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The Anselmic View of the Atonement

The doctrine of the atonement has always been one of the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith—a tenet of such central importance that with it the Christian religion can be said to stand or fall. It was to effect the atonement for man's sin and to reconcile the creature and the Creator that the Son of God assumed the human nature. This has been the conviction of all those who have stood within the historic Christian tradition—from the days of the Apostles onward.

The study of the doctrine of the atonement, accordingly, represents one of the most important chapters in the history of Christian thought. And to this chapter few men have made a more significant or provocative contribution than St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. It shall be the purpose of this study to analyze and evaluate the Anselmic conception of the Atonement.

Anselm of Canterbury

Anselm of Canterbury was one of the greatest of the early Scholastics; indeed, he has been called the "father of medieval Scholasticism." In him were combined the qualities requisite for a great religious leader: a deep sense of personal piety, a keen and capacious intellect, a spirit of courage and devotion to principle, and the faculty of winning the love and confidence of those whom he sought to influence and to lead. Born in Aosta in 1033, of noble Germanic stock, he early gave evidence of the deeply religious strain that was to characterize his entire life. At the age of fifteen he had already decided to become a monk; meeting with paternal disapproval, he left home and at length found his way to the monastery of Le Bec, in eastern Normandy, of which the renowned Lanfranc was prior. Anselm followed in the footsteps of his mentor, succeeding him first as abbot of Le Bec, and later, in 1093, as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anselm's theological orientation was altogether that of traditional Roman Catholic orthodoxy. He never questioned the validity of any of the Church's doctrines; these he held to be true because they had been revealed, and to be accepted without question on the authority of the Church. He conceived of reason as the servant of faith, and his entire theology is characterized by the watchword to which he gives expression in his *Proslogion*: *Credo ut intelligam*. His position is aptly summed up in his treatise *De fide trinitatis*, as quoted by McGiffert: "No Christian ought in any way to dispute the truth of what the Catholic Church believes in its heart and confesses with its mouth. But always holding the same faith unquestioningly, loving it and living by it, he ought himself as far as he is able to seek the reason for it. If he can understand it, let him thank God. If he cannot, let him not raise his head in opposition, but bow in reverence."¹

At the same time, he was convinced of the rationality of revealed truth, and he felt that this could be proved by taking recourse to dialectics. The disciplines of logic and philosophy were to be pressed into the service of theology, and they should therefore form a part of the professional equipment of every theologian. He was a Platonic realist and held that the reality of universals must be held by the orthodox theologian. It is evident throughout that Anselm's approach to Christianity was predominantly intellectual, and this divests his religious experience of that mysticism which, for example, characterized Bernard of Clairvaux.

Anselm's chief concern was the rational comprehension of the traditional faith, which he essayed to "rethink." He endeavored to reason out the faith which he, for himself, took for granted, both as the body of ecclesiastical teachings and as religious experience. He let the power of reason play upon the affirmation of faith. He felt that such a "reasoning out" of the Christian faith would make it understandable and rationally acceptable even to the Jew and the pagan, without reference to any Scriptural authority. This accounts for the singular paucity of Scriptural references in the writings of Anselm. At the same time his writings were characterized by a deep and fervent piety, as is shown by the fact that he wrote his theological treatises in the form of prayers to God.

The Writings of Anselm

Never a systematic theologian, Anselm's theological writings consist chiefly of disconnected short essays. Among his most important works are his *Monologion* and his *Proslogion*. In the former he sets forth his cosmological argument for the existence of God—which, it must be acknowledged, is largely based upon his own

1) A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. II, p. 186.

a priori doctrinal assumptions. After having given his proofs for God's existence, he goes on to depict His nature, which Anselm conceives as absolute perfection; he concludes with the explication of God's self-expression through the divine Word.

The *Proslogion* is famous for Anselm's ontological proof for the existence of God. "God," he argues, "is that nothing higher than which can be thought; but God would not be that than which nothing higher can be thought if He were only in the understanding." He concludes, therefore: "Without any doubt, therefore, there exists something both in the understanding and in reality than which a greater cannot be conceived." Although Anselm's argument did not find favor among the Schoolmen and was severely criticized in later times by Kant, it must be conceded that it has never been successfully refuted.

