



Monastic Life and Public Display in Héloïse (1090-1164)

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The non-necessity of external things for a life of devotion is a recurring theme of Héloïse's Ep. 6 on the monastic life for women. She points out that "virtues alone win merit before God" ("solas apud Deum merita uirtutes obtinere"), so that true Christians will be concerned solely with the inner person ("toti circa interiorem hominem [...] occupati") and not with outward works ("de exterior", Luscombe 2013: Ep. 6, § 24). God cares more about the devotion of our heart ("animi deuotio") than exterior appearances, and Christians can serve him with greater humility if they focus less on external things (Ep. 6, § 25). To illustrate her point, Héloïse adduces the New Testament story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 39-42)—a story that particularly resonates in a letter dealing with the monastic vocation of women—pointing out that too commonly those who are concerned with external things wrongly criticize those who devote themselves to a life of holy service (Ep. 6, § 29). Héloïse also distinguishes between those things that are good or evil, and those that fall between, which she describes in philosophical terminology as "indifferent" ("que media boni et mali atque indifferentia dicuntur", Ep. 6, § 20). She argues that both philosophical and religious discourses have taught us that indifferent things should be of little consideration in a holy life (Ep. 6, § 26), because they are common to the wicked and chosen alike ("eque reprobis ut electis", Ep. 6, § 20). Indeed, they can be followed equally by the faithful, hypocrites, or adherents of other religions, whose hearts nevertheless remain untouched by the love of God that defines Christians ("caritas", Ep. 6, § 20). Héloïse argues that indifferent things, such as regulations regarding food and clothing, should not be a focus of the religious life, granted only that their usage does not cause scandal to others, and superfluity does not exceed necessity (Ep. 6, § 20).

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Keywords:

monasticism, inner person, exterior things, virtue, hypocrites, indifferent, religious life, Mary and Martha, caritas