

[1964. In *Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

**ANSELM.** (1033-1109), archbishop of Canterbury and “father of medieval scholasticism.” Born in Aosta (Piedmont) of wealthy parents he entered the monastic school of Bec (Normandy) in 1059. The following year he took the monastic vows, and in 1063 he succeeded Lanfranc as prior. Between this time and 1078, when he became abbot of Bec, Anselm wrote several of his chief works *Monologion* (1076), *De Libero Arbitrio*, *De Casu Diaboli*, *Liber Apologeticus pro Insipiente*, and *Proslogium* (1077-78). From then on Anselm was to become embroiled in the Investiture Controversy, which concerned the right of the Emperor and other lay princes to invest an abbot or bishop-elect with the ring and staff and to receive homage before consecration. He had already unwillingly received the staff from William the Conqueror when he himself became abbot. The conflict grew after he made the archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, but it was resolved in a satisfactory compromise in 1106. As archbishop he attempted many reform measures: forbidding simony, the marriage of priests, and the mingling of the clergy in worldly affairs; encouraging regular synods; and attempting to cultivate a true piety.

Deeply influenced by Augustine and adopting one of his phrases as a motto, *Credo ut intelligam*, “I believe in order to understand,” Anselm continued to regard theology and philosophy as coextensive. It will be convenient, however, to summarize what is obviously theology in *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*) before explaining how the atonement is philosophy as well.

Anselm immediately comes to the point: By what necessity did God become man to die for the world when He might have saved sinners by means of angels or merely by an act of will? This question is not to be answered by a devotional appeal to beauty or appropriateness but by showing the rational cause of Christ's death. If the atonement were not rational, God would not have willed it. We must therefore find the reasons.

Sin or disobedience robs God of His honor and requires either that man be punished or render satisfaction to his Sovereign. To remit sin without punishment, i.e., to ignore the distinction between innocence and guilt, would make God Himself unjust, would make God deny His own nature, and this is impossible.

The satisfaction or the punishment must be proportionate to the dishonor. But since man already owes everything to God, he has no independent resources with which to make satisfaction. Even if he had such resources, they would not be proportionate to the infinite gravity of dishonoring God. Still, satisfaction is necessary, for if a man does not wish to pay his debt (if he wishes salvation without satisfaction), he is unjust; and if he wishes it paid, but it is not paid, he is unhappy. Therefore the

possibility of blessedness depends on satisfaction. No other method is possible.

Since the debt is of greater value than all the universe, only God can discharge it. But the satisfaction ought to be made only by man. Therefore God of necessity had to become man.

It is implied in this account that Christ is man's substitute; but Christ's death is pictured more as a gift of honor to God than as a penalty for sin. The gift, rather, is substituted for the punishment. True, Anselm asserts that the satisfaction must be bitter and difficult, but the clarity of detail found in the Reformation is lacking here.

Anselm's attempt to show the rational necessity of the atonement illustrates the *Credo* of his motto. Faith is the indispensable and inviolable starting point. The doctrines are believed because God has revealed them. None the less, understanding is superior to faith because it is the purpose of faith. The doctrines were revealed to be understood. Propositions, e.g., the theorems of geometry, are understood by working out a rational proof. Philosophy therefore consists of demonstrating the contents of faith.

By demonstration Anselm does not mean an inductive study of Scripture for the purpose of formulating a doctrine. This was faith. Anselm means that the doctrines—the atonement, the Trinity, the existence of God, and all doctrines—can be shown to be true without reference to Scripture. In the Preface to *Cur Deus Homo* he claims for his argument that “leaving Christ out of view, as if nothing had ever been known of him, it proves by absolute reasons the impossibility that any man should be saved without him. . . .” The death of the God-Man is proved “reasonable and necessary” so as to convince one “unwilling to believe anything not previously proved by reason.” Very significantly, at the end of the work Anselm's pupil concludes, “By this solution . . . I see the truth of all that is contained in the OT and NT, for in proving that God became man of necessity, leaving out what was taken from the Bible . . . you convince both Jew and pagan by the mere force of reason.” Similarly, in the *Monologium*, where he discussed the existence of God he says, “in order that nothing in Scripture should be urged upon the authority of Scripture itself, but that whatever the conclusion of independent investigation should declare to be true, should . . . with common proofs . . . be briefly enforced by the cogency of reason.”

Of course, this is an immense delusion for if Scriptural concepts were eliminated, little or nothing would remain of *Cur Deus Homo*. But whereas the pure reason of pagan philosophers never even imagined Christ's atonement, Aristotle produced an intricate argument to prove the existence of God. Perhaps, therefore, this point can indeed be established without recourse to Scripture. To this end Anselm offers a new and ingenious “ontological” argument.

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. But at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of

God, i.e., a Being than which nothing greater can be conceived, understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding although he does not understand it to exist. However, that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the understanding alone; for if it could, it could be conceived to exist in reality also, and this would be greater. That is, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived existed in the understanding alone, it could not be that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But obviously this is a self-contradiction. Why, then, does the fool say there is no God? Why, except that he is dull and a fool (*Proslogium* II, III).

One of Anselm's contemporaries, the monk Gaunilo, objected first that if this proof were valid, it could be used to prove the existence of an undiscovered island more excellent than all others. Anselm replied that God is not simply the greatest of all actual beings—He is the greatest conceivable being. Even if there is such an island, it can be conceived not to exist, but God cannot be conceived not to exist.

In the second place, Gaunilo objected that God is inconceivable. I may conceive of a man unknown to me because I have framed the concept of man from observing real men. But “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” is an empty verbalism.

This criticism raises the epistemological antagonisms between Gaunilo's Aristotelianism and Augustinian Platonism, between empiricism and a-priorism, between a “tabula rasa” and innate ideas. The latter view holds that God has endowed man with an idea of perfection not derived from sensory experience. This was Calvin's view, too, though he made no explicit use of the ontological argument. Descartes and Hegel, while not particularly Christian in their philosophy, accepted it, but Kant and the majority of secular thinkers today reject it.

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