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SPIRITUAL IDEAS IN THE LETTERS OF PETER OF BLOIS

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The popularity of the letter-collection of Peter of Blois for three centuries after his death contrasts markedly with its neglect by modern scholars.[1] The only recent article is by R. W. Southern, who explained that he abandoned work on a critical edition because "behind the attractive exterior there appeared to be a deep emptiness, a lack of thought, of originality, of anything but conventional feelings. . . ."[2] Yet there was something about these letters which spoke to the men of the late Middle Ages. Insofar as a work's appeal can be gauged by the quantity of surviving copies, Peter of Blois's letters, with their 250 manuscripts, clearly rank among the most popular of the Middle Ages. Not so clear are the reasons for this appeal, but they will emerge from a study of Peter's collection for its form and contents.

The chronology of the success of this collection is in itself revealing. Although the author enjoyed some renown in his own lifetime and although his collection was copied relatively often throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the increase in the number of manuscripts in the fifteenth century is especially striking.[3] This pattern is not accidental nor is it to be explained by the naturally greater survival of more recent manuscripts. It corresponds rather to a greater interest in his letters taken by the men of the late Middle Ages, especially in Germanic regions. Indeed, it is part of the wider pattern for surviving manuscripts and works on spirituality which shows the appeal of twelfth-century thought in the late Middle Ages[4] and suggests that the explanation of the popularity of Peter's collection can be sought in its spiritual ideas.[5]

* This article was substantially complete at the time of Dr. Higonnet's death on 24 November 1973. It has been revised for publication by members of her family in cooperation with Giles Constable.

[1] See my thesis, "The Letters of Peter of Blois," Diss. Harvard University 1973, pp. 1–2 (hereafter cited as "Letters"). All references to Peter's letters will be to the edition by J. A. Giles, volumes 1 and 2 in the 4-volume *Petri Blesensis Bathoniensis Archidiaconi Opera Omnia* (Oxford, 1847–1848). The letters are cited by number and, for quotations, by volume and page.

[2] R. W. Southern, "Peter of Blois: A Twelfth Century Humanist?" in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (New York, 1970), p. 107.

[3] By rough count I find 46 MSS from the thirteenth century, 40 MSS from the fourteenth century, 138 MSS from the fifteenth century, 2 MSS from the sixteenth century, and 4 MSS from the seventeenth century. Southern thought there were 7 MSS from the twelfth century, 42 from the thirteenth century, 39 from the fourteenth century, 112 from the fifteenth century (Southern, "Peter of Blois," p. 105). I preferred to date all the possible twelfth-century manuscripts as thirteenth century.

[4] Cf. Giles Constable, "The Popularity of Twelfth-Century Spiritual Writers in the Late Middle Ages," *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Hans Baron,* Biblioteca Storica Sansoni, Nuova Serie 49 (Florence, 1971), pp. 3–28, and "Twelfth-Century Spirituality and the Late Middle Ages," *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5 (Chapel Hill, 1971), 27–60.

[5] It is probable that style as well as content was an important factor in the popularity of this

The genre through which Peter of Blois expressed himself most successfully was letters, skillfully written and collected with an eye to posterity and to publication, and their literary quality no doubt accounts for some of their popularity. The manuscripts show that the form of the collection was not fixed definitely at a certain moment in time; its order, its contents, and the texts of the letters, though carefully planned, were revised as new or better ideas occurred to the collector.[6] The success of Peter's letter-collection especially in the late Middle Ages depended on his ideas, above all on his spiritual ideas and on the skill with which he handled them; but it is nonetheless important to consider also that the letters, with very few exceptions, were read and copied as a whole.[7] They achieved success in the eyes of both their author and of posterity as an arrangement of ideas, as a unified collection, whose outline must be sketched to provide a context for his ideas on the spiritual life.

Almost all the letters contribute in one way or another to a large picture of the proper conduct of life. Many examples can be cited, such as the second letter of the collection to Henry II of England, urging him to subdue his grief at the death of his son, the young king Henry. Whether such a letter of consolation was entirely appropriate, given the fact that the young king had rebelled violently against his father, is a separate question, but its purpose in the collection is to advise a man — a king in this instance — on how to behave in the face of death. A similar desire to advise and correct underlies the many letters to bishops who prefer hunting to caring for their flocks, to clerics who drink excessively, to a friend who believes in superstition and trusts the interpretation of dreams, to the French king who unjustly tried to tax the church to finance his Crusade. Peter also advised men and women about their commitment to the monastic life, the king about the activities of his officials, a noble about despising the low birth of his chaplain. The collection comprises a multitude of subjects, but the letters have in common the goal of advising people how to behave morally.[8]

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collection. This was especially true in fourteenth-century Italy where, it is known, Peter's collection was much admired. Coluccio Salutati mentions Peter of Blois as one of the letter-writers he most admired (I owe this information to Ronald Witt of Duke University) as did later, in a backhand fashion, Aeneus Silvius (Southern, "Peter of Blois," p. 127, n. 1). Although there are no Italian manuscripts of Peter's letters, they were popular in Renaissance Italy as much for their style as for their moral contents.

[6] "Letters," pp. 69–127.

[7] Other factors also help explain the success of this collection and underlie Peter of Blois's motives for writing letters. He wrote, of course, because he had things to say to people (mostly friends) who were far away; but it is also significant that letters were in vogue in the twelfth century and served as a vehicle for expressing ideas which at other periods might have been dealt with more impersonally, in tracts, for example. Even though he wrote many letters in the names of his masters, the ideas he wrote about were his own. This is true not of all the letters he composed as secretary, but of the ones he chose to include in his collection and especially those he retained in all the stages of its growth. He deliberately used a literary form which was circumstantial and spontaneous.

[8] The letters characteristically achieve an equilibrium between the specific, immediate situa-

Since the letters are addressed to all kinds of people, they set forth standards of moral conduct appropriate to many human situations. Writing as he did at the end of the twelfth century, Peter rejected the attitude of those who wanted to turn the whole world into a monastery with monastic ideals of sanctity.[9] Rather, like Peter the Chanter, he saw a variety of ideals for a variety of orders in society,[10] and justified, for example, the desire for marriage and for a life of domesticity of a young woman who was being urged to enter the nunnery. As the western church had always upheld the sanctity of marriage, especially against dualist heretics,[11] Peter's defense of marriage was in no way revolutionary, but it is typical of his whole attitude towards morality. For him, morality was often a sort of practical or every-day affair which was as secular as it was monastic.

Although some of the letters are primarily concerned with business matters — political, curial and above all financial — Peter's treatment of these topics reinforces the impression of his overall moral goal. As he worked over his assembled letters, Peter omitted many whose purpose was chiefly to contract business or which paid little or no attention either to style or to the links between the incident and a higher moral purpose.[12] Thus, four letters in the name of Archbishop Rotrou of Rouen about the rebellion in 1173 of the sons and wife of Henry II are omitted from the later stages of the collection in order to sharpen the moral focus of the collection.

At the same time, although Peter did choose to cull out certain business letters, he also determined that others should remain; and the reader who studies the letters is struck by the number of them which relate to events of the author's life or which deal with his quest for financial security. The explanation of this divergent treatment lies in his desire to preserve a record of his life, which is, in fact, one of the more important subjects in the collection. He explained a great deal about himself (if not everything): his family background, his education, the ups and downs of his career and the

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tion and the universal, moral truth. In this connection the letters concerning Thomas Becket are apt. Although Peter never wrote to Becket himself, he wrote about his exile to his devoted friend, John of Salisbury, and to his circle of followers and supporters (his *familiares*). Each letter involved a particular circumstance; for example, the family is asked to forgive any possible affront or harm to the martyr which they feel — incorrectly, according to Peter — had been done by the arch-deacon of Salisbury, Reginald. But throughout the moral truth of the *libertas ecclesiae* is evoked; the crux of this letter is that the archbishop's life and death represent the proper relationship between church and state, recognized and accepted by everyone, including the archdeacon. The specifics of the case are put into perspective by the principle of the church's liberty, but they are not quite swallowed up by it. The balance is maintained between the specific and the universal.

[9] M.-D. Chenu, "Monks, Canons, and Laymen in Search of the Apostolic Life," in *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, ed. and tr. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago, 1968), p. 212.

[10] See John N. Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants. The Social Views of Peter the Chanter and His Circle*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1970).

[11] John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 128.

[12] See "Letters," pp. 80–87.

choices he made in it, his intellectual growth, his physical illnesses, his spiritual crises. His own life was the one he knew best and it provided a sort of case-study of human conduct. Although he may have exaggerated some of his good qualities, he did not hide his faults. Rather he described internal and external incidents as they occurred. The pattern of his life was not a model to be imitated, but an example of the difficult decisions and problems that all men face.