It is to his *Cur Deus Homo*, however, that Anselm's chief claim to theological fame is to be ascribed. The doctrine of the atonement had long been subject to an interpretation which Anselm found untenable, and it was to establish what he conceived to be the true reason for God's becoming man that he wrote this, his major theological work. In his *Cur Deus Homo* he broke with longstanding ecclesiastical tradition and adduced a theory of the Atonement which was destined to have an important bearing upon the entire subsequent history of the Christian Church.

Patristic Teaching of the Atonement

In order properly to evaluate and understand the Anselmic approach to the Atonement, it will be of some profit briefly to trace the history of this dogma down to the time of Anselm. The immediate successors of the Apostles advanced no "theory" of the Atonement, but confined themselves to the Scriptural statements on the subject — which, to be sure, should be altogether adequate. Nor does any theory of the Atonement loom large in the writings of the Postapostolic Fathers, who laid great stress on the Incarnation in connection with the atoning work of Christ. The method of the Atonement was not a matter of controversy in the postapostolic age. Irenaeus, of course, speaks of Christ's giving His life as a ransom for sinners, and Clement of Alexandria refers to the work of Christ as a propitiation for sin. It remained for Origen, however, to advance the theory that the Atonement was a payment which Christ made to the devil. This theory remained firmly imbedded in Christian thought — even in the case of Augustine — until the time of Anselm.

Among the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Athanasius speaks most clearly and most conformably to Scriptural teaching with regard to the vicarious nature of the Atonement; he declares that Christ died *ἀντὶ πάντων* ("instead of all"); and that He offered Him-

self as a ransom for all. This emphasis on Christ's payment for the sins of the world was repeated also by Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria. It was to these Fathers that Anselm was most indebted in the theory of the Atonement which he evolved.

A degrading conception of the Atonement was the idea that Jesus had engaged in a game of deception with the devil, who was not permitted to see the Savior's true nature; as a consequence, Jesus allowed Himself to be brought to His passion and death in order then to "fool" the devil by His resurrection and final victory. This appalling and blasphemous distortion of God's plan for the world's redemption through the sacrifice of His Son first suggested, as we intimated before, by Origen, strangely enough gained wide currency; it was held, at least in some measure, by many of the Fathers.

The Latin Fathers held to the centrality of the person and work of Christ, which they were content to describe according to the plain words of Scripture, without attempting any involved theory of the Atonement. Tertullian was the first to employ the term *satisfactio*, although he referred this term to human penances rather than to the atoning work of Christ. The conception of the Atonement as satisfaction does, however, appear in the writings of such Western Fathers as Ambrose, Hilary, Sulpitius Severus, and Lactantius.

Augustine likewise had formulated no elaborate theory of the Atonement, and the aspect of satisfaction does not come to the fore in his interpretation of the work of Christ. He rather viewed the atonement in terms of the penalty which Christ thereby paid for the sins of men, and, in keeping with the prevalent theological mood, he conceived of this payment as being made to the devil. At the same time it must be borne in mind that Augustine laid the groundwork for a clearer apprehension of the work of Christ by his emphasis on sin and grace. Hence, the influence of Augustine in shaping the theology of Anselm was not inconsiderable.

In summarizing the Patristic teaching on the Atonement, then, it must be asserted that the Fathers were not greatly concerned about any philosophy of the Atonement. They accepted it as a fact and did not worry too much about the method or process, which they did not regard as vital. They attempted no scientific construction, no rationalization of this dogma. They did not regard this as essential to the Christian faith. What is evident, however, is their emphasis on the incarnation and its relation to the Atonement. Harnack sums up the Patristic position in these words: "From the days of Paul, all of them [the Fathers] testified that *Christ died for us* and delivered us from the power of the devil. That was felt and proclaimed as the great act of redemption. Ambrose and Augustine had then emphasized the position that Christ is Mediator

as man and had given many instructions about particular points; but the question why that Man, who was at the same time God, was obliged to suffer and die, was dealt with by pointing to His example, or by reciting Biblical texts about ransom, sacrifice, and suchlike, without the necessity of the death here coming clearly to view."²⁾

Cur Deus Homo

It remained for Anselm to formulate a *rationale* of the Atonement and to advance an interpretation of the death of Christ in substitution for one which—despite the centuries of tradition that lay behind it—he regarded as unacceptable. In place of the prevalent idea that the death of Christ was a ransom paid to the devil, he set forth the proposition that this was rather to be regarded as a satisfaction, or reparation, demanded by God's *honor*. This he essayed to prove on the basis of reason and in the form of a philosophical approach. This conception of the atonement, then, he explicated in his epochal treatise *Cur Deus Homo*—which opened up a new area in the domain of Christian theology, and which gave rise to the most important theological discussion since the time of Augustine.

