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The Logic of Faith:  
The Congruence of Divine Authority and Human Reason  
in the Philosophy of Anselm

by  
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in the Philosophy of Anselm

APPROVED BY

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This Report is dedicated to Pastor Paul Hahn  
and the Session of Redeemer Presbyterian Church,  
Austin, Texas,  
for without their support  
it would not have been possible.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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by  
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The purpose of this report is to explore Anselm's theological, apologetical, and philosophical outworking of the Augustinian motto, "faith seeking understanding." By examining Anselm's argument for the existence of God, his refutation of Roscelin's anti-Trinitarian teaching, and his Christology, we see the strength of his defense of Christian faith. But we also arrive at a master theme for Anselm's worldview as a whole, namely, congruence. For Anselm, there is a beautiful congruence not only between faith and reason, but also between God's nature and the nature of the world he

has made and redeemed. This congruence is seen most preeminently in the incarnation of the Logos.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
ANSELM AND THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION .....	4
FAITH AND REASON .....	7
FAITH, REASON, AND HUMILITY .....	9
A PARADOX: FAITH AND <i>MIS</i> UNDERSTANDING .....	14
RATIONALISM, FIDEISM, AND MYSTERY .....	16
“FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING” IN COMMUNITY .....	22
THE HAPPY MARRIAGE OF FAITH AND REASON.....	26
DOES ANSELM GIVE REASON A CRITICAL FUNCTION? .....	29
NATURAL THEOLOGY IN THE ANSELMIAN WORLDVIEW .....	33
CASE STUDY #1: ANSELM’S PROOF OF GOD’S EXISTENCE .....	35
PUZZLING OVER <i>PROSLOGION</i> : PROOF OR CONFESSION? .....	36
THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND ANSELM.....	42
ANSELM’S REVELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY.....	44
CASE STUDY #2: ANSELM, ROSCELIN, AND	

THE TRINITY .....	48
THE CHALLENGE OF ROSCELIN .....	48
THE TRINITY AND ANSELM'S APOLOGETIC.....	50
FAITH FINDING UNDERSTANDING: THE ONE AND THE MANY .....	55
CASE STUDY #3: ANSELM'S CHRISTOLOGY .....	57
THE FITTINGNESS OF THE INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT .....	57
THE AESTHETICS OF ANSELM'S WORLDVIEW .....	61
EVALUATING ANSELM'S INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENT AS A CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST .....	64
ANSELM'S APOLOGETIC .....	64
A PRESUPPOSITIONALISM OF THE HEART .....	68
THE POWER OF ANSELM'S APOLOGETIC .....	72
THE BEST PROOF OF ALL: THE JOY OF BELIEVING .....	77
CONGRUENCE AS A MASTER THEME IN ANSELM .....	79
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	83
VITA .....	86

## INTRODUCTION

Anselm sailed the flagship of the Augustinian tradition through a turbulent intellectual period in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> All of Anselm's philosophical work may be considered an unpacking and updating of the Augustinian motto "faith seeking understanding."<sup>2</sup> Anselm is thus a

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<sup>1</sup> "It can scarcely be too strongly emphasized that the span of Anselm's life covered one of the most momentous periods of change in European history, comparable to the centuries of the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution." R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine cited Isaiah 7:9 in support of his view that faith must seek understanding: "If you will not believe, surely you will not be established" (RSV). The *Septuagint* has mistranslated this verse, "If you will not believe, you will not understand." This mistranslation seems to have influenced Augustine quite a bit. Augustine states his position clearly in *Tractates on John's Gospel*, XXIX, 6:

Dost thou wish to understand? Believe. For God had said by the prophet, 'Except ye believe, ye shall not understand.' . . . If thou hadst not understood, said I, believe. For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand.

Anselm echoes this at the end of *Proslogion* chapter 1:

I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that unless I believe, I shall not understand.

All quotations from Anselm's works (unless otherwise noted) taken from Bryan Davies and G. R. Evans, editors, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

wonderful mix of rigorous, traditional Christian orthodoxy blended with fresh philosophical formulations. The outcome is a powerful and unique apologetic for the faith he held dear.

If “faith seeking understanding” is the main current in the flow of Anselm’s thought, the major cross current is order. Again and again, Anselm shows a deep concern for elegance, harmony, and beauty. Anselm’s theology is rooted in Scripture, of course, but also in “the nature of things” because God’s Word and human reason were made to fit hand-in-glove.

The burden of this report is to explore these twin currents in the Anselmian river by examining a series of test cases. After a broad overview of Anselm’s place in the Augustinian tradition, I will extensively examine Anselm’s reworking of the Augustinian motto. How does Anselm relate faith and understanding? Then I will turn to a series of case studies to see the Augustinian motto in action. These test cases will include the proof for God’s existence, the Trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement. Along the way, I will drift into a few tributaries that show the contemporary relevance of Anselm, namely, the place of community in his epistemology and the function of his literary style. Then I turn to an examination of his intellectual

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achievement as Christian philosopher and evaluate the success of his apologetical program. Finally, I will draw together Anselm's view of faith and reason as an interlocking unity with his view of order or fittingness, to arrive at a master theme underlying the Anselmian worldview as a whole: congruence.

## ANSELM AND THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION

Anselm lived just before the rediscovery of the bulk of the Aristotelian corpus. Thus, his intellectual formation was mainly guided by the Scriptures and the church fathers. After the Bible, Augustine is clearly the greatest influence on his thinking. His early years at Bec provided ample time for study, meditation, and reflection. Anselm's first published book, *Monologion*, drew heavily on Augustine's work, though he never explicitly cites Augustine. Richard Southern describes Lanfranc's reaction to the work and Anselm's counterpoint:

Lanfranc's first reaction to the *Monologion* was to challenge Anselm to name his sources. Anselm's reply was comprehensive, but enigmatic; comprehensive in ascribing everything to Augustine; enigmatic in providing no detail at all to substantiate his claim.

Anselm's answer ran as follows:

It was my intention throughout this disputation to assert nothing which could not be immediately defended either from canonical *Dicta* or from the words of St.

Augustine. And however often I look over what I have written, I cannot see that I have asserted anything that is not to be found there. Indeed, no reasoning of my own, however conclusive, would have persuaded me to have been the first to presume to say those things which you have copied from my work, nor several other

things besides, if St. Augustine had not already proved them in the great discussions in his *De Trinitate*. I found them argued at length in this work, and explained them briefly on his authority in my shorter chain of argument.<sup>3</sup>

Anselm may be somewhat disingenuous here. Certainly much of his argument in *Monologion* can be found in Augustine in nascent form, but Anselm's final product goes far beyond anything found in the Augustinian corpus. He has so absorbed Augustine that he may freely search out new lines of thought along trajectories faithful to Augustine, even while never directly quoting him. It would not be going too far to see in Anselm an intellectual reincarnation of Augustine, albeit in a quite different historical and cultural milieu. Anselmianism is simply Augustinianism transformed and brought up to date.

Southern draws out many Augustinian influences in Anselm's work.<sup>4</sup> Stylistically, Anselm's Latin mirrored that of Augustine, with its rhythmic, musical structure. Both men had a knack for clever, tightly packed aphorisms that encapsulated paragraphs of thought in one sentence. Augustine sought to offer a sustained and reasoned defense of Christian faith, as did Anselm,

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<sup>3</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 71-2.

<sup>4</sup> See Southern, chapter 4. See also Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (Revised edition, Lincoln, NE., and London, 1983).

though in a quite different social environment. Finally, the Augustinian pattern of meditation provided a model for Anselm's devotional life.

Of course, there were great differences between Augustine and Anselm as well, but Anselm's immersion in Augustine's thought is easy enough to see. In one sense, we might even say that Augustine's philosophical reflection and biblical exegesis are the interpretive keys to Anselm's own thought.

