograph *Peter Abelard's Concept of Theology*.²

THE THEORY OF SIMILITUDES

In the first book of *Theologia Scholarium* Abelard provides the following definition of faith:

(...) faith is the evaluation of things which cannot be seen, that is the evaluation of things which cannot be subjected to sensory cognition.³

Thus, it is impossible to see, hear or experience the reality of faith through the senses. If we defined science as the study of a mathematically or empirically verifiable subject, we would have to conclude that man is not able to do science based on faith, as his mind – relying on sensory cognition – is not able to obtain necessary information and

² D. Wąsek, *Peter Abelard's Concept of Theology*, Kraków 2010.

³ “Est quippe fides existimatio rerum non apparentium, hoc est sensibus corporeis non subiacentium”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, I, 2, in: E. M. Buytaert, C. J. Mews (eds.), *Petri Abaelardi opera theologica*, III, Turnhout 1987 (Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis [=CCCM], 13).

knowledge.⁴ Consequently, a researcher of supernatural reality will lack terms expressing the truths of faith.

However, theology – being a science which explores extrasensory reality – must possess a language enabling it to fulfill its objectives, most importantly to convey the right interpretation of the Revelation and to defend it against adversaries. Abelard saw a solution to this problem in a method used by the Church Fathers, which he described in *Theologia Scholarium*:

...The saints themselves used to argue against and tame the rebellious by reflecting on issues regarding faith with the use of arguments presented as examples and similitudes.⁵

Thus, in patristic times the matters of faith were presented and defended by creating argumentation based on examples and similitudes. Abelard intentionally used the term *similitudo* present in the works of his predecessors, as he aimed at creating constructions which would explain the incomprehensible elements of the Christian doctrine in a better way than those known in his times.⁶ The key notions for him were the unity and trinity of God, which he wanted to prove and defend against the criticism of the doubtful.⁷

As Paolo Bonanni, an expert in this aspect of Abelard's thought, claims, Abelard linked the word *similitudo* with other specific terms: *imago, figura, involucrium, metafora, allegoria*. All these terms were in some way connected with spiritual reading of a text. It is, therefore, the first context that we need to focus on in order to understand what

4 "Fides quippe dicitur existimatio rerum non apparentium, cognitio vero ipsarum rerum experientia per ipsam earum praesentiam"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 49.

5 "...ipsi quoque sancti de his quae ad fidem pertinent ratiocinantes multis exemplorum vel similitudinum rationibus rebelles arguerent vel reprimere soleant"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 44.

6 Por. G. R. Evans, *The Language and the Logic of the Bible: the Earlier Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984, p. 101.

7 "Nunc autem fidei summa circa unitatem ac trinitatem divinam a nobis proposita, superest ut adversus inquisitiones dubitantium congruis eam similitudinum exemplis defendamus atque astruamus. Quid enim ad doctrinam loqui proficit, si quod docere volumus exponi non potest, ut intelligatur?"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, I, 27.

Abelard meant when he talked about similitudes.⁸ This spiritual reading was supposed to be common for the Old Testament and the works of pagan philosophers, as in both cases the aim was to discover truths hidden behind metaphors and allegories, whose full meaning could be seen only in confrontation with the Christian Revelation. Abelard wrote:

Having chosen and presented – rather carefully I believe – excerpts from Plato according to our faith, I still intent to join his supporters in what was said about the soul of the world, so as to present these observations accurately and assign them to the Holy Spirit as its extraordinary figure. Using figures of speech is common both for prophets and philosophers. While pursuing deeper philosophical mysteries, the former do not use ordinary words but lure the reader with similitudes and similes. The texts of the latter, though at the literary level seem to be useless fables, turn out to be far more valuable for the cognition when we discover the abundance of great mysteries they carry, and as such become a treasure for those who create the doctrine.⁹

Abelard pointed to the same way of expressing thoughts in the works of prophets and ancient philosophers. They used images suggesting literary fiction, myth or fable as a cover for deep religious truths that they wanted to convey. Similitudes defined, in a descriptive way, some key notions, and made it possible to present truths which seemed inexplicable in scientific terms. As Chenu claims, using allegories had yet another important advantage. It did not only make difficult matters