Peter's concern with the events of his own life is not accidental. It is an aspect of his overriding concern with morality as against for example speculative theology or political theory or metaphysics. He saw man's nature and place in the universe from a moral point of view. Inevitably, he was concerned with the Christian life as lived by monks and clerics, in monasteries, in parishes, at royal and ecclesiastical courts, and in schools. Thus, he dealt with several specifically spiritual themes: poverty, interior religious feelings, love, and the will. Likewise, individual morality is the focus of two other ideas which shed light on Peter's concept of the spiritual life: his view of education and of learning, and, finally, his opinion of the dignity of man.

It is evident that such a view of man's nature and place in the universe reflects a number of important developments during the twelfth century, which was crucial, as Odon Lottin has shown, for the definition of concepts of psychology and of the laws of morality.[13] In terms of religious mentalities, the twelfth century also witnessed changes that were greater and more lasting than any others before the sixteenth century.[14] The very importance both in his own age and later of the spiritual and moral concerns found in Peter of Blois's letters may explain the success of his collection. But it remains to be seen whether his ideas on poverty or on other topics were new or even avant-garde in his own age and whether his ideals of sanctity were the same as those which were most important and most audacious in the late twelfth century.

THE MONASTERY

Although criticism of the abuses of monasticism and of the supposed deformation of its original ideals of organization and spirituality was common in the twelfth century, it is almost totally absent from Peter of Blois's letters. To a certain extent this is not unexpected, since he was not a monk. He viewed monasticism from the outside, with some detachment from the burning issues of the day. There is an occasional remonstrance to the monk who lacked some virtue, such as the reminder to the run-away monk of the permanence of his monastic vows (Ep. 80), and he complains about the moral laxness in monasteries not subject to local bishops (Ep. 68). Such criticisms, however, occur relatively infrequently and, in any case, do not constitute a fundamental discussion of monastic life. All the same Peter was

[13] See Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, vols. 1–6 (Louvain and Gembloux, 1942–1960).

[14] Constable, "Twelfth-Century Spirituality," pp. 29–30.

concerned with some aspects of the monk's office and place in society, and I shall deal with them here, leaving aside momentarily his broader spiritual ideas.

Peter's picture of monastic life is schematic and defined primarily by his emphasis on the monastery's opposition to the world in the sense not of conflict but of separation. The monk is to remove himself from the world, fleeing its sins and temptations. "And thus you should form yourself from and cling to the likeness of the dead Christ, so that you are dead to the world, dead from your heart, and your life is happily hidden away in Christ" (Ep. 137, 2:24). Similarly the chasm between the monastery and the world is the basis for the congratulations sent to a young noblewoman entering the nunnery (Ep. 35). When she took her monastic vows, Anselma gave up her riches and her noble status in order to assume a life of poverty and, consequently, a demeaning social status. But she should console herself, said Peter, since true nobility resides in apparent poverty. The point here is that the monastery is so distinct from worldly society that it bears no relationship to it, even in terms of the economic determination of class. Whether this was actually the case is a separate question; the significance of this remark is the distance it puts between the monastery and the world.[15] In terms of the dichotomy between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, therefore Peter saw the life of the monk as contemplative. But he did not explore these concepts either by interpreting, as was traditional, the asceticism and prayers of the contemplative monk as the ultimate and ideal form of the active life or by urging the monk to participate in his community and thus assigning him that sort of active life. The monks of Peter's letters are asked to lead conventional contemplative lives.

Peter questioned the possibility and validity of a fully contemplative monastic life only for the abbot. Because the abbot is responsible for overseeing both the spiritual well-being of his monks and the abbey's daily administration, his life is by necessity devoted as much to action as to contemplation.[16] In a letter written ostensibly to congratulate the newly-

[15] The monastic vocation is conventionally defined and its virtues identified as humility, penitence, detachment, chastity. For women, the monastic vocation consists almost entirely in chastity. Although this seems to be an excessively narrow view, it probably results more from the schematic nature of Peter's description of religious women than from a deliberately narrow interpretation. Moreover, in another context, the author shows that he was not unaware of the women who desired to lead their lives in accordance with their religious feelings. He criticized a novice for preaching and misleading "poor little women burdened by sins" (Ep. 13, 1:42). For monks, the famous opinion of Jerome is often cited: His office is to weep (see Ep. 13, 1:42). The monk's tears should be accompanied by asceticism, fasts, and prayers. The true sons of God are those "who subject the deeds of the flesh to the spirit . . ." (Ep. 131, 1:403). His stress on discipline and asceticism, however, did not include an investigation of their connection with contemplation, which is recommended separately: "descend into the gardens of aromatic flowers that you may feed on spiritual delights and collect the most beautiful lilies of joys" (Ep. 242, 2:262).

[16] It is interesting that Peter viewed the administrative office of the abbot as the major danger the contemplative monk encountered. He only once discussed the problem which had been so

elected abbot of the Augustinian canons of Bourgmoyen (near Blois), the author stressed the dangers and burdens of administration. "While you administered a minor office, you were often a scandal for yourself, frequently in tedium, and always in danger; . . . now it is necessary for you to be distracted by various things, to grind for others, to be solicitous with Martha, to postpone that one necessity, to go from the repose of Mary to some labryinth of the soul" (Ep. 134, 2:8–9). What is significant is that this letter did not admit the spiritual value of work in the world, though written in the 1190s, when the movement was already launched which considered the activity of the religious man properly to include some involvement in the world around him.[17] The solution suggested to the problem of administration was still that the abbot "should so administer his office that none may reproach his ministry" (Ep. 242, 2:262), but that at the same time "you should always carry with you a certain internal solitude, so that your soul, collected in itself, be not deflected to the exterior. . ." (Ep. 134, 2:9). In short, this requires alternating the active and contemplative lives, as had been proposed earlier by Anselm of Havelberg for canons, whose very phrase Peter used.[18] But his opinions of the value of this mixed life differed from Anselm's. Where Anselm thought the mixed life was better, Peter preferred strict contemplation and accepted the activity of the abbot only on the grounds of practical necessity and not as an ideal of sanctity.

The longest letter in the collection, Ep. 102, also describes the tension between action and contemplation in the abbot's life. It summarizes a conversation Peter claimed to have had with the abbot of Reading and sets forth the answer he had been unable to give at the time. The abbot had complained bitterly about the danger to his soul imposed by his office, and the first part of the letter states these arguments. "Is not my own iniquity sufficient for me, that I not sin against many and take upon myself a double sin?" (Ep. 102, 1:319). The monk should be dead to the world and the world should be dead to him. "For I have elected to be abject in the house of God . . . but now, moreover, I have been lifted up in the wrath of God in the pastoral chair . . ." (Ep. 102, 1:321).[19] Peter's answer characteristically em-

important for the early Cistercians and others, the involvement of the monastery socially and economically in the feudal structure.

[17] Caroline W. Bynum, "The Spirituality of Regular Canons in the Twelfth Century: A New Approach," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, New Series 4 (1973), 3–24. See also her lecture, "The Cistercian Conception of Community: An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality," given November 10, 1973, at the American Academy of Religion.

[18] "Sic in te contempl.:tiva et activa vices suas alternent, ut nullum tempus habeas feriatum." (Ep. 134, 2:9–10). See Anselm of Havelberg, *Epistola apologetica pro ordine canonicorum*, PL 188:1131–1132. See also Jean Leclercq, François Vandenbroucke, Louis Bouyer, *La spiritualité du Moyen Age*, in *Histoire de la spiritualité Chrétienne*, 2 (Paris, 1961), 177.