## FAITH AND REASON

The slogan “faith seeking understanding” has meant different things to different Christian philosophers, but all those in this Augustinian stream are united in at least two ways: (1) a rejection of an irrational, fideistic approach to Christianity that makes Christian commitment a blind leap; and (2) a rejection of a rationalistic approach to Christian truth that would require full comprehension of a proposition or doctrine before granting it acceptance. In other words, reason is not worthless but neither is it the ultimate determiner of the possible. While Anselm has his own peculiar approach, he is situated quite snugly in this tradition as his opening remarks in *On the Incarnation of the Word* show:<sup>5</sup>

But before I examine this question I will say something to curb the presumption of those who, with blasphemous rashness and on the ground that they cannot understand it, dare to argue against something which the Christian faith confesses – those who judge with foolish pride that what they are not able to understand is not at all possible, rather than acknowledging with humble wisdom that many things are possible which they are not able to comprehend. Indeed, no Christian

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<sup>5</sup> Anselm has Roscelin in view in the following quotation..

ought to question the truth of what the Catholic Church believes in its heart and confesses with its mouth. Rather, by holding constantly and unhesitatingly to this faith, by loving it and living according to it he ought humbly, and as best he is able, to seek to discover the reason why it is true. If he is able to understand, then let him give thanks to God. But if he cannot understand, let him not toss his horns in strife but let him bow his head in reverence. For self-confident human wisdom can, by thrusting, uproot its horns more quickly than it can, by pushing, roll this stone. For when certain men begin to grow “horns” of self-confident knowledge, then (being ignorant of the fact that if someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it) they are accustomed to mount up presumptuously unto the loftiest questions of faith before they possess spiritual wings through firmness of faith. Consequently, when they try to ascend to those questions which first require the ladder of faith (as it is written, “Unless you believe you will not understand”), but try to ascend in reverse order by means of first understanding, they are constrained to fall into many kinds of errors on account of their defective understanding. For it is apparent that they have no foundation of faith

who, because they cannot understand what they believe, argue against the truth of this same faith – a truth confirmed by the holy Fathers. It is as if bats and owls, which see the sky only at night, were to dispute about the midday rays of the sun with eagles, which with unblinded vision gaze directly at the sun.<sup>6</sup>

If we unpack this rather lengthy quotation, we will get to the heart of Anselm's view of Christian faith seeking understanding, which in turn will unlock the door to his theological and apologetic method. We will find that in the Anselmian worldview, revelation and reason (properly functioning) are entirely congruent.

### **FAITH, REASON, AND HUMILITY**

Perhaps it is most important to notice that for Anselm knowledge is a moral issue.<sup>7</sup> Anselm will not allow us to be neutral in our reasoning.<sup>8</sup> Proper

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<sup>6</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 125:

Similarly, he who aims at understanding the nature and works of God must be prepared to use reason in a way that permits appropriate thoughts to be entertained. The preparation is both mental and moral, and it is an essential preliminary for secure reasoning on these subjects because the image of God implanted in the human mind at the Creation has been deformed by sin, and can only be restored by repentance, prayer, and a purifying of the mind. For reasoning on these subjects, therefore, it is not enough to perform a plodding series of mechanical acts; it requires a kindling of the spirit, a throwing-off

reasoning (especially about ultimate realities) must take place in a context of piety or our efforts will be defective. Scholarly pride blinds us to the truth in our intellectual pursuits. For Anselm, reason is not to be wielded as a weapon against the faith as though it were a final standard. Rather, reason is to bow

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of the chains of the flesh, a rising above the world of material things, all of which are the fruits of a long process of purification. Hence it was not inappropriate that Anselm should use the same phrases of mental excitation in his philosophical discourses which he had used earlier in his Prayers, for it was only through prayer that he could reach the state at which reasoning on these subjects could be profitable.

Compare also Louis Mackey, "Anselm, Gaunilon, and the Fool" (unpublished manuscript), 179:

Anselm lists several conditions that must be met before we apply our judgment to the deep things of the faith. First, the heart must be cleansed by faith. Second, the eyes must be enlightened through the keeping of the precepts of the Lord. Third, we ought to become as little children through humble obedience to the testimonies of God. And finally, we must live according to the Spirit, putting aside the things of the flesh. Thus faith, observance of God's commandments, obedience to his revelations, and a spiritual life are all necessary before a man can reason about God and his faith. It is tempting to suppose that the Fool is a fool because he has not met these conditions.

In a sense, we can see Anselm's moral requirements for knowledge as his own version of Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (NKJV).

<sup>8</sup> Consider what Anselm says in chapter 1 of *On the Incarnation*, citing Romans 1:21 as proof:

And not only is the mind prevented from rising to the understanding of higher things when it lacks faith and obedience to the commandments of God, but by the neglect of good conscience even the understanding which has already been given is sometimes removed.

humbly before the authority of faith (as contained in Scripture and interpreted by the church). In other words, reason is a *tool* rather than an *ultimate authority*, and thus it is to serve the faith and explain it as best it can rather than criticize it. For Anselm, no man should be so presumptuous as to expect to understand Christian truth apart from a child like faith. Only a humble mind can make progress in understanding.<sup>9</sup>

For Anselm, faith is a prerequisite of true understanding in the very nature of the case.<sup>10</sup> After all, the Christian God is incomprehensible. We

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Faith, and apparently the obedience that comes from it, are necessary for true understanding.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps then it would be best to differentiate between reason as it functions in the believer from the unbeliever. There is a sharp contrast – one is tempted to say an antithesis – between these two types of reasoning. The believer uses reason, but does so in submission to an ultimate authority, God’s revelation in Scripture. The believer also assumes an ultimate harmony between revelation and (right) reason. The unbeliever, on the other hand, assumes his own reason to be self-sufficient and therefore makes it his final test of truth. He takes a critical stance towards all external authorities. In short, for Anselm, this is the difference between humility and pride. Boso explains the Christian’s approach to reason, over against the unbeliever, in chapter 2 of *Why God Became Man*: “For although they appeal to reason because they do not believe, but we, on the other hand, because we do believe; nevertheless, the thing sought is one and the same.” Reason itself is similar in both the believer and unbeliever; both want to be rational. But for the believer, rationality is shaped by prior faith commitments, whereas reason functions autonomously for the unbeliever.

<sup>10</sup> While the focus of this paper is the role of faith in one’s understanding of God, I believe Anselm’s commitment to the primacy of faith to be unqualified. Faith is not limited to revelation or to so-called spiritual matters.

have no right to demand from him a complete explanation of himself or the world, nor could we even understand one if it was given. Moreover, whatever understanding of truth the Christian does attain is granted to him by divine grace, as Anselm never tires of reminding us. According to Anselm, the believer passes through a kind of progression from faith to understanding. Anselm says in his letter to Fulco,

For a Christian ought to advance through faith to understanding instead of proceeding through understanding to faith or withdrawing from faith if he cannot understand. But when he is able to attain understanding, he is delighted; but when he is unable, he reveres what he cannot apprehend.<sup>11</sup>

As faith becomes reflective, it naturally seeks to reason out what is believed, to probe divine mysteries. This reflective process leads to an increase in

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It is a necessary human function in all understanding and the precondition of the right use of reason in any sphere of knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 1, Anselm adds:

Therefore, let no one plunge rashly into complex questions concerning divine things without first striving in firmness of faith for earnestness of life and of wisdom – lest running through a misleading mass of sophistries with frivolous lack of care, he be ensnared by some persistent falsehood.

We must have an unshakable faith in the Scripture's teaching about God *before* we can engage in profitable philosophical reflection about God.

understanding, but never to full comprehension because our finite minds cannot contain the infinite God. Understanding is not a sturdy enough ladder to get us to God apart from faith.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, this methodology leads Anselm to a critique of rationalism.<sup>13</sup> The rationalist has the epistemological process backwards. The rationalist makes his reason the standard of what is to be believed. Thus all mystery and paradox must be eliminated before assent is granted.

Understanding is made a condition of belief. For the rationalist, God is in the dock (to use a phrase from C. S. Lewis) and man is on the bench. God must pass man's test. Of course, with the atheistic fool and Roscelin, two opponents of Anselm with whom we shall deal more fully later, this kind of rationalistic attitude is on full display.

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Anselm is first a Christian believer, and only secondly a Christian philosopher, but these two are by no means incompatible.

<sup>12</sup> For Anselm this pursuit of understanding God is not optional but our duty. We must exercise our minds as much as we are able in order to come to a fuller understanding of God. We are to hold firmly to the faith as taught by the church, even while we "seek to discover the reason why it is true" (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 1).