8 Por. S. P. Bonanni, *Parlare della Trinità. Lettura della "Theologia Scholarium" di Abelardo*, Roma 1996, p. 111.

9 "His ex Platone breviter collectis atque ad nostrae fidei testimonium satis, ut arbitror, diligenter expeditis, consequens existimo ad sequaces eius commere, ut ea quae ab ipsis quoque de anima mundi dicta sunt, nulla ratione convenienter accipi posse monstremus, nisi Spiritui Sancto per pulcherrimam involucri figuram assignentur. Hoc quippe loquendi genus philosophis quoque sicut et prophetis familiarissimum est, ut videlicet, cum ad arcana philosophiae perveniunt, nihil vulgaribus verbis efferant, sed comparationibus similitudinem lectorem magis alliciant. Quae enim quasi fabulosa antea videbantur et ab omni utilitate remota secundum litterae superficiem, gratiora sunt, cum, magnis plena mysteriis postmodum reperta, magnam in se doctrinae continent aedificationem"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, I, 157–158.

more accessible but also concealed some aspects of the studied reality, thus creating an aura of mystery. Fictional images would simultaneously express and conceal something.¹⁰

Abelard provided another proof for the beneficial role of similitudes in the field of theology by claiming that:

God admires his creation to such an extent that He would prefer to be expressed by the natures of the things created in his image, rather than by words discovered or created by men. God prefers the similitude in things to that in our words or the Bible. Therefore, caring for the beauty of reflection on him, he preferred to let himself be known in creation rather than in words, as he regarded similitude as the most proper means of expression.¹¹

The above text provides a few important statements. To start with, the use of similitudes was characteristic not only of ancient thinkers and prophets, but also of God himself. That was how He expressed himself and handed his image down to men. This form of expression, mostly because of its aesthetic value, is even more precious than Holy Scripture. The qualities of words, grammatical and logical rules cannot be the measure of Revelation. Finally and most importantly, the image of God resulting from contemplation of the created world bears a mark of authenticity, as it is not an outcome of sensory and intellectual activity, but a gift from the Creator.

According to Abelard, thanks to its presence in the Bible, Tradition and ancient philosophy, and rooting in the theology of creation, similitude had all the qualities needed to accept it as a rightful theological tool.¹² Although God expressed himself by means of creation, in order to talk about it we need to use verbal formulas. Images resulting from

¹⁰ Por. M. D. Chenu, *La teologia nel dodicesimo secolo*, Milano 1999, p. 212f.

¹¹ “In tantum vero in ipsa factura sua delectatur Deus, ut frequenter ipsis rerum naturis quas creavit, se figurari, magis quam verbis nostris quae nos confinximus aut invenimus, exprimi velit, et magis ipsa rerum similitudine quam verborum nostrorum gaudeat proprietate, ut ad eloquentiae venustatem ipsis rerum naturis iuxta aliquam similitudinem pro verbis scriptura malit uti, quam proprie locutionis integritatem sequi”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 32.

¹² The topic of similarities and the differences in understanding similarity in the field of logic (as an image of a single thing in the mind) in relation to theology was covered in: M. M. Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals*, Amsterdam 1976, p. 175.

an analysis of the world are suitable for such communication. However, the process of linking these two realities poses some problems, voiced by the Christian in Abelard's *Dialogus*:

When you distinguish accidents and their underlying substances, you are resorting to the vocabulary of philosophical teaching and measuring things belonging only to the earthly life, not the heavenly one. Indeed, this secular and earthly discipline was content only with lessons adopted to the present life's state, not to the future life's quality, where neither this vocabulary nor any human teaching is needed. People applied their arts' rules when they investigated the natures of things, but, as is written, "He who is of earth speaks about the earth." Therefore, if you endeavor to scale the heavenly life's summit that goes far beyond every earthly discipline, do not rely too much on earthly philosophy's rules. Earthly things still have not been able to be fully comprehended and defined by them, much less heavenly ones.¹³