[19] It is interesting that some of these complaints — not Peter's own, or at least put into the mouth of another — relate to the economic and social involvement of monasteries which does not appear elsewhere in the letters. "For it is detestable in a monk that under the color of some honor or the title of power he should have contracts, male and female serfs, homage and vassals and liege men, or that he impose on men service and extra service and other burdens of public duty" (Ep. 102, 1:324).

phasized the complexity of the situation without taking a clear-cut position. First, he soothed the distressed abbot by explaining that "it is of a richer grace to be religious in the world, to be just among the impious; . . . for those who lead well, a double crown, according to the Apostle, is promised" (Ep. 102, 1:328). He continued by praising service: "the roads to salvation are diverse and there are divisions of graces; for to each is given the manifestation of the spirit for some useful purpose" (Ep. 102, 1:328). But, said Peter, the sanctity of service must not be stressed to the detriment of the individual's salvation. In this context, he cited the example of Geoffrey of Péronne, who refused to accept his election to the bishopric of Tournai in order to protect his soul. Peter's solution has ambiguities: service is good, but the refusal to serve is also praiseworthy; and it was only in connection with monks living at court that he held a categorically negative opinion of service, related directly to his definition of the fundamentally contemplative nature of monasticism (Ep. 107). If the necessary activity of the abbey's administration was acceptable, although barely so, activity at court was not.[20]

In the twelfth century the nature of religious life was questioned by canons as well as by monks and the canonical movement occasionally appears in Peter's letters in this connection. Diverse and, in some ways, new forms of organization and spirituality were developed more by regular canons than by the relatively traditional, non-innovative secular canons with whom Peter of Blois personally had most contact. For example, he had been put in charge of the secular canons of Wolverhampton, but found that he could neither control them nor reform their degenerate lives. He therefore asked Innocent III to transform the priory into a Cistercian monastery (Ep. 152). This reform of the canons of Wolverhampton, however, was directed at their moral laxity rather than their institutions or religious ideals. The regular canons were more innovative than the secular canons in both spirituality and organization, but Peter's letters evince only slight interest in their developments. The primary characteristic of regular canons, seen in the context of the revival of religious life and the reform of the canonical order, was their similarity to monks. They lived common lives, and, often, their spirituality cannot be distinguished from that of the new order of monks. Though recent work on canons has shown that the canons' conception of themselves differed from the monks' in that it included an important element of commitment to service and to the community,[21] their contemplative stress cannot be overstated. It is in this context that Peter's view of regular canons must be placed.

This stress is borne out by the letter he wrote to the chapter and dean of the Holy Savior at Blois which had been newly reestablished thanks to the moral and constitutional guidance of the bishop of Chartres, John of Salis-

[20] [Some points in this paragraph, and later, seem at variance with the remarks in the previous paragraph concerning Peter's view of the spiritual value of work in the world, but they have been left substantially as Dr. Higonnet wrote them. G.C.]

[21] Caroline W. Bynum, "The Spirituality of Regular Canons."

bury, and the efforts, possibly financial, of a pious knight Geoffrey (Ep. 78). It appears that the canons who had lived at Blois earlier had been dispersed because of their scandalous lives, and that a new foundation (*novella plantatio*) had been made which clearly involved the common life: "it is good and joyful for the brothers to live in unity . . ." (Ep. 78, 1:236). The activities of the canons are described as primarily the liturgy and secondarily charitable acts: ". . . in your church the obedience to the debt of service is to be celebrated daily and solemnly. . . . Thus, therefore, in the singing of Psalms and the Canticles and in the sacrament of the altar and also in charitable acts your devotion may be exercised. . ." (Ep. 78, 1:237). He also stressed the importance of interior devotion; even good acts are good only because they glorify God. In short, it would be hard to distinguish the canons described here from monks. Nothing is said about their responsibilities to each other or to the community in which they live; nothing is said about the care of souls; charitable acts are mentioned only secondarily. As religious men with lives in common, Peter's regular canons, like monks, led primarily contemplative lives.

The diversity of monks and canons and their differing types often produced conflict, and they were frequently seen as competing forms of the cloistered life. More rarely, however, as in the *Libellus de diversis ordinibus,* the varieties of religious life were discussed calmly and interpreted as several valid paths to salvation.[22] Like the author of the *Libellus,* Peter of Blois did not see the different types of monks and canons with their different lives and ideals as in conflict with each other. His attitude was instead detached and perfunctory. He thought of both monks and canons schematically as contemplative because he was not involved personally in their approach to spiritual life.

Peter's characteristically moderate and tolerant view of monks and canons — perhaps resulting from a lack of interest — also dominated his opinion of the proliferation of monastic orders, a problem which attracted the best minds of his age, provoking violent tempers and deeply-felt emotions. The debate between Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, treated the difference between orders as two competing roads to perfection and sanctification. For Peter of Blois, however, it is certain that such constitutional conflict did not engage his naturally combative spirit.

Indeed, Peter argues both sides of the question. Thus he could write in defense of the new orders a letter dissuading a monk from transferring to the Cluniac from the Carthusian order. First a conventional argument is made: instability and the desire for novelty are sins. Then a more forceful and positive reason is given: ". . . you can find a place of penitence, the secret of solitude, peace of soul, the sanctuary of contemplation, joy in the holy spirit, the gift of salvation and the potent benefit of healing. . . . If you had wanted to have leisure for yourself, and if you had wanted to write,

[22] *Libellus de diversis ordinibus et professionibus qui sunt in aecclesia,* ed. and trans. G. Constable and B. Smith, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1972), esp. pp. xxiv-xxv and 80–96.

pray, read, meditate and sing Psalms, never would you have put the city before the hermitage, or solicitude before solitude" (Ep. 86, 1:261–264). This description conforms to the traditional ideals of monasticism, especially as they were revitalized in the new orders. Finally, the specific complaint of the monk who wanted to transfer, that the Carthusians do not celebrate Mass daily, is countered by invoking the standard position of the new orders. To be holy the sacrament of the Eucharist must have interior meaning; thus the purity and reverence with which the host is taken is far more important than the frequency. The emphasis on inward emotions seems therefore to suggest that Peter of Blois preferred the new orders to the old.

The conjunction of this letter, however, with another on the same subject shows that Peter did not take sides publicly in the debate between the old and new orders (Ep. 97). Either because he feared to offend the abbot of Evesham (since he meant for his earlier letter to reach a wider audience than the monk it addressed) or because he did not want his collection to have a partisan flavor, he later wrote and included in his collection a temperate letter to the abbot of Evesham explaining that in no way had he intended to detract from the reputation of his house: "Between the white and the black habit He does not distinguish. . . . The order of the Cluniacs is holy, and of the Cistercians is holy, and in both the Lord has placed His ministry of reconciliation and His work of salvation" (Ep. 97, 1:305–306). Even frequent administration of the Eucharist, which earlier he had opposed, is given its place: "I admit that frequency of psalmody is very salutary, if it proceeds from devotion; if someone is slothful, occupation is honest . . ." (Ep. 97, 1:306). This view of spiritual matters parallels in some respects that of Bernard of Clairvaux in *De praecepto et dispensatione,* which admitted more than one lawful interpretation of the Rule, some of them severe and some benign.[23] But tolerance is not the dominant tone of Bernard's writings, above all in his *Apologia,* nor does it conform with the tradition which "bids the monk to follow his carefully formed conscience, even against common opinions. . . ."[24] Moderation and tolerance were scarcely admissible in an argument over different roads of sanctification and their presence in Peter of Blois's letters reflects his lack of personal involvement in the issues of monastic organization and spirituality.

CLERICS

As Peter of Blois was a cleric, not a monk, one would expect his ideas about the spiritual life and functions of clerics to be well developed. If he saw the monk as primarily devoted to tears and contemplation, how did he see the cleric, whose life was traditionally defined as active rather than contemplative, and what were his views on the nature of the cleric's com-

[23] David Knowles, *From Pachomius to Ignatius. A Study in the Constitutional History of the Religious Orders,* The Sarum Lectures, 1964–5 (Oxford, 1966), p. 79.

[24] Knowles, *Pachomius,* p. 80.

mitment to activity in the world, the extent of his withdrawal from society and, in particular, the importance of the care of souls and of preaching?

Although Peter frequently limited his discussion to castigating the moral laxity of his correspondents, he also related these rather simple disciplinary questions to broader spiritual concerns. He reprimanded an alcoholic cleric, another for engaging in commerce and yet a third for his pride and ambition; more generally he contrasted these moral faults with the care of souls, which was seen as the essential purpose of the cleric's life. The bishop who spent his days at the hunt is urged instead to oversee those souls committed to his trust (Ep. 56), since the *cura animarum* is singled out as the bishop's primary function. A still stronger advocacy can be found in Peter's letters to his vicar reminding him of his responsibility to God for the souls entrusted to him and of the fact that his position did not represent a source of income but a spiritual duty. (It occurs to the reader that the same argument could be made about the author's own responsibilities.) The vicar must guide his flock by deeds as well as by words: "therefore, let your words be for the profit of your subjects; let your works be an example. . ." (Ep. 157, 2:98–99). This ideal of teaching by work and example is also very clearly stated in the letter which castigated the bishop of Bath for leaving his see: "For what is it to feed sheep if not to evangelize your subjects, to make your people acceptable to God and to direct them in the ways of the Lord by word, deed and example and to make the people perfect for the Lord?" (Ep. 148, 2:78). In Peter's mind the cleric's life clearly was committed to service.

That Peter also embraced the opposite view, that of the virtues of fleeing the world, was owing not to a weakness of conviction but to his ability to understand the many sides of a question. Thus in the consoling letter to Archbishop Walter of Rouen about his exile his argument hinges on the virtues of exile, which are defined as martyrdom, suffering and withdrawal. Walter's exile permitted him to escape the cares of his office and to find divine peace in reading and prayer. "Do not be unoccupied in your exile. . . . Freedom from the cares of the world is that lack of occupation about which Solomon said, 'Wisdom is written in leisure and those who have little business shall perceive it' " (Ep. 125, 1:388). To some degree, then, even clerics like bishops, whose traditional role was active, were urged to lead a contemplative life.