<sup>13</sup> Certainly there are other uses of the terms "rationalism" and "rationalist" (some of which may not even be opposed by Anselm), but for our purposes rationalism simply means reason is put above revelation or any other authority. The rationalist requires all propositions to meet certain *a priori* criteria of intelligibility in order to be worthy of belief. The rationalist has

## **A PARADOX: FAITH AND *MISUNDERSTANDING***

Anselm's explanation leads us to a paradox that must be solved for the "faith seeking understanding" tradition to be coherent. If Roscelin does not understand the Trinity because he does not believe it, how can he be accused of rejecting it? After all, it is not *really* the Trinity he rejects but his rationalistic caricature of it. The same problem crops up in Anselm's argument for the existence of God in *Proslogion* and his *Reply to Gaunilo*. How can the fool be called an unbeliever if he has no understanding of the religious propositions he is rejecting? If faith is required to attain understanding, unbelievers are not rejecting Christianity but a misunderstanding of Christianity. It seems the "faith seeking understanding" model of knowledge means no one can ever reject Christianity!

However, Anselm is careful to avoid this problem in his argument for God's existence. His argument for God's existence presumably is persuasive only because the fool understands in some fashion what is meant by "God." The fool understands what the words "that than which no greater can be conceived" signify just as he can understand what the words "fire is water" signify. At this point, Anselm makes a crucial distinction:

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faith in the self-sufficiency of his own reason. See Paul Helm, *Faith and*

But how has the fool said in his heart what he could not conceive; or how is it that he could not conceive what he has said in his heart? But, if really, nay, since really, he both conceived, because he said in his heart; and did not say in his heart because he could not conceive; there is more than one way in which a thing is said to be in the heart or conceived. For, in one sense, an object is conceived, when the word signifying it is conceived; and in another, when the very entity, which the object is, is understood. In the former sense, then, God can be conceived not to exist; but in the latter, not all.<sup>14</sup>

Anselm draws a clear line between understanding what the words signify and understanding the very thing itself which the heart conceives.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, Roscelin can understand what the words of the Christian creeds signify, yet he does not understand the very thing itself, namely God. Like the fool in *Proslogion*, Roscelin cannot understand God because he has not experienced

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*Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Proslogion*, chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 12. In order for the fool to say in his heart, "There is no God" he must have some understanding of God. And yet at the same time he does not understand God, because if he did, he would understand that God's non-existence cannot be conceived. God necessarily exists.

him. And, of course, this experience of God which Anselm has had, requires faith.<sup>16</sup>

### **RATIONALISM, FIDEISM, AND MYSTERY**

All of this does not make Anselm an irrationalist or a fideist. He does not simply jettison reason in favor of revelation (though he occasionally sounds this way). He believes Christian theology to be internally rational. It may be supra-rational (above reason) at certain points, at least for us creatures, but never is it irrational. Anselm assumes believers can attain a sufficient measure of genuine understanding to discern the inner rationale of the faith. But how can this be so? How can Anselm hold that Christian truth is rational even though it cannot be fully comprehended? How can we rationally defend

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<sup>16</sup> Anselm, following Augustine, explicitly links faith, experience, and understanding in *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 1 :

This very thing I assuredly affirm, that he who does not believe, cannot understand. For he who does not believe can have no experience, and he who has no experience cannot understand. For as experience is superior to merely hearing about something, so knowledge gained through experience is far superior to that gained by merely hearing about things.

Anselm's use of experience here should not be limited by modern empiricist assumptions. Experience is a broad concept for Anselm, including the experience of God. Anselm's point, then, is rather straight forward and easy to grasp, however hard it may be for moderns to accept: Without faith in God, there is no experience of God; without experience of God, there is no understanding of God.

what we cannot completely rationally explain? How can reason and mystery peacefully co-exist?

First, it would be unfair to hold Christians such as Anselm to the rationalist's test. The *a priori* criteria of the rationalist are themselves in need of justification, whatever they may be.<sup>17</sup> Besides, virtually nothing in any field is known comprehensively.<sup>18</sup> Nor does most of our knowledge (at least initially) come from first hand experience. We are frequently satisfied with partial explanations and second hand accounts because they are all we can hope to achieve. This is as true in theology as it is in science. In a sense, what Anselm would have us do with God is no more or less than what we do with other humans all the time in ordinary life. Most of our knowledge begins not with direct experience or comprehension but comes from relying on the

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the Augustinian tradition need not oppose this kind of *a priori* knowledge. In fact, Augustine himself insisted upon an *a priori* knowledge of basic mathematical and moral principles. But within the circle of Augustinian faith, such universal and inescapable knowledge may be justified with recourse to God and his work of creation. Non-theistic rationalists must justify their *a priori* principles before imposing them on Augustine or Anselm.

<sup>18</sup> It is simply fallacious to insist on either absolute knowledge or no knowledge at all. Interestingly, it is this false dilemma that is often at the root of both rationalism and irrationalism. See, for example, D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 107ff, 120ff.

testimony of another, who is presumably a trustworthy source.<sup>19</sup> A small child believes parental instruction about not playing by the street, even though the child cannot comprehend the physics of a car crashing into his small body. The trustworthiness of the authority makes up for the child's feeble understanding and lack of full experience.<sup>20</sup> Beginning with faith in Scripture

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<sup>19</sup> When we consider the vast network of human testimony on which we rely for our knowledge of the world, Christian faith comes off looking quite good. Thus, Anselm's frequent appeals to the authority of the church (human testimony) are not out of place. It seems testimony must be accepted by all epistemologists as a valid starting point for at least a significant portion of our knowledge about the world. Of course, in itself this is not an adequate apologetic for Christianity, but it is significant and often overlooked. See Dewey Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason From Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), especially chapters 1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Obviously then faith is not just a temporary exercise until reason comes to the rescue. No one would accuse a child of acting irrationally in obeying parental authority. In fact, the *reason* the child *believes* his parents' words is simply this: he knows his parents to be reliable and trustworthy. He would be irrational *not* to listen to those older and wiser and to run out into the street. Similarly, the Christian believer begins with faith in Scripture and the leading teaching authorities in the church. His initial *reason* for believing is that Scripture claims to be God's Word and the church has witnessed to this revelation. But, like the child, as he matures, he grows in understanding. Faith does not fall by the wayside, but the reasons for believing in the first place become increasingly apparent. Hoitenga (*Faith and Reason From Plato to Plantinga*, 140-1) explains, using Augustine to illustrate:

The model is one of following established human authority – in Augustine's own case, the authority of his parents and of the Church. This authority leads him to Scripture, just as the teachers of rhetoric lead the student of rhetoric to the writings of Cicero. But notice what Augustine's example from rhetoric implies for religion. Just as students go to Cicero because of the authority Cicero enjoys among

(God's Word) in order to come to know God is no more intellectually suicidal than the history student beginning with a textbook on history (the historian's word) in order to begin to master his subject. What other choice is there?<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as Scripture teaches (Romans 1:18ff) and as Anselm firmly

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the people, so he *went* to Scripture on the basis of the authority it enjoyed with the multitude of Christians; just as students stay with Cicero because they find in him what they seek, so he *stayed* with Scripture because he found the truth he was seeking... In other words, human authority must finally yield to divine authority; human faith to divine faith. At some point the believer no longer believes the testimony of human beings but the revelation of God.

