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MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY:  
ANSELM OF CANTERBURY BLENDS  
FAITH AND REASON

The dominant role of the Christian religion in all aspects of European civilization during the Middle Ages had led some historians to label the period an "age of faith." A hierarchical society appointed by God and governed by his vice-regents, the pope and king, focused concern on preparation for life after death and devoted considerable energy toward the honor and glorification of God. By the mid-12th century c.e. the theological rationale of the nature of God, man, and the universe—based on revelation and patristic traditions—encountered a serious challenge from the previously unknown logical and philosophical works of Aristotle, which offered a conflicting worldview including the primacy of reason as a means for establishing truth. Western thinkers eagerly recaptured Greek learning, and also Arab and Jewish philosophies about nature and reason. Leading theologians successfully met the challenge by applying Aristotelian methodology and by incorporating many of Aristotle's philosophical concepts to construct a Christian theological and philosophical system, called scholasticism, which brought their views into agreement.

The reconciliation of Christian faith and Aristotelian logic was a major concern of St. Anselm (1033–1109). Born in northern Italy, Anselm became a monk and ultimately rose to the leading post of the Catholic church in England, with the office of Archbishop of Canterbury; he was ultimately sainted. Anselm believed that logic could and should be used to demonstrate Christian truths, though he in no sense wished to challenge key Christian beliefs. His insistence that reason and faith were compatible is indeed the essence of his approach. Anselm was one of many Western churchmen and intellectuals between the 11th and the 13th centuries to work in this vein. His arguments allow us to grasp a distinctive moment in Western cultural history, when at the same time two powerful currents, Christianity and rationalism, were being advanced in ways that would affect later periods as well.

Ultimately called scholasticism, this rationalistic theology as put forth by Anselm was a striking creation that allowed its supporters to believe that they possessed a comprehensive framework through which everything that could be understood, was understood—and yet faith was at the same time affirmed. Scholasticism was a special achievement, differ-

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ent from philosophical work either before or since (though it resembled debates occurring in Islam at about the same point, and it borrowed from these debates). It was also, however, a key point in a larger intellectual history that ran from the ancient Greeks to modern Western science. How did Anselm's system resemble, as well as differ from later Western intellectual assumptions? (See Volume II, chapter 2).

## ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, MONOLOGION

I began to ask myself whether perhaps a single argument could be found which would constitute an independent proof and would suffice by itself to demonstrate that (1) God truly [really] exists, that (2) He is the Supreme Good, needing no one else yet needed by all else in order to exist and to fare well, and that (3) He is whatever else we believe about the Divine Substance. I often and earnestly turned my attention to this goal. At times what I was in quest of seemed to me to be apprehensible; at other times it completely eluded my mental powers. At last, despairing, I wanted to give up my pursuit of an argument which I supposed could not be found. But when I wanted to shut out the very thought [of such an argument], lest by engaging my mind in vain, it would keep me from other projects in which I could make headway—just then this argument began more and more to force itself insistently upon me, unwilling and resisting as I was. Then one day when I was tired as a result of vigorously resisting its entreaties, what I had despaired of finding appeared in my strife-torn mind in such way that I eagerly embraced the reasoning I had been anxiously warding off. Supposing, then, that to record what I had joyously discovered would please its readers, I wrote the following short work on this subject (and on various others) in the role of someone endeavoring to elevate his mind toward contemplating God and seeking to understand what he believes.

O the wretched fate of man when he lost that end for which he was made! O that hard and ominous fall! Alas, what he lost and what he found, what vanished and what remained! He lost the happiness for which he was created and found a wretchedness for which he was not created. The necessary condition for happiness vanished and the sufficient condition for wretchedness remained. Man then ate the bread of angels for which he now hungers; and now he eats the bread of sorrows, which then he did not know. Alas, the common mourning of all men, the universal lament of the sons of Adam! Adam burped with satiety; we sigh with hunger. He abounded; we go begging. He happily possessed and wretchedly deserted; we unhappily lack and wretchedly desire, while, alas, remaining empty. Why did he not, when easily able, keep for us that of which we have been so gravely deprived? Why did he shut us out from the light and enshroud us in darkness? Why did he take life away from us and inflict death? Wretched creatures that we are, expelled from that home, impelled to this one; cast down from that abode, sunken to this one! [We have been banished] from our homeland into exile, from the vision of God into our own blindness, from the delight of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death. O miserable transformation from such great good into such great evil! What a grievous loss, a heavy sorrow, an unmitigated plight! . . .

O Lord, I acknowledge and give thanks that You created in me Your image so that I may remember, contemplate, and love You. But this image has been so

effaced by the abrasion of transgressions, so hidden from sight by the dark billows of sin, that unless You renew and refashion it, it cannot do what it was created to do. Lord, I do not attempt to comprehend Your sublimity, because my intellect is not at all equal to such a task. But I yearn to understand some measure of Your truth, which my heart believes and loves. . . .