In normal circumstances, however, Peter firmly endorsed the goal of clerical life, the care of souls, and the activity it involved, that is, the caring for the spiritual well-being of the flock by preaching or "teaching by work." Preaching was a central issue in the religious movements of the twelfth century.[25] It could determine the orthodoxy of a religious man or group of men, but in Peter's letters it appears only as an element in the accepted traditional role of clerics. There was little emotion and no conflict in Peter's recommendation that a cleric preach. In a letter written towards the end of

[25] See Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Historische Studien 267 (Berlin, 1935; rep. with additional material, Hildesheim, 1961).

his life he specifically stated that the duties of the priesthood included preaching the word of God to the laity and he cited Paul's recommendation to his disciple Timothy, ". . . preach the word . . . do the work of the Gospel and fulfill your ministry" (Ep. 230, 2:218). In addition he argued that a priest was required to use the gifts with which he was endowed; he was to learn and then to put his learning to good purpose, incorporating in some sermon or brief treatise the flower of his studies (Ep. 230). In another letter, Peter cited himself as an example of the responsibilities of the priesthood, saying that with old age he had become too feeble and forgetful to be able to preach, but that as an alternative he tried to write something useful every day (Ep. 244).[26]

In keeping with Peter's generally moderate outlook, it is natural that his recommendation that clerics preach did not raise the issue of heresy. Peter overlooked one of the most interesting aspects of preaching: incorporation of popular religious sentiment in the institutional church through preaching. The solution of the Franciscans and Dominicans was to preach, with permission, the orthodox word of God. If the heretics preached the false word, the Franciscans preached the approved word. Peter, for his part, did not discuss the matter, even though he was on some level aware of the link between preaching and the heretical or potentially heretical movements. One letter describes heretics: "there have risen up in your times preachers of false doctrines, doctors of lies, enemies of the truth and subverters of the faith. They are bland and simple, like lambs, but they are astute like foxes and rapacious like wolves." His procedures for dealing with these people significantly do not include preaching. "Summon the clergy, bring together the people so that out of the communal deliberation of those who possess the spirit of God a terrible constitution be promulgated in your province, . . . so that others may be terrified by the punishment of these" (Ep. 113, 1:351). Clearly, then, in spite of his awareness of the problem of popular religious movements, Peter ignored the critical role preaching was to play in their incorporation in the church.

Although Peter rarely questioned or explored the cleric's active life when

[26] Peter automatically urged preaching on clerics as their duty, but he only discussed its precise nature in connection with a young novice. The question of preaching by monks is, of course, separate from that of preaching by either priests or laymen. He opposed the young man's desire on the grounds of his youth and inexperience and not on the grounds of his not having permission to preach or the office of priesthood. Indeed, it is not clear whether this novice was also a priest or not. What is clear is that an equation is made between the monk's desire to preach and his wish to give up the monastery to return to the vanities of the world, an equation which recalls the author's emphasis on contemplation. "You should not return to the world when you have made the profession of the monastic order" (Ep. 13, 1:41). The point of the letter is to describe the dangers involved in preaching, to the monk himself and to the people among whom he may be spreading darkness instead of light. "For some go out from your house to instruct others and to convert them to a holier life and through them your house becomes a scandal. . . . Beware, said Christ to you, who go around on the sea and land to make one convert. These, said the Apostle, are those who penetrate homes and lead out as captives poor little women burdened down by sins" (Ep. 13, 1:42).

it involved the care of souls, a major source of conflict in his own life concerned the active life of clerics at court. Much of his adult life was spent at one court or another, both royal and ecclesiastical. He served as secretary to three archbishops of Canterbury (Richard of Dover, Baldwin, and Hubert Walter), to archbishops of Rouen, the bishops of Lincoln and others. He several times served the king of England and the queen, Eleanor, both as secretary and as a diplomatic envoy. Indeed he claimed that the high point of his career came in his youth when as tutor to young King William II of Sicily he held an important position in Sicilian government. A number of letters in the collection concern his court career and its vicissitudes, some written for his masters, others written to ask for positions or to complain about his present and past positions. It is natural that the issue of the cleric at court was one on which he expended great energy and intellect and it is in this context that he developed most completely his ideas on the extent to which a cleric should be involved in the world.

As might be expected, Peter here also maintained basically two attitudes towards clerics at court: he approved of them and he condemned them. Perhaps the more prevalent position is that a cleric can do good through his court activities; but the perils of such a life are also emphasized. This discrepancy can in large part be explained by the fact that the author changed his mind in his old age when the approach of death filled him with anguish and led him to despair of the value and even the propriety of human activity. This crisis, however, does not entirely explain the tension in his views of court activity, and the vicissitudes of his career also account for it. When in favor he approved; when in disfavor, he disapproved. In fact, most interesting about his conflicting attitudes is their deliberate juxtaposition in the collection, thereby forcing the reader to consider the complexities of the question.

The approval of the cleric at court is couched in terms of the exercise of the power of government. Although Peter's position at court was chiefly that of a secretary, he had at times served in a position of power and this is what he considered to be the primary governmental function of clerics. He argued that courtiers could do good for society. They could be useful, he thought, because of the skilled, learned and moral nature of their advice. Thus, in response to complaints brought against the bishops of Winchester, Ely and Norwich, he wrote to Alexander III in the name of Archbishop Richard of Canterbury, defending the bishops against the claims that they had "completely overthrown pastoral solicitude and they have immersed themselves in the flood of court activities, or rather, evil doings" (Ep. 84, 1:253). These clerics, he thought, follow a long tradition: "Nor is it a new thing that bishops should be present in the councils of kings: for as they precede others in honesty and in wisdom, so are they thought to be more expeditious and efficient in the administration of the affairs of state" (Ep. 84, 1:253). Moreover, the people who are best qualified, who "understand, desire and are able to have mercy on the suffering, to provide for the peace

of the land and the welfare of the people, to educate kings to justice. . ." (1:253), have a duty to advise. The final argument is that if bishops are the counsellors of kings, they can protect the church from harm done by the secular sword and can aid the royal government in carrying out its responsibilities to the poor and the weak (1:254).

The argument based on the utility of clerics in government is also developed on a personal level in a letter written in the name of Archbishop Hubert Walter to the chapter of Salisbury concerning its debate on residency. Peter himself had participated in this debate somewhat earlier by writing to complain that he was being forced to reside at Salisbury, even though his prebend of five marks was not sufficient to maintain life. The later letter in the archbishop's name also explained that not all holders of prebends should be forced to live at Salisbury "since some are necessary to the lord king, some to us, some are sick, some are active in schools, some are on pilgrimages. . ." (Ep. 135, 2:19). How Peter himself was necessary to the king is demonstrated in the letter written to Henry II to advise him of the injustices perpetrated throughout the kingdom; there Peter describes the abuses of the hundred courts, of royal officials and especially of the itinerant justices, and insists that the king be vigilant so that people with power over the poor and weak exercise their responsibilities morally (Ep. 95).

The arguments in favor of clerics in secular administrative positions are therefore based on moral considerations that have political consequences. By contrast, the argument opposing a cleric's living at court revolves around the dangers to his soul and leaves aside his usefulness, and, as has been said, many of the letters which combat court life were written towards the end of the author's life when he was preoccupied with salvation more than with social welfare. In describing his own life and career to a Cistercian abbot, he explained that he had not tended his own soul properly since he had always labored "in the schools or in courts" (Ep. 139, 2:35). His work in the schools was useless for the life of the soul and, a more serious matter, "whatever is done in the courts is, for the most part, destructive of salvation, ambitious, adulating, fictitious, detracting, deceptive, envious, cruel and impious. . ." (Ep. 139, 2:35). Here Peter not only insisted on the futility of court activity but also condemned it, because it prevented the pursuit of a contemplative life.

The best example of Peter's double attitude towards the court is to be found in the pair of letters written to the clerics of the king's court, Epp. 14 and 150. Ep. 14, one of the longest and most famous letters in the collection, condemns the court and the place of clerics there: ". . . the life of the courtier is death for the soul. . . . It is damnable for the cleric to involve himself in secular or curial affairs" (Ep. 14, 1:43).[27] This opposition is

[27] [This passage in Ep. 14 may be one of the later insertions made by Peter of Blois which reflect his growing distaste for court life, according to R. W. Southern, who also pointed out with regard to Dr. Higonnet's one but following paragraph that this letter possibly disappeared in the second recension of the collection but not in the later recensions. G. C.]

developed on several levels. The most serious concerns personal sanctity and the potential danger of desiring power and wealth. If the courtier has gifts from God, he is not to use them in secular affairs which are nothing but ambition and vainglory. Another level of criticism paradoxically concerns the physical discomforts and dangers at court. Daily life, presumably of all courtiers, not just clerics, is beset by the terrible quality of the food and drink, the poverty of the lodging, the danger of fatal disease, and the impossibility of sleep which was constantly disturbed by the king's impromptu desire to move to another place.