Hoitenga may be accused here of psychologizing away important epistemological issues. But, again, this is not to be considered a stand alone Christian apologetic. Hoitenga, following Augustine, is simply giving us insight into the way we actually come to know what we know, without taking up more theoretical questions of justification. Of course, the above quotation raises another question: What is the authority of the church vis-à-vis Scripture? This issue has been debated for centuries between Roman Catholics and Protestants, with much misunderstanding on both sides. The point is too big to explore here, but one statement from Hoitenga (138) will suffice: "The authority of the Church's testimony is prior to the authority of the Gospel in *time*, but the authority of the Gospel as God's Word is prior to the authority of the Church in the order of *reality*." This seems to be Augustine's view when the dust clears, and I think Anselm would be in basic agreement.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, Anselm may find the above analogy a bit offensive, or at least highly inadequate. Anselm believed Scripture to be God's Word, an inspired divine revelation and therefore perfect, whereas any merely human work is certainly subject to imperfections. The point is not that Scripture should be treated as any other book (Anselm would disagree), but there is an analogy between the learning process for the young Christian and the young historian. Both cases involve reliance on testimony and submission to an external authority.

believes, God has revealed something of his character in the things he has made. Men already have a sense of deity before even picking up the Bible or hearing the teaching of the church. They already know God and know him to be trustworthy, even though they may suppress this.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Anselm believes that the rationale of Christian truth is plain enough to leave the unbeliever without excuse. It is no defect in Christian theology that makes Christian truth unacceptable. Rather, according to Anselm it is the folly and pride of the human heart that makes some heretics like Roscelin. This dogmatism explains Anselm's harshness towards Roscelin:

And I will say this by way of confirmation: as long as he persists in this obstinacy let him remain anathema, for he is not at all a Christian. But if he was baptized and was brought up among Christians, then he ought not at all to be given a hearing. No explanation for his error should be demanded of him, and no explication of our truth should be given him. Rather, as soon as the detection of his falsehood is beyond doubt, either let him anathematize the poison which he produces and spews forth or let him be anathematized unless he recants. For it is

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<sup>22</sup> Again, see Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason From Plato to Plantinga*, especially

pointless and most foolish to call back into the uncertainty of unsettled questions that which is most firmly established upon a solid rock -- on account of every single man who lacks understanding.<sup>23</sup>

For Anselm, then, certain understanding begins with faith in God's testimony, deposited in Scripture and explained by the church (especially in her creeds) and grows from this starting point. To fail to begin with faith in God's Word is to head down a blind alley. Our only avenue to true experience, and therefore to true understanding, is the route mapped out by faith, however uncomfortable and humbling this may be for us.

#### **“FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING” IN COMMUNITY**

Any contemporary discussion of Anselm's epistemology would be incomplete without an excursus examining the role he gives to friendship and community. This may be shocking at first since Anselm's monastic life was often centered around private exercises of devotion. But this private mysticism was constantly enveloped by the dialectic of dialogue, by the sending of letters to and from dear friends, by communal interaction with

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chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Fulco. *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, translation and annotation by Walter Frohlich (Kalamazoo, MI. 1990). Notice that Anselm clearly holds at least certain basic Christian truths to be immune from revision.

fellow believers, and even interchanges with opponents like Gaunilo and heretics like Roscelin. Anselm was not on an individualistic quest for knowledge; all his philosophical endeavors take place in the context of the community and are for the sake of the community.<sup>24</sup>

Postmodernism has once again brought to the surface the corporate context in which our truth pursuits take place. Stanley Grenz crystallizes this postmodern insight: “Individuals come to knowledge only by way of a cognitive framework mediated by the community in which they participate.”<sup>25</sup> Anselm does not offer any formal argument for the importance of community; rather he lives it out. Southern explains the crucial importance of friendships in Anselm’s spiritual development:

[T]here was no period in Anselm’s religious life when friendship was merely a personal and, so to speak, optional occupation: it was a central experience, and it had a profound and eternal importance...[H]e gave intimate friendship a new emphasis in the

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<sup>24</sup> In some cases the community is no broader than his fellow monks, in other cases it is the whole church.

<sup>25</sup> Stanley Grenz *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 168.

corporate religious life...His circle of friends was essential for the development of his theology.<sup>26</sup>

A good example of Anselm's communal epistemology may be found in his *Why God Became Man*. The work is structured as a dialogue between Boso, one of Anselm's finest students and Anselm, the master teacher.<sup>27</sup> It is truly a case of "iron sharpening iron" for all the arguments arise in the context of two friends pursuing truth together. Early on in the dialogue, Boso explains the purpose and value of such a methodology:

[I]t often comes about in discussions of some issue that God reveals what was previously hidden. And you ought to put your hope in the grace of God that, if you willingly share those things you have freely received [cf. Matt. 10:8], you will deserve to receive those 'higher things' to which you have so far not attained.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 139, 140, 137. This whole chapter in Southern's work gives important insight into Anselm's view of friendship and his famous talk. See also David Moss, "Friendship" in John Millbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), chapter 6 and William Shannon *Anselm: The Joy of Faith* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 79, 111ff.

<sup>27</sup> Even if the dialogue form is only a literary device and not an actual conversation, the point made here still holds.

<sup>28</sup> *Why God Became Man*, chapter 1.

Another example of Anselm's self-consciously communal approach to truth comes from *Monologion*. In the Prologue, he states "Some of my brethren have often and earnestly asked me to write down, as a kind of model of meditation, some of the things I have said, in everyday language, on the subject of meditating upon the essence of the divine; and on some other subjects bound up with such meditation."<sup>29</sup> Even works done for personal meditation have a corporate flavor and are written for the community as a whole. Marilyn McCord Adams puts it quite stunningly: "Qua author, Anselm plays Cupid endeavoring through the *Monologion*, the *Proslogion*, and the *Prayers* generally to stir up the reader into a romance with God, the Good that satisfies."<sup>30</sup> Anselm wants his friends to share in his own experience of God and to finally reach "the blessed company of the saints."<sup>31</sup>

None of this is to say Anselm was a postmodern before postmodernism. He firmly believes in objective (revelational) truth and therefore has a standard beyond and outside the community by which all

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<sup>29</sup> *Monologion*, Prologue.

<sup>30</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, "Romancing the Good: God and the Self According to At. Anselm of Canterbury" in Gareth Matthews *The Augustinian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 94. See also 101: Anselm is a spiritual physician whose works are " 'skillful means' for the cure of souls in their several roles and dimensions, for converting both mind and affections to God."

knowledge may be judged.<sup>32</sup> The communal context in which knowledge is mediated does not radically relativize knowledge for Anselm. Still, his communal praxis has at least a formal commonality with postmodernism.

### **THE HAPPY MARRIAGE OF FAITH AND REASON**

Paul Helm explains why Anselm should not be viewed as a fideist or a rationalist:

Understanding involves possessing the reasons which shows why the faith is true. Faith initially accepts that it is true, while understanding comes to see (in a measure) how it is true, its basis in the principles of reason, in the nature of things, that is, ultimately in God himself. And so in seeing how it is true the mind comes to grasp something of the divine reality itself.

Anselm links the understanding that faith seeks with a particular normative view of what understanding is. For him, understanding is not simply the removal of anomalies and the gaining of information through the operation of reflective reason, but dispelling the appearance of irrationality or whimsy or arbitrariness in what God has

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<sup>31</sup> *Letters*, 77. Quoted in Shannon, *Anselm*, 119.

<sup>32</sup> Following Augustine and the Apostle John, this is the Logos. See Mackey “Anselm, Gaunillon, and the Fool,” 183.

willed....It is one of the tasks of reason to look for reasons why this faith is true, which presumably provide grounds which do not in turn depend for their convincingness on the mere authority of the Church, but which have some independent validity. Not that Anselm wished to be free of submission to the authority of the Church, but he wished in addition, to have some 'independent reason' for what he believed, a reason that would convey some of the inner rationale of his faith. Insofar as reason succeeds in this task, it gains understanding... The basic, positive connection between faith and understanding, a common thread running through [Anselm], involves a spiraling connection between faith and understanding, a spiral which in this life never reaches its zenith.<sup>33</sup>

Starting with faith does not make one a fideist if one also believes that, in principle, reasons for believing can be given. Anselm believes there *are* reasons – even good and necessary reasons – for the faith he believes. But even when our finite human intellects cannot penetrate to these reasons, we are still to hold firm to the faith. In this life, there will always be a certain incompleteness to our understanding. God has reasons which are, for now at

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<sup>33</sup> Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, 30, 33.

least, epistemologically inaccessible to us. But ultimately, Anselm would claim Christian faith cannot be irrational because the Christian God is rational; indeed, he is the very source of reason itself. According to Anselm, the revelational *is* the rational, though our sin and creaturely limitations may prevent us from seeing revelation's full rationality.