Thus, vocabulary used to describe the earthly reality is not suitable for describing the world of faith. Words used by a philosopher are limited by human abilities and capabilities, which are not only insufficient to precisely express theological truths, but also imperfect in describing the earthly reality for which they were created. While talking about God, we need to be aware of the inadequacy of our language, and remember that we use only representations, through which we can sometimes see the truth, but it is often the case that they differ from it. The Creator transcends creation to such an extent, his nature differs so much

13 "Cum accidentia eisque subiectas distinguis substantias, ad philosophicae verba doctrinae converteris et ea tantum, quae vitae terrene, non caelestis sunt, metiris: haec quippe disciplina saecularis et terrena his tantum documentis contenta extitit, quae ad praesentis vitae statum accomodata sunt nec ad illius futurae vitae qualitatem, in qua nec verba ista nec ulla hominum necessaria est doctrina; artium suarum regulas applicaverunt, cum rerum investigaverunt naturas, sed sicut scriptum est: 'Qui de terra est, de terra loquitur.' Si ergo ad illud vitae caelestis fastigium conscendere niteris, quae omnem terrenam longe transcendit disciplinam, ne plurimum innitaris terrene philosophiae regulis, quibus nec adhuc ad plenum comprehendi ac definiri terrena potuerunt, nedum caelestia"; Peter Abelard, *Ethical Writings: Ethics and Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, trans. P. V. Spade, Indianapolis 1995, p. 126.

from ours, that our minds are incapable of creating a fully satisfying similitude.¹⁴

Abelard concluded that the only way to express the truths of faith in our language is to state clearly that we use certain terms with meanings different from those originally assigned to them.¹⁵ He called this transfer of meaning *translatio* and described in the following way:

Therefore it is the right thing for a word to assume a unique meaning or a special construction when it is transferred from its natural context to the divine one. Thus, while describing God who differs from any created thing, a word assumes a meaning different from the original one.¹⁶

Hence, if we adopt a word from our language to express a truth of faith, we need to be aware that in the new context the meaning of it would be different from the one we normally associated with it. Bonnani, whom I have referred to before, explained *translatio* as “metaphorical use.” He singled out four types of such transfer of meaning in Abelard’s works. He called the first one *translatio equivocationis* and explained it with the example of the word “dog.” In its basic meaning, it defines a barking animal, but could also be used to describe a sea animal or a constellation. In this case, a vocabulary item has different meanings, which are naturally linked in some way, but only through the use of the same word. Different meanings are a result of different *impositiones*.

The next type of *translatio* is used mostly by poets in order to embellish their texts. It is usually called a metaphor. For example, in Hamlet’s

¹⁴ “Quanto autem excellentia divinae naturae a caeteris quas condidit naturis longius abscedit, tanto minus congruas similitudines in illis reperimus quibus satisfacere de ista valeamus”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 76.

¹⁵ “In tantum vero in ipsa factura sua delectatur Deus, ut frequenter ipsis rerum naturis quas creavit, se figurari, magis quam verbis nostris quae nos confinximus aut invenimus, exprimi velit, et magis ipsa rerum similitudine quam verborum nostrorum gaudeat proprietate, ut ad eloquentiae venustatem ipsis rerum naturis iuxta aliquam similitudinem pro verbis scriptura malit uti, quam proprie locutionis integritatem sequi”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 32.

¹⁶ “Oportet itaque, cum ad singularem divinitatis naturam quascumque dictiones transferimus, eas inde quandam singularem significationem seu etiam constructionem contrahere, atque per hoc quod omnia excedit, necessario propriam institutionem excedere”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 85.

monologue Shakespeare uses the term “undiscovered country” to refer to afterlife. In this case we can single out different meanings of a certain expression, but they do not refer to different beings.

In the third type, called grammatical *translatio*, a term is used as a grammatical category, like in the expression *homo est vox*.

The last type is called *translatio dialectica*. We can see it in the expression *homo est species*, in which the word *homo* is used to describe a certain genus, thus becoming a logical category.