Yet Ep. 14 is often accompanied in the collection of Peter's letters by Ep. 150, a shorter letter written to the same clerics to retract his earlier harsh criticism. Here Peter reverses himself and explains that although courtiers do not have time for prayer and meditation, they are in a position to do much good. Through them, "the necessity of the poor is alleviated, religion is fostered, justice is done, the church enlarged. . ." (Ep. 150, 2:82). Besides, he continued, it is not possible for all to choose the "stricter life" (Ep. 150, 2:82). The implication is that social service is praiseworthy, if perhaps second-best, and that there is a place in salvation for both active and contemplative ways of living.

The ambiguity of Peter's attitude towards clerics at court is underlined not only by the frequent conjunction of Ep. 150 with Ep. 14 but also by the way in which he handled the position and texts of the two letters in the collection. One important element is that Ep. 14 was heavily revised between the First Collection and the Third Collection, producing a letter far more categorically hostile to the court. Another important element is that the author did not include both letters in every stage of the collection. They appeared together in the earliest stage of the collection, with Ep. 14 in its calmer, shorter version. In a later stage, Ep. 14 disappeared, and Ep. 150 which praises courtiers remained; here the balance swings towards the courtier. Finally, in the last collection, Ep. 150 was dropped and Ep. 14 was reintroduced in its long, radically hostile version. These changes and revisions show that although Peter espoused to some degree the concept of activity and the commitment to improving society through government, he was not completely clear in his own mind about the degree to which clerics were to withdraw from government. Here, as in many other areas, he saw the value of both positions.

POVERTY

The evangelical awakening, as M.-D. Chenu has called it, focused on poverty, [28] stimulated in part by the desire to imitate the primitive church and in part by the recurring crisis of actual, physical poverty throughout the twelfth century.[29] Although voluntary poverty had always been a fundamen-

[28] M.-D. Chenu, "The Evangelical Awakening," in *Man, Nature and Society*, p. 239.

[29] Michel Mollat, "Le problème de la pauvreté au XII[e] s.," *Vaudois languedociens et pauvres catholiques*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 2 (Toulouse, 1967), 24.

tal virtue in Christianity, for Jesus and the apostles, for the early church, for monasticism and for many people in the twelfth century, a turning point in its history came in the late twelfth century when new concepts of poverty were developed, some of which crystallized in the thought of Valdes, Francis, Dominic, and others.[30]

Poverty is an important theme running through Peter of Blois's letters, one which engaged deep and conflicting emotions. Involuntary poverty was a vital issue, especially as it affected his own life, since he was a poor man, or thought he was. As he was afflicted by uncertain material circumstances throughout most of his life, a frequent topic in his collection is the quest for money and position. He referred with revulsion to "contemptible poverty" (Ep. 66, 1:192), even while explaining that he did not fear it (Ep. 58). This contempt for poverty went against the profound Christian tradition and Peter's dislike of being poor is for that reason significant. When poverty touched his own life, he understood it as a social evil.

His response to the involuntary poverty of others was more traditional, since he saw it as having penitential value. God inflicts "sacred poverty" on man like a medicine to cure his sinful nature. "I bear the reproaches of the Lord, since I have sinned" (Ep. 229, 2:212). He occasionally gave it a more positive function in the pursuit of salvation. The motif of the casting down of the rich and powerful recurs frequently, implying that riches impede and poverty aids salvation. "In holy poverty is a commerce in most precious things since poverty confers that which riches are not able to confer" (Ep. 241, 2:258). Poverty is the only "*via secura et expedita ad vitam*" (Ep. 102, 1:327). For the individual, therefore, poverty is a stepping stone on the road towards salvation.

Another traditional attitude towards involuntary poverty has an important place in Peter's correspondence: the poor man was an object of charity and as such an occasion for the rich man to exercise his piety. Psychologically this was a comfortable attitude for Peter to espouse, given his distaste for his own material insecurity, since it endowed wealth with a function in the economics of salvation. In this context the crucial element in evaluating riches and poverty was the internal attitude of the individual rich or poor man. "It would be of little use to you to renounce riches unless you also renounce vices, since it is less dangerous to be the rich man of Christ than a poor man of anti-Christ" (Ep. 137, 2:25). Here poverty is not an end in itself, as it was thought to be by those who claimed for it an inherent spiritual value. For someone who considered poverty to be virtuous in itself, the phrase "a poor man of anti-Christ" was a contradiction in terms. Only when poverty and wealth were evaluated according to internal feelings could other conclusions be reached. "It is not those who have riches, but those who wish to have riches who fall into the temptation and the snare of the devil" (Ep. 241, 2:258). Riches, therefore, are not evil in themselves; the individual rich man can use his wealth well, thus contributing to his own sanctification. "It is

[30] Mollat, "Le problème de la pauvreté," p. 36.

possible to possess riches, just as Abraham possessed them, from legitimate sources and for lawful uses, for the grace of hospitality, for the maintenance of the poor" (Ep. 241, 2:258). Or: "The maintenance of poor men is the substance and the redemption of the rich. Therefore let poverty be more esteemed when derived from humility of soul than from [lack of] wealth" (Ep. 229, 2:213). If wealth sometimes represents a grave danger for the soul — the rich man clings to his money rather than to his salvation — it also permits the rich man to perform acts of charity, and the poor man to be an object of charity.

This double vision of poverty and wealth corresponds to two types of poverty, voluntary and involuntary. The involuntary poor primarily constitute occasions for the charity of the rich; but the man who voluntarily gives up his worldly possessions also performs a pious act of penance or asceticism. It is consistent with Peter's personal dislike of poverty that he generally ignored the value of involuntary poverty except as penitential. He certainly ignored the image of the poor man who represented Christ. Likewise he did not emphasize voluntary poverty. For example, there is no evidence in his correspondence that he recognized groups of poor men who depended on society for support, such as Stephen of Muret's "pauperes Christi."[31]

As Peter's personal fear of poverty ran very deep, it is natural that his hesitation about accepting the spiritual value of poverty, voluntary or involuntary, finds a parallel in his dislike of his own loss of status and position in society. For poverty was traditionally linked to the socially weak, the sick, widows and orphans, to all those people who could be thrown into poverty because they had few or no defenses against losing their place in society. It was relatively independent of social position (a knight was almost as vulnerable to it as a peasant), but it was strictly tied to having a stable position in society[32] and Peter's attitude towards social position was double. On the one hand he condemned the person who venerated honors: ". . . the outstanding mark of virtue is to triumph over worldly pomp. . ." (Ep. 93, 1:289). Similarly, the woman who gave up her noble status to enter the monastery is praised for her choice of the real nobility of poverty over the false nobility of the world (Ep. 35). On the other hand, he valued his own social position, and boasted to a nephew who had complained about their family's lack of honors that he had practically governed Sicily by himself when he was there as tutor to the young king, and that he had refused as unworthy a number of bishoprics such as Naples (Ep. 93). Just as he was unable to think of his indigence as a virtue, he was also unable to praise a lack of social position for himself.

Underlying Peter's concept of poverty is his attitude towards the material world, specifically towards property and commerce. Here, too, his attitude

[31] Occasionally, however, Peter stressed the value of voluntary poverty: "For those laboring patiently in the shipwreck of this tempest, poverty is a port and the gate of life: truly if we want strenuously to struggle or to swim . . . let us throw off our clothes" (Ep. 229, 2:212).

[32] Mollat, "Le problème de la pauvreté," p. 29.

was slightly ambivalent. Because he accepted the usefulness of riches, he did not totally reject property, money or commerce. A letter addressed to a cleric engaged in business castigates him for usury, but does not condemn commerce. "You give wine for grain, and for wine a horse; and so in the process of exchange or under the pretence of delayed repayment you receive an increase in your purse, but also damage to your soul. . . . Therefore, I ask you . . . to be content with the legitimate acquisition of goods and to cease from enormities of wealth. . ." (Ep. 17, 1:64–66).