For Anselm, then, there is a happy marriage between the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and properly functioning reason. Reason and faith mesh with one another, and mutually strive towards a common goal, namely, the knowledge of God. Yet, Anselm always maintains the priority of faith. "Faith seeking understanding" is not a two-way street. Faith is the ruling husband, reason the submissive wife, and yet their conjugal relations are sweet.<sup>34</sup> To change the metaphor, Anselm views faith as protological, reason as eschatological. One starts with faith, and through a long, winding journey with friends, reaches the destination of understanding. Faith doesn't cease to be faith when supported with reason, yet neither is faith without its reasons.

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<sup>34</sup> As Dr. Mackey pointed out, this illustration reverses our traditional associations of reason with the masculine and faith with the feminine. However, viewed from another angle, it is not odd at all. The submission of reason to faith is, in reality, the submission of humanity (rational creatures) to God (whose word must be taken on faith). Biblical imagery often uses the feminine for humanity as a whole and the masculine for God or Christ. See, for example, Ephesians 5:22ff.

## DOES ANSELM GIVE REASON A CRITICAL FUNCTION?

Thus far, it has been argued that Anselm puts reason in the service of faith. But does this mean that Anselm gives reason no independent role whatsoever? Does reason merely *explicate* the faith, and therefore “second” its already revealed conclusions? Or does reason enter into genuine dialogue with faith, thereby *examining* it critically? Here we must be careful not to read post-Enlightenment views of “critical reason” back into Anselm’s work.

In the Augustinian-Anselmian tradition, faith and reason are related dialectically. Faith informs reason and reason in turn illumines faith. Faith and reason form something of an “epistemological circle,” or better, an “epistemological spiral,” which begins with faith and reaches its final apex with full understanding. This process is complete and the tension resolved only when faith becomes sight (which, according to the Christian tradition, happens only in the eschaton with the Beatific Vision).<sup>35</sup>

It might seem, then, that one is simply thrown into this spiral somewhere between faith and reason, and thus the oscillating process begins. But this cannot quite be true. If it were, one could move from understanding

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, Christian orthodoxy allows for mystery even in the eschaton, since we will still be finite creatures. This mystery will not be unsettling,

to faith as easily as one moves from faith to understanding. But for Anselm, faith *always* has priority. “Faith seeking understanding” is irreversible; one may travel up the spiral from faith to understanding, but not back down the spiral from understanding to faith. Faith always limits, qualifies, and regulates the legitimate use of reason. Reason’s autonomy is, at most, very relative. The dialectic between faith and reason is always enveloped by faith.<sup>36</sup>

Consider an analogy. A group of calculus students have a set of problems to solve and an answer key. The answer key is fully trustworthy, but they do not yet know how the solutions were reached. Through a long, and perhaps grueling process, possibly involving a great deal of trial and error, they come to understand how to work the problems and arrive at the “revealed” solutions. This is just the situation in which Christian believers find themselves. They have a God-given answer key, but need to learn the rationale for those answers. This is what the “Faith seeking understanding” motto is all about.

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however, as it often is for us now. Rather, it will be all the more cause for wonder and worship.

<sup>36</sup> Thus, the dialogue between faith and reason is real, but it is not simply a conversation (or debate) between equals. Rather, faith and reason partner

This seems to be just the way the *Proslogion* works as well. Anselm received the name of God as a revelation from God.<sup>37</sup> This name, as we will see below, is the key to the whole proof. But if Anselm does not first *believe* the revelation he has been given, the project of seeking to *understand* that name never gets underway. Faith's absolute priority is essential to his apologetic and meditative program. Faith is the air reason breathes, the environment in which it lives and flourishes. Cut off from faith, true rationality quickly withers and dies.

None of this rules out a scrutinizing function for reason, but it does severely limit it. Reason's main role is to explain and confirm the faith. In so doing, however, the faith is supported in such a way that it becomes increasingly credible to skeptics who are willing to be "open minded," at least for the sake of the argument.

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together much the way Anselm and Boso do in *Why God Became Man*. Faith is the master teacher, reason the diligent student.

<sup>37</sup> For details, see Mackey "Anselm, Gaunilon, and the Fool," 168ff. The situation is ambiguous, but most likely Anselm received the name "That than which no greater can be thought" and proceeded to reason through to an understanding of this name, resulting in a proof for God's existence.

For Anselm, the believer need not fear reason. Reason does not put the faith at risk, as though faith and reason might be incompatible in the end.<sup>38</sup> For the believer, faith and reason are to interpenetrate one another increasingly. The distinction between them remains, but as one travels around the epistemological spiral again and again, one sees with ever increasing clarity that whatever tension there is between faith and reason is “unnatural;” that is, it is due to sin and not some defect of irrationality in the faith itself. Reason’s role is thus more of an additional witness called to the stand, rather than a judge that arrogates itself over revelation. God has given the believer two witnesses to his veracity, namely revelation and reason, and therefore “the matter must be established” (Deuteronomy 19:15).

### **NATURAL THEOLOGY IN THE ANSELMIAN WORLDVIEW**

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<sup>38</sup> It cannot be stressed too strongly that Anselm will not allow autonomous reason the freedom to revise the faith. Faithful reasoning may bring a new clarity to the faith, but autonomous reason can only destroy the faith. Thus, autonomous reason is immoral. Remember the words from *On the Incarnation of the Word*, quoted above: “Indeed, no Christian ought to question the truth of what the Catholic Church believes in its heart and confesses with its mouth.” Not even reason is allowed to question the conclusions of faith. Rather, reason is expected “to seek to discover... why [the faith] is true.” Even when reason fails to understand the faith, the faith is to be held firm. In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Boso says “I thus consider myself to hold the faith...so that, even were I unable in any way to understand what I believe, still nothing could shake my constancy...” Quoted in Mackey, “Anselm, Gaunilon, and the Fool,” 179.

A question closely related to the one just considered in the preceding subsection is that of natural theology. Is Anselm a natural theologian? Natural theology, of course, is a theology constructed by reason from the ground up, apart from the guidance of revelation.<sup>39</sup> It seems that no such project is undertaken by Anselm. In fact, it seems such a program would be considered impious by him.

Natural theology, in the nature of case, moves from understanding to faith. But this is just what Anselm says the believer must not do:

A Christian should advance through faith to understanding, not come to faith through understanding, or withdraw from faith if he cannot understand. Rather, when he is able to attain understanding, he is delighted; but when he cannot, he reveres what he is not able to grasp.<sup>40</sup>

This wholesale rejection of natural theology has obvious implications for apologetics. Reason may not seek to construct an apologetic for Christianity

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<sup>39</sup> Natural theology must be distinguished from natural revelation. The first is rejected by Anselm, but his use of Romans 1:18ff shows he accepts the second. For a thorough explanation of the differences between natural revelation and natural theology, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P & R: Phillipsburg, N. J., 1995) chapter 9 and Greg Bahnsen *Van Til: Analysis and Readings* (P & R: Phillipsburg, N. J., 1998).

that starts with natural theology. Anselm does not attempt to climb the ladder of reason as high as it will take him, only to grab hold of the ladder of faith when reason can do no more. Nor does Anselm consider autonomous reason to be independently adequate, simply needing faith to fill in gaps and supply what is lacking. For Anselm, natural theology is really natural *a*theology – or natural idolatry. Natural theology – theology that starts with reason rather than faith -- cannot lead one to God. As we proceed with our case studies, this will become more apparent.

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<sup>40</sup> From Epistle 136. Quoted in Mackey, “Anselm, Gaunilon, and the Fool,” 178.

