

Chapter 4

God the Creator in Chartrian Thought

INTRODUCTION: THEOLOGICAL SPECULATION IN THE EARLY TWELFTH CENTURY

In the last quarter of the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury presented the first systematic articulation of theological inquiry. His famous definition of theology as faith seeking understanding marks a turning point in the development of the articulation of the Christian understanding of God. In his *Monologion* (1076) and *Proslogian* (1077–78)¹ Anselm asked age-old philosophical questions—such as, “What can we know?”—but he applied them in a new way to the nature of God, and to how we could “prove” the existence of God and God’s trinitarian nature. This inquiry carried over into the twelfth century and saw theological speculation flourish, especially through the use of dialectic or logic—much of this bolstered by the use of Aristotle’s works on this subject.

Peter Abelard, arguably the most controversial figure of the early twelfth century, picked up Anselm’s mantle. However, where Anselm was canonized, Abelard was chastised and had his writings declared heretical. He represents both the new style of learning and the new level of inquiry afforded to the masters of the schools throughout Europe. In his *Theologia* and its revised and expanded version, the *Theologia Christiana*, Abelard used Aristotle’s newly available ideas on logic to argue points on the trinity and unity of God. Certain parts of his theology were condemned at the Council of Soissons in 1121 and the Council of Sens in 1141. He was, however, just as much chastised for the novelty of his ideas and his willingness to apply the

discipline of logic to more fully explain theological positions. At the same time, he ridiculed those who made theological pronouncements but who lacked the rhetorical skill and dialectical acumen of the master of Pallet.

Many others were involved in the love of learning in the early twelfth century including those within the Cistercian school, such as William of St. Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Victorine school, including Hugh and Richard. There were many others as well, armed with a new sense of the value of human inquiry and the belief that God was the inspiration for this new search for truth. They sought to articulate theology even though they were not trained—or authorized—to do so. Among these we can include the Rhineland mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen. The Chartrians, too, sought to use their skills and experience to understand better that which they held on faith.

CHARTRIAN THEOLOGY: GOD AS METAPHOR

We begin our investigation into the Chartrian understanding of God with a look at language. When the Chartrians refer to the persons of the Trinity, they usually point to a particular attribute or activity, and this is usually spoken of in reference to the created world. For instance, God the Father is primarily designated by the term *power*, by which the cosmos was created. The first person of the Trinity is also designated as the *efficient cause* of creation, as the *Good* and the *One*. That Plato used the term *Demiurge* and Christians use the term *Father* or *power* to designate the same reality was not viewed as problematic by the Chartrians. The juxtaposition of these two terms is easier to accept when we recognize that all words about God are imperfect and imprecise. Consequently, no words or groups of words are granted exclusive authoritative status. Concerning this, Thierry writes the following:

But God is signified in the mode of substance; this word *God* is being used metaphorically, so too with other expressions such as the power of producing and ordering all things, which is called his creating; the active mode signified is being used metaphorically. And in this way all that is said of God is spoken metaphorically. For all words used of God are spoken metaphorically, otherwise they are not appropriate to God. We say, namely, that all [words] about God are borrowed.²

Even the term *God* is itself a metaphor. It is a borrowed idea and word for that which we encounter or think of as the divine. Human experience offers a great many words and descriptions which can then be used to aid in