Peter's attitude towards material possessions was generally moderate, but he did sometimes reject excessive involvement with worldly goods in passionate terms. In connection with the litigation between the prior of St-Côme-en-l'Ile and the abbot of Marmoutiens over some land, he said: "The possession of this world is deceptive and transitory. . . . The word of the prophet is: Oh earth, earth, earth, listen to my words. Man is earth since he is taken from the earth, abides on the earth, and returns to the earth; he tastes the earth, he licks the earth, he drinks the earth. His 'belly cleaves to the earth' [Ps. 44.25], he descends into the depths of the earth, and having forgotten the sky, he litigates for the earth and fights for the earth" (Ep. 117, 1:358).

The biblical tone of this passage is striking and its strength reminiscent of Francis of Assisi's attitude of radical detachment towards the material world, but ultimately Peter's attitude to materialism is not Franciscan in tone. Whether Francis was as irreconcilably opposed to all property as the Spiritual Franciscans thought he was, or whether he was merely opposed to the "property-owning mind," he was firm in thinking that the brothers must remain among the poorest of society and that their means of maintenance must be transient and uncertain.[33] Francis's rejection of property was almost dualist in tone, and yet it was his genius to balance this dualism with his love of the world as God's creation. In contrast with this movement towards radical, voluntary poverty, and despite his occasional passionate condemnation of worldly goods, Peter of Blois's moderate acceptance of material possessions establishes his place among traditional thinkers and places him clearly out of step not only with Franciscans, but also with many other examples of this movement in the twelfth century, the Grandmontines, Robert of Arbrissel, Dominic and others.

Peter's reluctance to take a clear stand on the spiritual value of poverty is mirrored as well in his negative appreciation of the associated themes of devotion to the human Jesus, the imitation of Christ, mendicancy, and wandering. The phrase *imitatio Christi* never appears in the letters, and in Ep. 243 on the antiphons sung at Christmas, there is no mention of the baby Jesus. When Peter urged people "naked to follow the naked Christ," he meant it in the traditional sense of taking a monastic vow or simply of behaving according to the standards of Christian virtue. Equally characteris-

[33] M. D. Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty* (London, 1961), p. 51.

tic of Peter's attitude is his description of the monk as Christ's heir: "doubtless you have become the son of God through adoption and the co-heir of Christ. For those who act in the spirit of the Lord are the sons of God" (Ep. 137, 2:22).

Similarly, Peter was naturally not unaware of or insensitive to Jesus's life as a mendicant and he wrote that "worn-out and afflicted, Christ used to beg among His poor. . ." (Ep. 227, 2:208). Poverty was an essential element in imitating the human side of Christ's life and the problem of how to sustain life when a commitment to radical poverty had been made was resolved by accepting mendicancy. Traditionally begging was forbidden to religious men, especially to clerics,[34] but manual labor, the established way to maintain life, often involved the forbidden possession of property. Therefore, mendicancy was endorsed, especially since it coincided with wandering, a theme which had re-emerged in connection with the *vita apostolica*. Although wandering conflicted with the monastic vow of stability, it took up the traditional idea of pilgrimage as an ascetic discipline.

Yet he seems to have had no interest in mendicancy as such. He decried it in a letter written for Archbishop Richard of Canterbury about certain "pseudo-bishops": "Although they have never accepted the grace of sacred unction, they celebrate orders, they dedicate churches, they consecrate altars, they bless abbots and thus, begging food and clothing through pity, they turn the sacraments of our redemption into a miserable and lamentable business" (Ep 53, 1:161). These people are credited with performing a number of functions reserved for bishops, but otherwise their activities are indistinguishable, for example, from those of the followers of Valdes, and it is important to see that Peter condemned their begging.

Peter's attitude towards wandering was consistent with his view of begging. Since wandering was identified with the life of Christ and the apostles, it became a spiritual ideal. But whereas Francis required his brothers to go from place to place, dependent on the hospitality of the people, Peter saw no positive spiritual value in wandering for its own sake: "To live always in exile and to travel about is the greatest misery. . . . To go from hospitality to hospitality is the worst life" (Ep. 148, 2:78). Nor was he moved by the thought that peregrination had been a traditional form of personal asceticism, as for the Irish monks who saw their travels to convert the pagans in these terms. Peter of Blois's view of exile here, too, was negative, since he did not admit even its ascetic value. Instead, he castigated the bishop who left his flock untended in order to go into exile and on a pilgrimage (Ep. 155) and he despised his own exile from his native France. For his own case he explained: "Wandering for twenty-six years in England I have listened to a language which I do not understand. . . . Am I always to be a wanderer and a fugitive on the earth? Will no one ever put an end to my wandering . . . ? (Ep. 160, 2:104).

Although Peter of Blois's view of poverty and associated themes was not

[34] Mollat, "Le problème de la pauvreté," p. 44.

generally original, the area in which his view of poverty might be called innovative is his vision of poverty as a social rather than spiritual or theological problem. Possibly the very fact that he felt himself to be on the threshold of destitution prevented him from developing a spiritual concept of absolute poverty. Both Valdes and Francis, for example, came from affluent urban families and it may be that the acceptance of radical voluntary poverty, at least initially, was appropriate as a spiritual discipline and way of life only for the rich. So far as is known, the early religious movements which focused on voluntary poverty were not made up of the poor and were protests less of the poor against the rich than of the rich against their own riches.[35]

INTERIORIZATION, THE WILL, AND LOVE

Poverty, mendicancy, wandering, the *imitatio Christi* and the devotion to Christ's humanity are elements in the broad shift of religious mentalities that took place roughly between 1050 and 1215. Another part of this shift is an interiorization of the individual's religious sentiment with an emphasis on will and on love and it is interesting to contrast Peter of Blois's view of poverty and insensitivity to ideas like the *imitatio Christi* with his stress on inwardness, the will and love. It will be seen that Peter's ideas here were somewhat closer than his conception of poverty to what was most innovative in his age. Since interiorization is often found in the works of spiritual writers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries,[36] it is not surprising to find it in Peter of Blois's letters.

The traditional stress on the contemplative nature of monastic life, where the monk tried to be "dead to the world," was revitalized by the new emphasis on interiority. The recognition of the immeasurable gulf separating God from man led to the monk's renewed desire for extreme asceticism and austerity as well as for the pursuit of solitude, interior prayer and contemplative introspection.[37] For precisely these inward qualities Peter praised the hermit-monks, the Carthusians: "Each one has his cell and his little house there that he may in freedom have leisure to contemplate and pray . . ." (Ep. 86, 1:263). This letter also includes in Peter's discussion of the Eucharist a characteristic example of his stress on the importance of inwardness and the will. When the young monk criticised the infrequency with which the Carthusians said Mass, Peter countered by arguing that it is not simply a ritual and that the host must be taken with reverence and purity of heart (Ep. 86).

Just as the taking of the Eucharist required inwardness and intention, so did its administration. Peter resisted for a long time the pressures he felt to become a priest. Accepting the priesthood, like taking monastic vows, was a matter of the individual's will and as such was linked to interior feeling.

[35] Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen,* pp. 29–35.
[36] Leclercq, *Spiritualité,* p. 146.
[37] Ibid., p. 146.

Thus Peter did not hesitate to complain that it was wrong to demand that he become a priest just as it was wrong to force a young woman to enter a nunnery when she was not willing. "The Lord does not accept forced service. . . . Indeed I, a Christian, shall perhaps be forced to the priesthood, but outside the decision of a free and devoted will I shall never celebrate on any altars" (Ep. 123, 1:381). Moreover, the function of the priest is such a sacred one, the administration of the body and blood of Christ so holy, that the decision to become a priest rested on knowing oneself and, specifically, on knowing oneself to be worthy. "Representing the crucifixion of the Lord, he bears in his own body His stigmata. . . . And who knows his own works? Who knows whether he is worthy of love or of hate? Who knows his own sins? The heart of man is depraved and inscrutable, a profound abyss, and the conscience of the sinner is filled with shadows and unexplored" (Ep. 123, 1:372–376). Peter himself at first refused to be a priest because he felt himself unworthy and afraid: "However, until recently reluctant, I put off the priesthood; for even in that I considered my works, and I was very afraid" (Ep. 139, 2:32). In the end, however, he accepted ordination, not so much because he examined his life and found it sufficient but because he prayed for strength to fulfill his office and for forgiveness for his sins (See Ep. 139). The conjunction of the importance of the individual's will in choosing a religious life and self-examination preliminary to choice meant that Peter could decide not to become a priest. He only took up those duties when he felt he could accept their responsibility.