## CASE STUDY #1: ANSELM'S PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

Anselm's two meditations on the nature and existence of God are like twin mountain peaks rising high above the rest of his corpus. *Proslogion* must be considered the higher of the two peaks since it represents his more mature thought and displays impeccable elegance, but both pieces are somewhat revolutionary. Here we see Anselm at his most Augustinian and his most original, his most traditional and his most creative.<sup>41</sup> The relationship between the two works is explained by Southern:

He had already, in his *Monologion*, succeeded in showing that God necessarily had all those qualities that are ascribed to him in Christian doctrine. But he had not shown that all of them are necessarily united in the being of God. To give a rough analogy, it was as if in his *Monologion* he had shown that a machine did all the things its inventor claimed, but he had not shown that it did them as a consequence of its nature. Or, to put it another way, he had demonstrated the necessary existence of the properties of God, but not the necessary existence of

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<sup>41</sup> *Monologion* is a self-conscious meditation on Augustine's *De Trinitate*, while *Proslogion* is more original, having come in a flash of divine illumination. Nonetheless, *Proslogion* remains Augustinian in flavor and method.

the single Being in whom these properties cohered. This is what he aimed at doing in his *Proslogion*.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, *Monologion* is concerned primarily with the qualities of God and *Proslogion* primarily with his existence, though it would be quite artificial to separate completely the *whatness* from the *thatness* of God. In the following discussion, both works will be considered but *Proslogion* will be our main focus.

#### **PUZZLING OVER *PROSLOGION*: PROOF OR CONFESSION?**

The *Proslogion* is a philosophical meditation offered to God in the form of prayer. It is a devotional contemplation on the substance of faith. In *Proslogion* 1, Anselm humbly petitions God to teach him, concluding,

I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand’ [Isa. 7:9].<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 117.

<sup>43</sup> *Proslogion* chapter 1.

Anselm's program, then, is to apply the Augustinian motto to the question of God's existence. Reason will be used to demonstrate the coherence of the faith, to clarify its content, and to show its necessity.

It is important to note that Anselm is not starting from scratch but from faith in both *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. His claim to be exercising pure reason, apart from Scripture, should not be misunderstood. Faith is the substrate on which reason works, the platform on which it rests. He begins with the conclusions of faith and shows how reason reaches them as well. Anselm's goal is to show the rationality of the faith, not prove the faith independently of faith.

But if this was Anselm's method, what exactly was he hoping to achieve? Is the *Proslogion* a full fledged apologetic aimed at unbelievers? Is it truly an ontological *argument*, as it came to be known? Or is it simply a meditative prayer to be used by believers? In short, was Anselm *confessing* his faith or *demonstrating* it?<sup>44</sup> Or was he attempting some combination of confession and demonstration?

Perhaps these questions can never be fully resolved. Perhaps there was some ambiguity even in Anselm's own mind. We can gain some insight

into the purpose of the *Proslogion* by looking back at the prologue to its prequel, *Monologion*. Anselm wrote *Monologion* in response to the request of some fellow monks. It is “on the subject of meditating upon the essence of the divine.”<sup>45</sup> *Monologion*’s original title, in fact, was *An Example of Meditation on the Meaning of Faith*. Note that *meditation* is in view, not *proof*. But when we come to *Proslogion*, we find proof and argument enter the picture and even retroactively, it seems, are thrust back upon *Monologion*:

After I had published, at the pressing entreaties of several of my brethren, a certain short tract [the *Monologion*] as an example of meditation on the meaning of faith from the point of view of one seeking through silent reasoning within himself, things he knows not – reflecting that this was made up of a connected chain of many arguments, I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself, and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists, that he is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have

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<sup>44</sup> This way of stating the issue is borrowed from Mackey, “Anselm, Gaunilon, and the Fool,” 166ff.

<sup>45</sup> *Monologion*, Prologue.

need of for their being and well-being, and also to prove whatever we believe about the Divine Being.<sup>46</sup>

Anselm now seems to have a more ambitious undertaking before him. Not only does he want to distill the *Monologion* into a single piece of reasoning, but now that piece of reasoning is to be considered an argument or proof. It seems he is no longer addressing the Christian community exclusively, but also “the Fool,” the one who denies God’s existence.<sup>47</sup> His response to

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<sup>46</sup> *Proslogion*, Preface.

<sup>47</sup> As Mackey points out, the presence of an antagonist indicates some kind of argument is being attempted. He gives a helpful description of the Fool (“Anselm, Gaunilo, and the Fool,” 175-177):

[W]e must not suppose that Anselm chose his opponent carelessly or arbitrarily. He elected to try his proof on its real enemy. That enemy is found in the Psalms, in the person of the Fool who says in his heart, There is no God. In his Scriptural setting (he appears in two nearly identical Psalms, 13 and 52) the Fool is no doubting philosopher or theoretical atheist. He is a son of Israel appalled at the vanity and wickedness of the people, offended by the apparent triumph of evil, and disheartened at Israel’s desolation by her enemies. He remembers the name of JHWH means ‘I AM THAT I AM’ in the sense: ‘I am the causer of things causes, I am the doer of what is done.’ JHWH is the one who is supposed to get things done. But the people wander blindly in sin, the barbarian wastes the land, and no one does anything. In his desperation the Fool concludes that there is no God. No one reproves the people and smites the Assyrian. JHWH is not JHWH...Anselm’s Fool is a medieval theological counterpart of his Scriptural prototype. He claims to understand what is meant by *Deus* and *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*. And yet he denies that one so described *is*. This he can do only because he is *stultus* and *insipiens*. He does not really understand what is meant by the divine

Gaunilo further reinforces the interpretation that there is more to *Proslogion* than meditation and confession; in some sense it is also an apologetic.

It is probably best, then, to conclude with Louis Mackey that both proof and confession are in view:

St. Anselm was a careful and lucid thinker who meant to be doing something that incorporated both logical argumentation and credal commitment...[T]he demonstrative and the confessional aspects of Anselm's proof are not contradictory and mutually exclusive, but rather harmonious and mutually reinforcing...[O]n Anselm's view both demonstration and confession are indispensable ingredients in any philosophical or theological program...The *Proslogium* proof is the Augustinian heritage in a nutshell. Divine illumination gives the proof whatever probative power it has, but it is faith that secures our confidence in the proof and in the Proven. Seen this way, Anselm's argument is at once both a confession of faith and a demonstration of

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name; he only knows how words like *Deus* and *id quo maius* are used in conventional grammar. The Fool of the Psalms could not perceive the workings of JHWH in Israel's history. So Anselm's Fool cannot comprehend the immanent necessity of God in the workings of his own language and thought. He thinks he can refuse to believe in God because he can form the sentence *non est deus*, just as the Fool of the

the being of God...And that is why it is not necessary to choose between an argumentative and a confessional interpretation of the *Proslogium*.<sup>48</sup>

Thus Anselm does hope to show the Fool his folly by demonstrating that God's existence is the necessary precondition of any understanding at all. But the real test of the proof, in the end, is not simply, "Does it persuade unbelievers to believe this one God? Does it draw unbelievers into the Augustinian epistemological spiral?" but also, "Does it lead believers to an ever deeper understanding of the God in whom they trust? Does it thrust believers further along the spiral?" *Proslogion* has both inward and outward facing functions to perform on behalf of the Christian community. Anselm is showing believer and unbeliever alike that Christian faith is reasonable, though he is certainly not attempting to create a rational proof *ex nihilo*.<sup>49</sup>

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Psalms thinks JHWH is false to His word merely because the Assyrian rages.

<sup>48</sup> Mackey, "Anselm, Gaunilo, and the Fool," 167, 184.

<sup>49</sup> Mackey, "Anselm, Gaunilo, and the Fool," 203:

For the parties to the controversy at least, that question [Does God exist?] was almost supernumerary to the real issue: How can faith and reason cooperate, without compromising themselves or each other, in the endeavor to make the being of God, initially accepted on faith, evident to reason?

## THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND ANSELM<sup>50</sup>

An often overlooked, but by no means tangential question that arises in examining Anselm's meditations concerns the nature of the deity he has "proven." Is the God of Anselm's *Monologion* and *Proslogion* the God of orthodox Christianity? We cannot give an easy answer to this question because Anselm's methodology requires him to suspend direct appeal to Scripture and proceed *sola ratione*. If he does arrive at a Scriptural conclusion, it will be without the help of Scriptural premises.