The *Cur Deus Homo* is a formal and logical explanation of the atoning work of Christ; the treatment throughout is based on reason, with the consequence that but little reference is made to Scripture in support of Anselm's position. He wanted to show that both the birth and death of Christ, God's Son, were necessary and "grounded in the very nature of things." Anselm's purpose was, of course, to accomplish a rational understanding of that which he had already comprehended by faith.

The treatise is written in the form of a dialog between Anselm and his rather acquiescent friend Boso, who plays the part of *advocatus diaboli* in the development of the argument. *Cur Deus Homo* is divided into two books: in the first, Anselm replies to objections and proves that man could not have been saved without Christ; in the second he shows that man could be saved only through the God-man.

Anselm begins by showing why none other than God could have liberated man and demonstrates the fallacy of the popular arguments and objections concerning the sacrifice of Christ which Boso adduces. He then proceeds, in Book I, chap. II, to launch into the main body of his argument. The *honor* of God, he maintains, must be kept inviolate. Sin, however, deprives God of His honor and therefore constitutes a debt. By sinning, man frustrates the will and purpose of the Creator. Thus man becomes *guilty* before God.

2) A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. XI, p. 56.

God's justice demands that either the guilty be punished or that God be repaid for the loss which He has sustained.³⁾

Now, the honor of God cannot be restored by the obedience of man, however perfect, for man owes God this obedience in any event; what is more, such obedience could never atone for past sins.⁴⁾ Hence, there remain only two possibilities for the reparation of God's honor: either a) punishment of the offender; or b) satisfaction, by which God would receive back *more* than He had lost. In His love, God does not demand nor desire punishment; indeed this would cause God to undo His own work. Therefore, God will accept satisfaction for the reparation of His honor.⁵⁾

This satisfaction, however, must be quantitatively sufficient to compensate for the sin which deprived God of His honor. Man of himself, however, cannot provide such compensation for his own sin and is therefore unable to render the satisfaction that God requires.⁶⁾ At the same time it is a matter of inexorable justice that the debt be fully repaid.⁷⁾ What is more, even though man of and by himself cannot possibly repay this spiritual debt, he is none the less responsible for it. Hence, there are only three possibilities open: either man cannot be saved at all; or he must be saved by some means other than those taught by Christianity; or he must be saved by Christ, God's Son.⁸⁾ Anselm rules out the first two, and sets out to prove the validity of the third.⁹⁾

The theme of Book II, therefore, is to show the manner of our salvation through Christ. He undertakes to prove his thesis in syllogistic fashion: Man must render satisfaction, but cannot. Only man *ought* to render satisfaction. But only God *can* render satisfaction. Therefore in order to actualize this satisfaction, God became man in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁾

The next question that logically arises is: How is Christ the God-man? Anselm answers this question by showing that this does not imply the change of the divine nature into the human; nor does it signify the blending of the two natures into a different substance; but it does mean that the divine and the human nature coexist in the person of Jesus Christ, each retaining its own character while partaking of the attributes of the other.¹¹⁾

As the God-man, Christ alone could render satisfaction for man's sin to a degree commensurate with the requirements of God's honor. He could effect this satisfaction, however, only by offering to God something that He did not owe Him and that God could not

3) *Cur Deus Homo*, I:11, 12.

4) *Ibid.*, 2.

5) *Ibid.*, 14.

6) *Ibid.*, 20.

7) *Ibid.*, 23.

8) *Ibid.*, 24.

9) *Ibid.*, 25.

10) *Cur Deus Homo*, II:6.

