

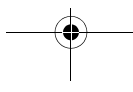
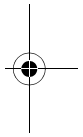
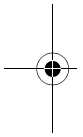
Chapter 9

The Condemnation of an Idea, and the Aftermath

INTRODUCTION: PERILOUS TIMES

As wave after wave of newly translated works of Aristotle and commentaries of Islamic scholars crashed upon the shores of the twelfth-century schools, scholars like William and Thierry were faced with decisions of paradigmatic proportions. While they defended their own use of new material in the face of complaints by the watchdogs of faith, they themselves had to grapple with the new material and how it appeared to contradict their previously held positions.

At the same time, some of these previously held positions were coming under assault. The idea that the world soul is related to—or can be identified with the—Holy Spirit was one of these. At times, disagreement led to charges of heresy. In an age when heretics were stoned and burned, these charges could not be taken lightly. Masters of the schools, no less than bishops, were brought to trial before ecclesiastic authorities. There was also the influence of politics and protection. At several times during the early twelfth century, there were two popes, each with his religious and secular support. As well, political disagreements erupted into war, including conflicts between the king of France and his lords, and between them and England, which included the lands of Normandy. Rome itself was subject to republican revolution in mid-century. Heretics, depending on who their friends were, could lose their heads. All of this must be kept in mind as we explore the condemnation of the idea of the world soul—and the aftermath of the condemnation—in the lives of those who espoused it.



THE CONDEMNATION

The identification of the world soul with the Holy Spirit, as it was thought to be held by Peter Abelard, was included in the list of heresy charges presented by Bernard of Clairvaux at the Council of Sens in 1141.¹ This—and all nineteen propositions supposedly held by Abelard—was later condemned in a papal bull of Innocent II.² Before the meeting at Sens where Abelard refused to debate and instead asked for recourse directly to the pope, Bernard condemned Abelard's teachings in several letters. He primarily focused on Abelard's Christology and on his teachings on the Trinity. The wild invective of Bernard's language seems startling today. In the letters, Bernard condemns Abelard's "leprous novelties."³ He says that Abelard "insults the Doctors of the Church by holding up the Philosophers for exaggerated praises"⁴ and that he tries "to explore with his reason what the devout mind grasps at once with vigorous faith."⁵ Abelard is called "an enemy of the cross of Christ"⁶ and one who "prepares the way of the Anti-Christ."⁷ Finally, he is compared with the greatest of arch-heretics Arius, Pelagius, and Nestorius.⁸

More specifically pertinent to our discussion, Bernard also condemns Abelard's understanding of the Holy Spirit as the world soul. He writes that Abelard believed that "The Holy Spirit is the anima mundi; that the world, as Plato says, is so much a more excellent animal, as it has a better soul in the Holy Spirit."⁹ Bernard's final words are telling as they do not condemn Plato, but Abelard. He writes, "Here, while he exhausts his strength to make Plato a Christian, he makes himself a heathen."¹⁰ As with many of the charges, Abelard, however, had not written exactly what he was accused of. In this case, what he had written was, "But if the things that are said about this world soul by Plato and by others are discussed more carefully, they will be found applicable to nothing except the Holy Spirit, by way of a most beautiful imagery filled with hidden meaning."¹¹

Abelard denied that he equated the world soul with the Holy Spirit and he consistently spoke of the world soul as an integument. That is, it offered a picture of characteristics that were "applicable" to the Holy Spirit. Still, this condemnation was placed alongside the other points in the formal charges at Sens.

This round of heresy charges was precipitated by William of St. Thierry's condemnatory letter about Abelard sent to the Bishop of Chartres, Geoffrey of Lèves (a papal legate) and to Bernard of Clairvaux. Shortly after the condemnation at Sens, William of St. Thierry, armed with a copy of—or a portion of—William of Conches' *Philosophia Mundi* that a young novice brought with him to the abbey of Signy, and fresh from the victory over Abelard, again wrote a harsh letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, this time