The crucial test of the individual's will was the question of obedience, but on this issue Peter was more ambivalent. For the Benedictines obedience was to the Rule and to the abbot who upheld the Rule and represented God's will. So long as the three elements of God-abbot-Rule were thought to be in harmony, obedience did not pose a problem. With reforms, however, and with the conflict among the monastic orders, the obedience of the monk came in doubt. The conflicting claims of authority and conscience and of stability and *transitus* were much debated by monastic leaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[38] For his part, Peter of Blois refused to admit any conflict between conscience and authority when he encountered it in the debate among the monastic orders. He insisted that all the orders were equally holy, and that a monk should not move from one to another (Ep. 97). In a different context, however, he advocated strongly the individual's will or conscience and replied to a monk who had left the monastery for life at court (with the permission, he claimed, of his abbot) that "if a prelate orders that which goes against the salvation of the soul and is against the precept of the Lord, his counsel is at hand: . . . it is more fitting to obey God than men" (Ep. 131, 1:404). The point here is that the individual decides by his own conscience whether the precepts of his superior go against God's will. Such a reliance on conscience may indeed have been unintentional, since Peter immediately qualified his statement by recommending that even

[38] See Knowles, *Pachomius*, pp. 79–83.

if the abbot led an evil life, "it is fitting to obey him out of love" (Ep. 131, 1:405). Thus, although his sense of unworthiness led Peter in the direction of conscience, his feeling for authority made him fall short of accepting it fully.

Love and friendship, important themes in twelfth-century spirituality, are also frequent topics in Peter of Blois's letters. They were concepts about which he claimed to have thought deeply and on which he wrote two treatises, *De amicitia* and *De caritate Dei et proximi*. That the *De amicitia* is, to a large degree, borrowed from Aelred of Rielvaulx's *De spirituali amicitia*,[39] means that Peter's idea of love is more derivative than he pretended, but this does not reduce its importance, at least in his own thought.

Although the letters do not analyze the nature of love systematically, they discuss it in connection with the writing of a letter to a friend, and these references give some idea of Peter's complex conception of love and friendship. An important element was that love is the emotion which links man to God and permits him to rise to the contemplation of God. "Love is beneficent. . . . But we do not love God well unless the neighbor is loved for himself. Love is divided into two kinds of feeling, which beginning with the neighbor reaches God, uniting in Him the diversities of feelings" (Ep. 50, 1:154). Like the Cistercians, Peter loved his neighbors in order to strengthen his love of God, and so to cultivate his own salvation.[40] Moreover, he did not necessarily know the people he loved and considered his friends. For him, love, instead of reaching out, was an emotion which turned inwards and intensified his self-exploration.[41]

The frequency with which Peter began one of his letters by explaining that he was writing out of love illustrates another aspect of his view of love and friendship. Love, for many the avowed philosophical basis for writing letters, was inevitably a social concept. "Love desires to bind, and uniting the neighbor to himself in the embrace of love, it banishes the evil of singularity (Ep. 63, 1:185–186). The social aspect of love is summarized by the popular twelfth-century pun, which Peter also used, on *affectus* and *effectus*: affective emotion was to be effective. Because men were bound to each other by friendship, they required services of each other, and the writing of a letter either provided services, by advising or consoling, or requested them. Insofar as he saw love as active and outward-reaching, Peter's views recall the new attitude towards the Christian life which stressed service to others.

EDUCATION, THE DIGNITY OF MAN, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

As a scholar and teacher, Peter of Blois was interested in practical issues of education and learning, such as the controversy over the ancients and the

[39] Philippe Delhaye, "Deux adaptations du *De amicitia* de Cicéron au XII[e] siècle," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 15 (1948), 304–331.

[40] Caroline W. Bynum, "The Cistercian Concept of Community."

[41] Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200*, Church History Outlines 5 (London, 1972), pp. 96–97 and 118–120.

moderns, and the conflict between the study of the Bible and the study of the classics, logic, or law. He was equally interested in the spiritual and psychological underpinnings of learning — the nature of man's relationship with God. Although man was made in God's image, how far had his original goodness and intellectual powers been vitiated by sin? There were enormously complex problems and Peter did not analyze them systematically, since he formulated his ideas in response to specific situations. Like his views on clerics at court, his attitude towards education and learning changes throughout the collection both over time and according to the situation encountered.

A teacher by profession, Peter naturally was concerned with one of the most famous practical intellectual controversies of the century: did classical studies constitute the proper use of man's mind? Peter of Blois gave several different opinions on this problem. In one instance he agreed with the humanists who argued in favor of studying the classics, and replied to accusations that he preferred the gentile and pagan philosophers to the Christian faith with a traditional Augustinian defense: "for if you diligently consider the Holy Scriptures, you will not find absurd that the words of philosophy or of civil knowledge are accepted sometimes in Christian doctrine, especially where required by reason" (Ep. 8, 1:20). Therefore, he concluded that if he found something in pagan writings which was useful, he had the right to take it "so that from it, the sons of the spirit may be brought forth in faith" (Ep. 8, 1:20).[42]

At another time, however, when the controversy over the classics was raised, Peter took a stance contrary to that of the humanists and expounded his opposition to the classics, albeit in extenuating circumstances. Faced with the reproach that he was wasting his time in the archbishop of Canterbury's court, Peter attacked his critic for neglecting the weighty discussions of great matters which were carried out at the court and for indulging in useless and bitter disputes over "letters and syllables" (Ep. 6, 1:16). "You exercise your intelligence over . . . the elemental beginnings of learning . . . and you remain with the ass in the mire of base knowledge. Priscian and Tully, Lucan and Persius: these are your gods" (Ep. 6, 1:16). And what good will they be for you in the final things? He opposed classical studies in the context of both the limited nature of grammatical studies and the need to apply such learning to higher spiritual and moral problems.

Although Peter alternatively favored and opposed the study of the classics themselves, he did embrace the humanists' position when the study of

[42] Southern, "Peter of Blois," pp. 117–118. Peter's approval of classical studies perhaps had its roots in his own schooling. Peter described his education in somewhat exaggerated terms as a classical education based on grammar. It included the study of the ancients primarily and of some moderns. "It was useful to me that I was forced as an adolescent to learn by heart the letters of Bishop Hildebert of Le Mans. . . . Beyond them it was also useful to me frequently to look at books which are celebrated in the schools, Trogus Pompeius, Josephus, Suetonius, Hegissipus, Q. Curtius, Cornelius Tacitus, Titus Livius . . ." (Ep. 101, 1:317). His point was that the truth found in the ancients by students could be useful.

the classics was contrasted with the scholastic study of logic and dialectic. The most famous humanist was John of Salisbury, who accused the "Cornificians" of wasting their minds on the snares of logic. A nearly identical argument appears in a letter written by Peter to the uncle of two of his students, explaining that the younger will be the better student of the two precisely on account of his ignorance, since the older boy's mind had already been cluttered by his study of the "traps of logic." Before he had mastered the foundations of learning, grammar and rhetoric, he had been allowed "to inquire about a point, about a line, about surface, about the quantity of the soul . . . about chance and free will, about matter and motion . . . about the substance and form of voices, about the essence of universals. . ." (Ep. 101, 1:316). Knowledge of such things, especially when it is a matter of superficial learning, has use, "neither for the home, nor for war, nor for the forum, nor for the cloister, nor for the court, nor for the church, nor for anything else, except for the schools" (Ep. 101, 1:316).

By contrast, when the study of law was opposed to the more purely religious study of theology or scripture, Peter's attitude was hostile to the humanists' approach, for he felt that knowledge of the law was infinitely inferior to scriptural or theological learning. He described his own experience when he had precipitously given up the study of theology at Paris to pursue the study of Roman law at Bologna, because of his inebriation with civil law. This had presented a grave danger to his soul, for "no one is able at the same time to sue and to pray, to entreat and to prosecute, to exercise the ministry of Christ and the office of a lawyer. . ." (Ep. 26, 1:95). Here Peter followed the traditional opposition to litigation. He likewise contrasted the *sapientia* of God's truth and the *scientia* of Roman law in a later letter advising a young clerk at the king's court to reject the study of ponderous law in favor of the Scriptures. "God has sent his short and simple message, moreover, across the earth so that you do not need to cross the Alps or the seas for the knowledge of salvation and of life" (Ep. 140, 2:37).

Peter's views of the underlying spiritual and psychological issues of learning and education were as complex as his ideas on their practical problems. For much of his life, and to some degree, even at its very end, the author held a favorable opinion of intellectual activity and of man's capabilities. Ultimately, however, possibly owing to a personal crisis, he assumed a more pessimistic position on rational thought.