11) *Ibid.*, 7, 8.

demand as His right. Complete obedience on the part of Christ would not have been sufficient, since God demands such obedience as His due. His perfect life, accordingly, would not have constituted a sufficient reparation of God's honor. It was therefore necessary that Christ do that which He was not compelled to do and which was beyond the proper demands of God. Therefore He died. "In order that His sacrifice of Himself might be efficacious, it was necessary that He be not only sinless, and hence under no obligation to die, but also omnipotent and hence able not to die."¹²⁾ He died, not by compulsion, but voluntarily.¹³⁾ He was able, by virtue of the superabundant merits of His death, to atone for the sins of all the world and to render full reparation for the wounded honor of God.¹⁴⁾

It is to be kept in mind that Anselm did not hold that Christ was punished for the sins of men, but only that He rendered satisfaction for them. This satisfaction made punishment unnecessary. This view, it will readily be noted, bears a close affinity to the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance, which viewed satisfaction as a prerequisite to pardon. It was Anselm's function to apply the principles of this traditional doctrine in a systematic manner to the work of Christ, in accordance with the thesis that "every sin must be followed either by satisfaction or punishment." Foley holds that Anselm was historically "the one to make the principles of the practice of penance the fundamental scheme of religion in general."¹⁵⁾

This consideration also serves to invalidate the theory, of which Shailer Mathews is the chief advocate, that Anselm's conception of the Atonement was derived from his feudal environment. Mathews holds the Anselmic theory of the Atonement to be a classic example of the impact of the social pattern upon theology. This interpretation, however, is utterly without foundation. The emphasis on the honor of God obviously did not originate with Anselm, but appears prominently already in the writings of Tertullian. We concur in McGiffert's conclusion that "Anselm's theory is an example less of the influence of contemporary conditions than of the application of logic to traditional beliefs and customs. The *Cur Deus Homo* is thus of a piece with the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* and like them is an illustration of Anselm's general theological method."¹⁶⁾

12) McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

13) *Cur Deus Homo*, II:10, 11, 17.

14) *Cur Deus Homo*, II:14, 18b.

15) G. C. Foley, *Anselm's Theory of the Atonement*, p. 109.

16) McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

Evaluation of the *Cur Deus Homo*

In evaluating the *Cur Deus Homo* due recognition must be given to those factors which appear on the credit side of the ledger. It is commendable that Anselm dealt with the Atonement as redemption from *guilt* before God and that he jettisoned the idea of the literal payment of ransom to the devil, maintaining, of course, the truth that Christ redeemed men from the *power* of the devil.

It is to his credit, moreover, that he centered the grace of God in the redeeming work of Christ and set forth the centrality of this doctrine in the divine economy. Anselm stressed the *objective* efficacy of the Atonement. The sacrifice of Christ was valid and effectual even before its appropriation—through faith—by its beneficiaries.

Foley's comment in this connection is significant and aptly summarizes what may be considered the chief and abiding contribution of the *Cur Deus Homo* to the cause of constructive religion: "The very limitation of the inquiry (*Cur Deus Homo?*) turned men's thoughts away from the externalism and superstition of a mere ecclesiastical system to the significance of the person and work of Christ. The discussion has not one word to say of personal and legal satisfactions, of priestly interpositions, of the Church's control of the means of salvation. It fixes attention upon the redemptive meaning of the Incarnation, upon the perfect offering of an obedient life, upon a death whose loving acquiescence and completeness of sacrificial surrender absolutely satisfied a Father's desire for an ideal Son, and it makes these the all-sufficient source and explanation of our reconciliation with God. That is to say, it acknowledges the greatness and sufficiency of Christ's work; forgiveness . . . is the free gift of divine grace and is undeserved and wholly dissociated from human merit."¹⁷⁾

The Anselmic theory, however, is open to serious objection on a number of counts. For one thing, it does not portray the *vicarious* nature of Christ's work in the strict sense of the term. According to Anselm, Christ did not suffer punishment in our stead, but rather provided a benefit—infinitely meritorious, to be sure—for us.

