God, Nature of in Anne Conway (1631–1679)

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We have two accounts of Héloïse’s views on marriage. Peter Abelard recounts in his life narrative, the Historia calamitatum, how Héloïse argued against his offer of marriage. She depicted marriage as contrary to the life of a philosopher, because it takes a person whose life is destined for the world and binds them in servitude to an individual, disturbing philosophical contemplation with the cares of married life and parenthood (Luscombe 2013: Ep. 1, §§ 24–25).

Abelard says Héloïse claimed that her taking the title of (girl)friend (“amica”) rather than wife (“uxor”) would be more honourable for him, because love freely given is preserved through grace (“gratia”) rather than enforced by the “chain” of marriage (“uinculum nuptialis”, Ep. 1, §26). In her reply to Abelard, Héloïse clarifies these words. She notes that although marriage is a sacrament (a development of twelfth-century theology), she finds Abelard bound to her rather by her inordinate love for him (“immoderatus amor”, Ep. 2, §8). Indeed, she contrasts love with marriage as the distinction between freedom (“libertas”) and a chain (“uinculum”). She entered into marriage, she declares, not because of the legal rights and goods it would bring her (“matrimonii federa [...] dotes aliquas”), but for Abelard himself alone (“te pure non tua”, Ep. 2, §10). A person should look for merit, not material reward, in another, so that a woman who marries for money is effectively prostituting herself (Ep. 2, §11). Héloïse repeats the earlier idea that she would rather be called Abelard’s (girl)friend (“amica”) than his wife, but extends the conceit: she would even prefer the titles of concubine or whore (“concubine uel scorti”), since such roles would represent her freely chosen and independent sexual association with him. Indeed, because she wants Abelard only for his personal merits, not wealth or titles, she would find it more honourable for her to be his whore (“meretrix”) than an Empress (“imperatrix”, Ep. 2, §10).

In Anne Conway’s Principia philosophiae, God is the first cause of all being, the highest of the three orders of being outlined in her system. The book opens with a definition of God as a perfect being, whose perfections are manifested in his attributes. God is ‘spirit, life and light’ possessed of traditional theological attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, justice, goodness. Conway conceives of two types of divine attribute, making
a distinction between those which are ‘incommunicable’ (such as immutability), which are predicated of God alone, and ‘communicable’ attributes (such as justice) which may be shared by the works of God. Conway uses this distinction between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God, as the basis of a principle of likeness and difference between God and creation, which serves to define the essence of each, and to account for likeness between created things and their creator. If God is living, and wise, it follows that his effects (works) reflect his wisdom, and that they must be living. God is essentially a creator, from whom all things derive by a process of continuous emanation, which results from an inner impulse of divine goodness and wisdom. Pre-eminent among the divine attributes are goodness and wisdom, which qualify the execution of God’s will. As a communicable attribute, goodness is something which makes all created things similar to God. Since it is in the nature of divine goodness to increase, this derivative goodness of the created world may be augmented to infinity, but it never becomes infinite, for then it would become God. Conway underscores the compatibility of her conception of God with religion, by describing God in religious terms drawn from the main religions of the world Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

**Primary Sources:**


**Secondary Sources:**


**Keywords:**

god, cause, perfection, divine attributes, goodness