His positive attitude towards learning and thought appears in several areas. Peter was, for example, a convinced advocate of the education of kings and one of his favorite expressions was "an illiterate king is like an ass." He drew a direct and causal connection between the extent of the ruler's education and the justice of his rule; in praising Henry II he said, "[your mind], which is trained in letters, is prudent in the administration of great things, subtle in judgments, keen in precepts, circumspect in council" (Ep. 67, 1:198). Therefore, he concluded, since as the king knows that "books contain the compendium of all prudence . . . ," the king's son, too,

should be educated as he himself had been (Ep. 67, 1:198). Education and learning are of primary importance and value for good government. As was traditional, he also urged monks and clerics to pursue their education. To the young cleric who wanted to rest before going on to finish his course of studies, Peter replied that this was sloth and a great danger to his soul and that only rest occupied by learning was salutary. The inherent spiritual value of studies was the basis for his claim that "if there is a paradise in this life, it is either in the cloister or in the school" (Ep. 13, 1:42). This equivalence between the monastery and the school reflected the context of monastic learning prior to the shift to scholasticism.[43]

Not content with the mere praise of the spiritual value of monastic studies, Peter also insisted on the worldly value of intellectual pursuits. He linked intellectual activity, and especially his own writings, to fame. He said his works would keep the memory and glory of Henry II alive, since "it is only writings which preserve mortals in some immortality of fame and they permit no aging to creep up on the acts of the ancients which they transmit to posterity" (Ep. 77, 1:231). His brother he advised to renounce his honors and his position as abbot because "your tragedy *De flaura et marco,* your verse on the flea and the fly, your comedy on the *alda,* your sermons and your other works of theology . . . will assure your name a more lasting memory" (Ep. 93, 1:290). The literary activities of his brother, which were as much secular as religious, would be more useful to bring him immortality than his leadership of the monastery.

At the end of his life, Peter pursued these defenses of intellectual activity, but for different reasons. He argued that the priest should train his mind through study even of the ancients in order to care most effectively for the souls entrusted him: "You read in the book of experience that whatever great richness of harvest results from the labor of your studies, you should offer the maniples of justice for the acquisition of souls" (Ep. 230, 2:220). Classical authors can be useful for ornamenting "some sermon or some short tract" (Ep. 230, 2:220). The pragmatic and subordinate nature of intellectual activity is clear here; studies are an aid for propagating God's word.

To be sure, in some letters and especially in those written towards the end of his life, many of which were not collected by their author, there remained a few persistent doubts on this issue. At times Peter thought that activity in the schools was useless in the economy of salvation. It has already been shown that Peter condemned one kind of intellectual pursuit, the scholastic study of logic (Ep. 101). A yet more sweeping rejection of all educational pursuits can be found in the late letters, where he wrote about the dissipation of his life in the schools: "indeed scholastic labor is inefficient for salvation" (Ep. 139, 2:35). And to the activities of the scholar and courtier Peter juxtaposed the mystic experience of the priest as he offers the Sacrament on the altar: "Whence frequently going out of himself in some sort of blessed ecstasy, and entering into love, becoming one spirit with Him, he

[43] M.-D. Chenu, "The Evangelical Awakening," p. 250.

performs the office of propitiation infused by divine sweetness . . . [and] he obtains the fruit of propitiation from that brief but blessed enjoyment" (Ep. 139, 2:36).

Anti-intellectualism, implicit in this juxtaposition of the mystic rite of the Eucharist with intellectual activity, is sometimes explicitly stated in his later letters. After railing against the study of Roman law, Peter moved on to condemn the use of human reason in matters of faith: "Do not seek to scrutinize that which is above you, nor to formulate empty theories; do not distend yourself in the fine points of disputations or in the trickery of words. . . . Intelligence is dark in heavenly sacraments and in the writings of the prophets. . . . Faith understands through grace that which reason is not able to seize by itself" (Ep. 140, 2:41–44). With a clarity not to be found in the other letters, the psychological foundations of the limits of human knowledge are expounded. Man's reason is corrupt and cannot analyse the mysteries of religion.[44]

Without doubt this anti-intellectualism indicates an important aspect of Peter's attitude towards the larger issues of the dignity of man and the value of human activity. In a letter which draws heavily on Innocent III's *De contemptu mundi,* for example, Peter explained that man's nature is evil since he springs from an evil source. In another letter to a friend who had been boasting about the purity of his conscience, he retorted that the "heart of man is depraved and inscrutable" (Ep. 118, 1:360). Because of his sinful nature, man suffers deservedly. His material objects and his loved ones are taken away from him, because it is right for God to administer this medicine for his sins. Indeed, no one can really know himself nor his sinful depths. Thus all human effort is worthless: "we are taught by our daily experience that whatever man does under the sun, whatever he struggles for in the world, or strives after, or gathers together, whatever he prepares or preserves for his own uses through anxieties and spiritual hazards, all will come to nothing like flowing water, will pass away like a nocturnal vision, will dissipate like smoke and like a dream fly away" (Ep. 241, 2:256–257).

Taken as a whole, however, the collection does not reinforce this emphasis on man's ineffectiveness, but instead praises his actions. The author's positive view of human activity is clearly evident in his attitude towards monastic withdrawal, towards marriage, towards the responsibilities of clerics as well as of laymen in government, towards poverty as a social ill rather than a theological virtue, towards wealth as a way to succor the poor, towards interior religious feelings, and towards the use of intelligence and education to spread the word of God.

By their espousal of the value of man's actions, Peter's letters focus on the individual, thus opening the vexed scholarly discussion of the validity of

[44] The context of the author's disapproval of reason is old-fashioned. He insisted that reason was of no value for matters of faith, thus taking the conservative side of an old debate between faith and reason. Notice, however, that he did not condemn all activity of reason but only as it related to faith.

using the concept of the individual in relationship to the Middle Ages.[45] Without engaging in this discussion specifically, it is still possible to defend in general terms a medieval concept of the individual, which, as has been seen, is a central factor in many of the themes in Peter of Blois's letters. Indeed, the whole shift of religious mentalities, the interiorization of religious feeling, the ideal of the imitation of the human Christ, the emphasis on the will, on love, on knowledge which begins with self-examination, is inconceivable without some awareness of the individual.

The medieval concept of the individual can also be defended by looking at the autobiographical nature of Peter of Blois's letters.[46] The number of letters which describe the author's inner and exterior life and the fact that the ideas expressed were his own, even though so many of them were written in the name of his various employers or masters, has already been discussed. Simply on the grounds both of the amount of biographical detail and of the personal character of the letters, Peter's collection is autobiographical. But even more important is the way in which the collection recorded his spiritual and intellectual growth.

As has been seen, Peter had a number of changing opinions about important spiritual issues: the proper role of clerics at court, poverty, the study of the classics, the ability of man's reason to grasp the truth, and the value of man's actions. At the end of his life it is clear that he became more pessimistic about the value of human activity and was more religious and more interested in theological problems. This change can be traced in the development of his letter-collection. Although in revising it Peter omitted some letters which no longer satisfied him on account of their stylistic deficiencies or their subject-matter, he retained most of his old letters, even when he had changed his mind on the subject. Thus the inherent flexibility of the form of the letter-collection permitted Peter to incorporate the progression of how he looked at many important topics.

Moreover, Peter went beyond the incorporation of the progression of his thought in order to stress its complexity by manipulating the genre to emphasize the many facets of the issues with which he dealt. In this connec-

[45] One of the most determined opponents of the medieval concept of individualism, D. W. Robertson, claims that modern sensibilities read individualist qualities which did not exist in the Middle Ages into colorful characters such as Chaucer's pilgrims, who were moral types and allegories: see his *A Preface to Chaucer. Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), *passim* and esp. pp. 12–16, 34–35.

[46] The interpretation of medieval letter-collections as autobiographies began with the view that collections were formed by the keeping of a book into which letters were entered at the time they were written so that their chronological order recorded the author's life and career: see Bernhard Schmeidler, "Über Briefsammlungen des früheren Mittelalters in Deutschland and ihre kritische Verwertung," *Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund: Arsbok* (1926), pp. 5–27. This view has fallen out of favor, as the variety of ways in which collections were assembled became known. Not all collections were chronological or based on letter-books, and it is now clear that many were assembled at a single moment in time for a literary or even propagandistic purpose: Carl Erdmann, *Studien zur Briefliteratur Deutschlands im elften Jahrhundert*, Schriften des Reichsinstituts für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde 1 (Leipzig, 1938), esp. pp. 4–15.

tion it is striking that he arranged the contents of his collection to bring out the tension among some of his ideas, as, for example, when he took a few of his later letters, such as one expressing disapproval of classical studies (Ep. 76), and placed them among earlier letters stating the opposite point of view. Peter never organized his ideas into an harmonious and systematized whole, but instead presented them deliberately in a fragmentary and disjointed form which showed their development and variety. By recording the history of his thought as well as his life, Peter's collection is therefore doubly autobiographical; and, by stressing the complexity of the issues it treated, it demonstrates the concept that knowledge begins with the self, with the thinking mind. Its appeal not only to the men of the late Middle Ages, but also to readers today, results from these essentially human qualities it displays: Peter's inner conflict, indecision, hesitation, the tension running through his view of man's place in the universe, and especially the preoccupation with himself and his own condition implied by these uncertainties.