Within the mentioned types of *translatio*, the last three form a group different from the first one. They do not require a change of *impositiones*, and therefore do not imply certain level of ambiguity. These kinds of *translatio* were applied by Abelard. He used words with meanings different from the originally assigned ones, but without changing their *impositio*.¹⁷

A theologian has to use words in order to express any truths from this specific sphere which the world of faith doubtlessly is. Therefore, the terms that he uses should be understood in a special way – not literally but figuratively. This transfer of meaning, however, cannot be random, but must be based on a similarity between a thing originally described by a given word that we intent to use, and an aspect of divine reality that we describe. It is not easy to find a representation fulfilling these criteria, because the reality which we want to talk about is based on faith, not understanding. As we cannot fully understand God, we can offer only a partial *similitudo*, being aware that we get tangled up in figures of speech and parabolic puzzles, without arriving at the final solution.¹⁸

17 Por. S. P. Bonanni, *Parlare della Trinità*, p. 129f. Bonanni, based on *translatio* in: L. M. De Rijk, *Logica modernorum. A Contribution to the History of Early Terministic Logic*, t. 1: *On the XIIth Century Theories of Fallacy*, Assen 1962, p. 51–55.

18 “Cum itaque homo vocem invenerit ad manifestandos suos intellectus, Deum autem minime intelligere sufficiat, recte illud ineffabile bonum effari nomine non est ausus. Unde in Deo nullum propriam inventionem vocabulum servare videtur, sed omnia quae de Deo dicuntur, translationibus et parabolicis aenigmatibus involuta sunt et per similitudinem vestigantur ex parte aliqua inductam, ut aliquid de illa ineffabili maiestate credendo nunc magis quam intelligendo degustemus. Et quoniam minus plenarias similitudines invenimus ad illud quod singulare est inducendas, minus de eo satisfacere possumus per similitudines”; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 91.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE THEORY

As I have mentioned before, Abelard's aim was to explore and describe the unity and trinity of God. In order to achieve this aim, he was looking for an image that would best explain his understanding of this theological problem. In the first edition of *Theologia Summi Boni* we can find initial reflections on *translatio* linked with the theory of similitudes, but Abelard does not present the notion of *similitudo* yet. He partially made up for this lack in the next edition of *Theologia Christiana* in which he used the image of a wax figure to describe how Jesus was born of the Father, but he did not mention the Holy Spirit. Abelard suggested taking a wax object and analysing the nature of the waxy substance from which it was made. Observations and reflections led him to the following conclusion:

Here we have the same matter of wax and a wax figure, so even in a statement we can link wax itself and the wax figure, and say that the wax figure is wax itself. However, because the wax figure is made of wax, we cannot reverse the order and say that wax originates from the wax figure, but wax is the matter of the wax figure and the wax figure cannot be the matter of wax itself or of the wax figure.¹⁹

Thus, we have a figure made of wax which has the same nature as the matter of wax but because of being just a derivative, cannot be equated with it. This image can be successfully applied to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity. God the Father can be compared to the matter of wax, whereas the Son to the wax figure. They have the same nature, but are not the same person. The Son is born of the Father, just as the figure is made of a piece of wax.²⁰

¹⁹ "...cum tamen eadem essentia sit cera ipsa et imago cerea, ut etiam per praedicationem sibi sociari queant cera ipsa et imago illa, et dici possit quod imago cerea sit ipsa. Nec tamen ideo minus dicimus ceream imaginem esse ex cera, non ceram ex cerea imagine, et ceram ipsam esse materiam cereae imaginis, non ceream imaginem esse materiam ipsius cereae aut cereae imaginis"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Christiana*, IV, 86, in: E. M. Buytaert (ed.), *Petri Abaelardi opera theologica*, II, Turnhout 1969 (CCCM, 12).