God cannot be thought not to exist. Assuredly, this being exists so truly [really] that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For there can be thought to exist something whose non-existence is inconceivable; and this thing is greater than anything whose non-existence is conceivable. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought—a contradiction. Hence, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly [really] that it cannot even be thought not to exist.

And You are this being, O Lord our God. Therefore, Lord my God, You exist so truly [really] that You cannot even be thought not to exist. And this is rightly the case. For if any mind could conceive of something better than You, the creature would rise above the Creator and would sit in judgment over the Creator—an utterly preposterous consequence. Indeed, except for You alone, whatever else exists can be conceived not to exist. Therefore, You alone exist most truly [really] of all and thus most greatly of all; for whatever else there is does not exist as truly [really] as You and thus does not exist as much as do You. Since, then, it is so readily clear to a rational mind that You exist most greatly of all, why did the Fool say in his heart that God does not exist? Why indeed except because he is foolish and simple!

God is whatever it is better to be than not to be. He alone, existing through Himself, creates all else from nothing. What, then, are You, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be thought? What in fact are You except that which—as highest of all things, alone existing through Himself—created all else from nothing? For whatever is not this is less great than can be conceived. But You cannot be thought to be less great than can be conceived. Consequently, You are just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be. For it is better to be just than not just, blessed than not blessed.

How He is omnipotent although there are many things which He cannot do. But how are You omnipotent if You cannot do all things? Or how can You do all things if You are not able to be corrupted or to tell a lie or to make what is true be false—for example, to make what has already happened not to have happened—and the like? Or is the “ability” to do these things not power but lack of power? For anyone who is able to do these things is able to do what is disadvantageous to himself and what he ought not to do. And the more he is able to do these things, the more powerful are adversity and perversity over him and the less powerful he is against them. Therefore, anyone who in this sense is able, is able not by a power but by a lack of power. For it is not the case that he is called able because he himself is able; rather [he is called able] because his own lack of power causes something else to be powerful over him—or [for some other reason coinciding] with some other way of speaking. For we say many things improperly—for example, when we substitute “to be” for “not to be” and substitute “to do” for “not to do” or for “to do nothing.” Indeed, we often say to someone who denies that something is the case, “Yes, it’s as you say it is,” although we would say more properly, “It’s not, as you say it’s

not." Likewise, we say, "This man is sitting even as that man is also doing" or "This man is resting even as that man is also doing"—although sitting is not doing anything and resting is doing nothing. Thus, when someone is said to have the ability to cause or to experience what is disadvantageous to himself or what he ought not to cause or experience, this so-called ability is understood to be an inability. For the more he has the alleged ability, the more powerful are adversity and perversity over him and the more powerless he is against them. Therefore, Lord God, . . .

How He who is completely and supremely just spares the wicked. He is justly merciful to the wicked. But how can You spare the wicked if You are completely and supremely just? For how can He who is completely and supremely just do something which is not just? Or how is it just to give eternal life to one deserving eternal death? How, then, good Lord—good both to those who are good and to those who are wicked—how can You save the wicked if it is not just for them to be saved and if You do only what is just? Inasmuch as Your goodness is incomprehensible, is this reason hidden in the inaccessible light in which You dwell? Truly in the deepest and inmost seat of Your goodness is hidden a fount from which the stream of Your mercy flows. For although You are completely and supremely just, nevertheless because You are completely and supremely good You are also beneficent to the wicked. Indeed, You would be less good if You were beneficent to none of the wicked. For someone who is good both to those who are good and to those who are wicked is better than someone who is good only to those who are good. And someone who is good by virtue of both punishing and sparing the wicked is better than someone who is good by virtue of merely punishing the wicked. Therefore, if You are merciful because You are supremely good, and if You are supremely good only because You are supremely just, then surely You are merciful because You are supremely just. Help me, just and merciful God, whose light I seek; help me to understand what I am saying. Truly, then, You are merciful because You are just.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is Anselm trying to accomplish? Why was this kind of work important in Western European intellectual history?
2. What kinds of arguments does Anselm use to prove God's existence and key attributes? Why did Anselm believe that reason should be used, along with faith?
3. What were some of the key principles of the Christian faith at this point in Western history?
4. How did this kind of intellectual approach compare with philosophical approaches in other major religions?
5. What were some potential weaknesses in Anselm's approach? Why might other Christian thinkers criticized the reliance on reason?
6. Why is scholastic philosophy, of the sort Anselm furthered, viewed as important in the larger Western intellectual tradition? Can you see any relationship to the later advancement of science?