A particularly grave defect of the theory is that it views the Atonement totally apart from the testimony of Scripture, without which the Atonement cannot possibly be properly understood. This not only constitutes an intrinsic weakness in the Anselmic argument, but it also served to direct subsequent thought on the Atonement into extra-Scriptural, and even unscriptural, channels. Anselm proceeds on the basis of pure logic, having recourse entirely to reason. His treatment throughout is abstract.

17) Foley, *op. cit.*, pp. 141, 142.

Anselm's approach, moreover, is theologically suspect in that it puts the entire relationship between God and man on a merely legal footing and gives it no ethical significance. His argument is based on the old Germanic law, and he therefore conceives of God's dealing with man in terms of a sovereign overlord dealing with his subject rather than as a loving Father caring for His child. In keeping with this conception of God it naturally follows that He treats sin more as "high treason" than as moral corruption.

A further defect of the theory is its exclusive emphasis on the death of Christ, while the rest of His redeeming work almost vanishes from sight. There is no reference to the Scriptural teaching that Christ also fulfilled the Law in man's stead.

A glaring omission in the *Cur Deus Homo* is the fact that scarcely any mention is made of man's appropriation of the gift of salvation, effected through the atoning work of Christ. He makes little reference to faith as the means by which man receives the benefits of the Atonement. In fact, he virtually loses sight of man as the beneficiary of the redemptive work of Christ. He struck a new—and unscriptural—note in confining the Atonement to the relationship between God and Christ and in disregarding the reconciliation between God and man, which is an integral factor of the Atonement. Anselm is much more concerned about the effect of Christ's redemption upon God than upon man.

Still one more count may be raised against the Anselmic theory, namely, its revival of the trivial notion of Augustine that God wanted to save enough men to replace the fallen angels. This idea is not only totally without Scriptural warrant, but is unworthy of the exalted nature of God and is out of harmony with the universality of His grace.

Influence of Anselmic Theory

Even though Anselm's theory found but little acceptance among the later Scholastics, it continued to bear a significant influence on the soteriology of the Western Church down through the period of the Reformation. The idea of "satisfaction" appears prominently in the writings of Hugh of St. Victor, Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventura, but none of these accepted the Anselmic theory *in toto*. Among other Schoolmen Anselm's conception of the Atonement was either ignored or openly rejected.

The nearest approach to acceptance of the Anselmic theory is found in the greatest of the Scholastics, Thomas Aquinas, in whose system medieval Roman Catholic theology found its consummation. Inasmuch as Thomistic theology has become authoritative for modern Catholicism, the Anselmic influence has, through the

channels of Thomism, extended down into our own times. As a result, the conception of satisfaction has become fixed in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Atonement.

Anselm's contribution to Christian soteriology in his *opus magnum* — both in itself and in its bearing on subsequent Christian thought — has carved for him a permanent niche in theology's hall of fame. We cannot escape the conclusion, however, that far more important than any rationalization of the Atonement is our own trustful acceptance of this central truth of Christianity as the basis of a sure and eternal hope.

Chicago, Ill.

THOMAS COATES

The Spiritual, Not the Social Gospel in the Church*

(With Special Reference to the Race Relations Problem)

Our country today finds itself confronted with a serious race relations problem. It is only one of the many social and economic questions facing us at this time, but, no doubt, every one who has carefully studied the race problem will admit that it is one of major importance and therefore should not be ignored by those whose business it is to study it. As citizens of our country it vitally concerns us all, and it is in view of this fact that the Missionary Board (upon the writer's suggestion) has decided to take up its study as a part of its agenda, especially since it is the duty of the Board to counsel those who are directly concerned with the problem in its practical applications. It is from this point of view that the Missionary Board, I hope, will continue to give the matter its careful attention.

There is no doubt that many of the thirteen million Negroes in our country are suffering serious injustice and are laboring under decided disadvantages. We shall not go into detail in describing these. They differ in various areas and communities of our country. In some places Negroes practically enjoy every prerogative which their Caucasian neighbors possess; in other places they are denied definite privileges which are theirs as American citizens, while again in other places they are unjustly oppressed and deprived of fundamental Constitutional rights. For this reason we are not merely facing one problem, but a complex of problems with a thousand different aspects and ramifications. Its solution

* An essay read and discussed at the plenary meeting of the Missionary Board of the Synodical Conference, Chicago, Ill., April 28 to 29, 1943.