²⁰ "Quod si huius similitudinis rationem ad divinam generationem reducamus, facile est ibi cuncta assignare ac defendere quae credimus. Ponamus itaque Deum Patrem, ut supra meminimus, divinam potentiam ac Deum Filium divinam sapientiam, et consideremus quod ipsa sapientia quaedam sit potentia, cum sit ipsa videlicet

The mystery of the trinity was fully presented in *Theologia Scholarium*, in which Abelard used the image of a bronze seal and described it in the following way:

Thus bronze, ability to seal and the seal itself have the same nature, as they are three different qualities of the same substance. These qualities are linked in such a way that the ability to seal comes from bronze, whereas the seal comes both from the ability to seal and from bronze. If we use these qualities with proper references to the Holy Trinity, it will be easy to resist pseudo-philosophers, who attack us with philosophical arguments. Just like a bronze seal comes from bronze and, in a way, is born of it, the Son comes from the substance of the Father and that is why we say that He is born of him.²¹

What made it possible to use this similitude to present the mystery of the Holy Trinity was the distinction between three different qualities of a bronze seal: the matter of bronze, the ability to seal and the imprinted seal. Abelard stressed that although they all have the same nature, they are not the same thing. The seal with its ability to seal comes from bronze, but we cannot reverse the order as bronze cannot be said to come from the seal or the ability to seal. Whereas, the imprinted seal comes both from bronze and the ability to seal.

Just like in the case of the wax figure, the origin of the seal from the matter of bronze was meant to serve as the image of the Son being born of the Father in the Holy Trinity. A new element was the explanation of the relation of the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit, which Abelard presented in the following way:

potentia discernendi ac providendi seu deliberandi veraciter omnia, ne quid Deum decipere possit aut latere. Est igitur divina sapientia ex divina potentia quomodo cerea imago est ex cera"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Christiana*, IV, 87.

21 "Sic igitur cum sit eadem essentia aeris et sigillabilis et sigillantis quae tria proprietate diversa sunt, ita haec tria invicem sunt sibi coniuncta, ut ex aere sigillabile, et ex aere simul et sigillabili sigillans habeat suum esse. Quae quidem omnia, si ad divinae trinitatis doctrinam congruis proportionibus reducuntur, facile est nobis ex ipsis philosophorum documentis pseudophilosophos qui nos infestant refellere. Sicut enim ex aere sigillum est aereum et ex ipso quodammodo generatur, ita ex ipsa dei Patris substantia Filius habet esse, et secundum hoc ex ipso genitus dicitur"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 112f.

Just like the bronze seal comes from bronze and the imprinted seal comes from bronze and the seal (meaning the ability to seal), the Son comes only from the Father, whereas the Holy Spirit comes both from the Father and the Son.²²

Thus Abelard used the image of a process which results in the creation of an imprinted seal originating from the matter of bronze and the imprinting potential of the seal, to present the Holy Spirit as coming both from the Father and the Son.²³

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In the introduction to this paper I posed the following research question: How should theological propositions, originating from the language used to describe creatures, be understood so as to avoid idolatry, that is reducing God to the category of contingent entities?

Using the theory of similarities formulated by Peter Abelard, I pointed out that the risk of committing theological errors decreases when language formulas are treated as models, and their meaning is understood in a figurative way. Such an attitude enables us to acknowledge the fact that language can be only partially adequate to the subject under discussion, and makes us aware that we describe only one aspect of a given theological phenomenon, as the chosen model may not correspond to other aspects.

Such understanding of the theological language calls for a constant reinterpretation of theological propositions. If images used in theology are linked to the structure of the world, each change in the scientific understanding of this structure brought by empirical sciences, should

22 "Sicut igitur ex aere sigillum aereum habet esse, et rursum ex aere simul et sigillo, id est sigillabili, sigillans habet esse, sic ex Patre solo Filius habet esse, et ex Patre simul et Filio Spiritus Sanctus, ut exposuimus"; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Scholarium*, II, 141.

23 About Abelard's Trinitarian Doctrine see: E. M. Buytaert, *Abelard's Trinitarian Doctrine*, in: E. M. Buytaert (ed.), *Peter Abelard. Proceedings of the International Conference. Louvain, May 10–12, 1971*, Leuven 1974, p. 127–152; J. E. Brower, *Trinity*, in: J. E. Brower, K. Guilfooy (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, Cambridge 2004, p. 223–257; I. Różycki, *Doctrina Petri Abaelardi de Trinitate*, vol. 2: *De Mysterio SS. Trinitatis*, Poznań 1939, p. 48–95.

lead to changes in the language used by theology. Lack of such changes in the system of religious beliefs will lead to a decrease in the credibility of theology and push its truths towards the category of myths and fables.

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