Nonetheless, there is good reason for assuming there is a great amount of overlap, if not total congruence, between the God of Anselm the philosopher and the God of Anselm the Christian believer. Remember, Anselm's project was not a rationalistic one; he never attempted to prove the truths of faith by neutral or autonomous reason. Rather, he sought to show the rationality of truths accepted by faith. Moreover, the fact that he frequently uses prayer as his rhetorical form of choice shows that there is no tension between what he believes on account of revelation and what he hopes to demonstrate using reason. He is speaking to – indeed worshipping -- the very

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<sup>50</sup> The clever title for this subsection is taken from Thomas V. Morris' title for chapter 1 of his work, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987).

one whose existence he is demonstrating. Finally, and most importantly, is the name of God invoked in *Proslogion*. God is “something than which nothing greater can be thought.”<sup>51</sup> But how does Anselm come to know that this is God’s name?

We know it because that is how God has revealed himself and because we believe him as he has revealed himself. But this knowing can be explained: we know it because on the basis of revelation and faith, standing before God, we know that we do not stand as any one being before any other being, but as a creature before his Creator.<sup>52</sup>

By unfolding the latent possibilities within his initial name for God, Anselm virtually reaches the revealed tetragrammaton of Exodus 3:14 by chapter 22 of *Proslogion*: “You alone then, Lord, are what You are and You are who You are.”<sup>53</sup>

## **ANSELM’S REVELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY**

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<sup>51</sup> *Proslogion* chapter 2. Southern (*Saint Anselm*, 129) claims this definition could have been inspired by Seneca or Augustine, though we will see it is ultimately an echo of the biblical name for God.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Barth *Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1960), 152.

<sup>53</sup> *Proslogion* chapter 22. See also Louis Mackey *Peregrinations of the Word* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 96ff. Mackey (99) claims this is the climatic moment in the *Proslogion*, concluding “The name of God proposed by (given to) Anselm is identical with the name entrusted to Moses.”

One more dimension to the *Proslogion* proof must be considered, namely the fact that Anselm tells us he received the proof as a gift from God himself. So far from being the achievement of his independent reason, the proof came to him in a wondrous flood of divine illumination. In other words the proof found in *Proslogion* 2-4 must be seen as the answer to Anselm's prayer for God to teach him in *Proslogion* 1. In the Preface to *Proslogion*, Anselm tells the story of how the proof came to him. He often sought a master proof that would improve upon the *Monologion*, but after continual failure, was near the point of despair. It was just in this desperate situation, as a fallen man was coming to see the bankruptcy of his spiritual condition, that the grace of God broke forth into his heart and mind:

I was about to give up what I was looking for as something impossible to find. However, when I had decided to put aside this idea altogether, lest by uselessly occupying my mind it might prevent other ideas with which I could make some progress, then, in spite of my unwillingness and resistance to it, it began to force itself upon me more and more pressingly. So it was that one day when I was quite worn out with resisting its importunacy, there came to me, in the very conflict of my

thoughts, what I had despaired of finding, so that I eagerly grasped the notion which in my distraction I had been rejecting.

Judging, then, that what had given me such joy to discover would afford pleasure, if it were written down, to anyone who might read it, I have written the following short tract dealing with this question as well as several others, from the point of view of one trying to raise his mind and contemplate God and seeking to understand what he believes.<sup>54</sup>

Anselm wants to share with others the proof that has been given him that they might enjoy the same satisfaction he has found. The proof was given to Anselm by God; in prayer he offers it back up to God, as an act of worship, but in so doing he also gives it to the whole Christian community for their enjoyment.

Understanding that the proof was given to Anselm by the grace of God furthers our understanding of his Augustinian epistemology. Like Augustine, Anselm recognizes that all truth comes from God. This is why true knowledge must begin with faith, rather than self-sufficient reason. In fact, to seek to progress from understanding to faith rather than faith to understanding is to get things precisely backwards, as the Fool shows us. Nor may faith be

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<sup>54</sup> *Proslogion*, Preface.

left behind once understanding is obtained. And the entire epistemological process is shot through with divine grace. Knowledge of the divine comes to us by grace through faith. It offers itself to us with a kind of irresistible, yet gracious, force as seen in the prayer of gratitude with which Anselm fittingly closes out *Proslogion* 4:

I give thanks, good Lord, I give thanks to You, since what I believed before through Your free gift I now understand through Your illumination, that if I did not want to *believe* that You existed I should nevertheless be unable not to *understand* it.<sup>55</sup>

At the root of *Proslogion*, then, is biblical faith.<sup>56</sup> The project is a joyful success for Anselm only because he has come to a deeper understanding of the God he already believed in apart from understanding.

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<sup>55</sup> *Proslogion*, chapter 4.

<sup>56</sup> Thus, Southern (*Saint Anselm*, 134-5) is incorrect in asserting that Anselm's proof only requires a generic philosophical faith, rather than specifically Christian faith.

## **CASE STUDY #2: ANSELM, ROSCELIN, AND THE TRINITY**

Anselm's *Monologion* and *Proslogion* were written from the comfort of the monastery and for other monks, primarily. The foolish enemy Anselm chose to engage was real, but did not pose any actual threat to the church. When we come to Anselm's next great work, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, circumstances are quite different. Now, Anselm must not only defend the faith against a true heretic, Roscelin, he must defend his own orthodoxy against charges that he has become anti-Trinitarian. In this public forum, we see Anselm work out the Augustinian slogan with more fervor than ever before.<sup>57</sup> No longer are we in the world of quasi-apologetics, as with the meditations on the divine being; now Anselm goes head to head with a pernicious and dangerous flesh and blood opponent of the faith.

### **THE CHALLENGE OF ROSCELIN**

We know very little about Roscelin. We do know he was an itinerant teacher at various secular and cathedral schools. We also know he sought to rigorously apply logic to the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately for Roscelin's career, this led to an obviously heretical denial of the traditional Christian view of the Trinity. Unfortunately for Anselm, Roscelin claimed

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<sup>57</sup> More historical background may be found in Southern, *Saint Anselm*, ch. 8.

Anselm for support of his novel teachings. This led to a bitter dispute, with Anselm's side of the matter encapsulated in his *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

Roscelin's attack on the Trinity assumes that God must be either one or three, but he cannot be both (as in the orthodox doctrine). In other words, God must be crammed into either a realist mold (emphasizing God's unity and oneness, resulting in modalism) or a nominalist mold (emphasizing the particularity of the persons, resulting in polytheism), but cannot transcend these categories because they alone are rational, i.e., comprehensible. Of course, Roscelin, as a nominalist, claims only particulars are real and so either there is one God (with no individual distinctions between persons in the Godhead, implying that the Father became incarnate), or there are three Gods.

For Anselm, there is actually great irony in this: Roscelin's insistence on understanding as a precondition of belief actually makes understanding impossible. According to Anselm, when Roscelin rejects the mystery of the Trinity, "he does so because he does not know what he is talking about." He lacks understanding precisely because he lacks the humble stance of faith that must characterize Christians.

## **THE TRINITY AND ANSELM'S APOLOGETIC**

Anselm's apologetic may seem rather naïve almost a thousand years later. Certainly if Anselm wrote in our day, his apologetic would take a quite different shape. But we must not forget Anselm's historical context. His situatedness requires us to understand his project in a certain way. He is a Christian believer, seeking to be faithful to his baptismal pledge, while reasoning through the Triune nature of God. This reflection is intended, among other things, to demonstrate the non-irrationality of the Trinity to Christianity's cultured despisers. Faith in the Trinity does not crucify reason. But Anselm goes even further, seeking to show that those who reject Christianity do so irrationally, with no firm basis.

How does Anselm do this? What is his apologetic method? Anselm answers the fool according to his folly.<sup>58</sup> He seeks to show that the alternative to the Trinity contemplated by his opponent Roscelin, namely nominalism, is simply not a rational option. If Anselm can show that the unbeliever's commitment to nominalism is unfounded and leads to all kinds of absurdities, he will have been successful. His apologetic is not so much a direct defense of orthodoxy as it is going on the offensive to show that non-Trinitarian

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<sup>58</sup> Compare Proverbs 26:5: "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (NKJV).

thinking is at odds with basic human experience; in fact, it reduces to non-sense.<sup>59</sup>

For our purposes it is not necessary to look at all the details of Anselm's argument in *On the Incarnation of the Word*. Anselm brilliantly and carefully navigates between various sub-Christian heresies, demonstrating that the oneness of God does not rule out personal distinctions within the Godhead, nor does the particularity of the persons lead to tri-theism. He is especially concerned to show (against Roscelin) that the Son alone is incarnate, and yet this does not preclude unity between the Son and the other members of the Godhead. He even gives a plausible rationale as to why the Son is incarnate rather than another person of the Godhead. But the core of Anselm's apologetic is to show that Roscelin's attempts at reworking Christian doctrine actually cause more problems than they solve.<sup>60</sup> In fact,

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<sup>59</sup> Thus Anselm's apologetic may be considered "indirect" in its method. See Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: P & R, 1955). I believe this explains why Anselm says he will not appeal directly to Scripture (or other evidence) in defending Scriptural doctrine. In his debate with Roscelin, his point is not so much to prove his own position as it is to refute opposing positions by showing they reduce to absurdity. If anything, the Trinitarian position is established from the impossibility of anything contrary to it. What is meant by this will be established a little further on in this paper.

<sup>60</sup> See chapter 7 of *On the Incarnation of the Word* in particular.

radical nominalism destroys not only Christian orthodoxy, but the intelligibility of all human experience:

All men are to be warned to approach questions concerning the Sacred Page with utmost care. Nevertheless, in particular, those dialecticians of our day (or rather, heretics of dialectic) who think that universal substances are only vocal sounds and who cannot comprehend that a color is something distinct from the material object or that a man's wisdom is something distinct from his soul, ought to be blown right out of the discussion of spiritual questions. Indeed, in the souls of these dialecticians, reason – which ought to be the ruler and judge of all that is in man – is so covered with corporeal images that it cannot extricate itself from them and cannot distinguish itself from those things which it ought to contemplate purely and in isolation. For example, how will someone who does not yet understand how several men are one man in species be able to comprehend how in that highest and most mysterious Nature several persons – each of whom, distinctly, is perfect God – are one God? And how will someone whose mind is too darkened to distinguish between his horse and its color be able to distinguish between the one God and His several

relations? Finally, someone who cannot understand a human being to be anything except an individual shall not at all understand a human being to be anything except a human person, for every individual man is a person. How, then, shall he be able to understand that humanity, though not a person, was assumed by the Word? That is, another nature, but not another person, was assumed.<sup>61</sup>

Anselm's point is that the radical anti-Trinitarian nominalism of Roscelin not only destroys Christian orthodoxy, but destroys all predication. Not only is Roscelin confused about God, he is confused about the whole of human experience.<sup>62</sup> How, then, can we trust him to explicate the nature of God when he cannot even explicate the simplest facets of human experience?<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 1.

<sup>62</sup> Consistent nominalism holds that only particulars or individuals exist. But if everything is unique and there is no unity or shared features among aspects of reality, then knowledge becomes impossible. "All is sound and fury, signifying nothing." Historically, while the shift to nominalism from realism during the Medieval period had many beneficial effects, eventually it led to skepticism, such as that found in David Hume. See Richard Weaver, *Ideas have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>63</sup> To say that nominalism leads to absurdities as well as heresies is not to say that realism is the Christian position. While Anselm is often categorized a realist, I am not fully convinced this best expresses his position (though obviously there are realist influences on his thought). Realism, taken to extremes, runs into absurdities and heretical conclusions, which are no better than the results of nominalism. While Anselm is clearly aware of the so-called "scandal of particularity" in his discussion of the incarnation, he does

## **FAITH FINDING UNDERSTANDING: THE ONE AND THE MANY**

Using the Trinity as a test case for Anselm's apologetic can be richly rewarding for the Christian. Implicit in Anselm's work is a gold mine of apologetic arguments. Ultimately, only the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can account for the unity and diversity of our experience. Only on the presupposition of the Triune character of God can we solve the one and the many problem, which has plagued philosophy since the days of the pre-Socratics. Only a Trinitarian scheme brings together facts (particulars) and

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not deny the particularities involved. He carefully distinguishes logical necessities and metaphysical necessities from historical contingencies. (See Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, 136-150). In his discussions of the Trinity, he clearly does not deny particularity either. For example, the Son alone became incarnate, not the whole Godhead. The individualities of the Father, Son, and Spirit are carefully preserved. Thus, Anselm has used Christian faith as a springboard for developing a Christian philosophy. Rather than trying to fit God into a pre-conceived scheme of universals or particulars, we must see that the Trinity transcends (and I would claim resolves) the realism-nominalism debate. In the Godhead, unity (oneness) and diversity (threeness) are equally ultimate. While Anselm does not state this explicitly, and while he can at times appear to focus too much on unity or oneness (due to the fact that he is answering nominalists, no doubt), at his best he preserves this equal ultimacy within God's being. God is our "concrete universal," so to speak. Thus Anselm is able to avoid the pitfalls of nominalism and realism with a thorough-going Trinitarianism. This is not to say all mystery has been removed, rather the mystery of universals and particulars has been made part of a deeper mystery, namely the mystery of the Triune being of God. Whatever other problems remain, the Christian must insist that both universals and particulars exist and neither is more basic than the other. See Frederick

laws (universals) in a meaningful way. Only the Trinity gives us a way of preserving unity in the midst of diversity, and vice versa. This is because the nature of things is grounded in the nature of God. The world and the Word of God are perfectly consistent. Because God exists as a Trinity, in which unity and plurality are equally ultimate, the world he has created reflects this.

Neither unity nor particularity is more fundamental than the other.

Ultimately, the nominalism-realism debate is based on a false dichotomy!

Anselm, by adhering to biblical teaching, as mediated by the church's creeds, has shown us the way not only to a proper understanding of God, but also to a proper understanding of the fullness of human experience. Faith does indeed lead to understanding. Ultimately, the doctrine of the Trinity is not so much a problem to be solved, but rather is itself the solution to one of the most perplexing philosophical problems of all.<sup>64</sup>

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Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, volume 2 (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 142.

<sup>64</sup> For a thorough working out of the Trinity as a philosophical answer to the problem of the one and the many, see Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, chapter 2. For cultural and social applications of the doctrine of the Trinity, as well problems stemming from non-Trinitarian thought, see R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978). For a philosophical application of the doctrine of the Trinity to contemporary intellectual issues, see Vern Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 57 (1995): 187-219.

### **CASE STUDY #3: ANSELM'S CHRISTOLOGY**

In approaching Anselm's Christology, we can be much briefer. We have already touched on his approach to the incarnation in the previous section on the Trinity and we need to only take a quick glance at his argument for the necessity of the atonement to see how his Augustinian epistemology is foundational. The advance of this section will be to bring into the discussion his view of order, or fittingness, and examine its implications for his worldview as a whole. This will lead us into a discussion of Anselmian aesthetics and a brief excursus on his literary style.

#### **THE FITTINGNESS OF THE INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT**

In challenging Roscelin's heretical view of the Trinity, Anselm undertakes the task of showing that only one person of the Trinity could become incarnate and that person had to be the Son. Otherwise, there would be two Sons in the Trinity and this would be "inappropriate."<sup>65</sup> In fact, Anselm's entire argument in *On the Incarnation of the Word* is driven by a concern for propriety, or fittingness, and for Anselm, fittingness is determined by the nature of God. As Southern says, "The principle that God did whatever

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<sup>65</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 10.

was most ‘fitting’ became one of the hall-marks of the Anselmian school.”<sup>66</sup>

But what is fittingness?

Anselm’s *Why God Became Man* is his fullest exposition of this theme. For Anselm, that which is fitting is broader than that which is rational, but certainly fittingness includes a kind of logical necessity. This does not make Anselm a rationalist; rather, reason is used to show “that there is not, and cannot be, the slightest deficiency or imbalance either in God’s nature, or in God’s creation.”<sup>67</sup> That is to say, God’s nature is rational, and that rationality is reflected in God’s creation; and, of course, the apex of creation’s rationality is found the use of pious reason seeking to understand the revealed faith. God’s rationality means that nothing is superfluous, that the best means are always chosen to accomplish the best ends, that there is a “logic of the truth”<sup>68</sup> that the church believes. When Anselm seeks to prove the necessity of the atonement, he proceeds by “unavoidable logical steps” to show there is “no rational objection to our faith.”<sup>69</sup> One by one, Anselm shows the fittingness of key Christian doctrines, such as the incarnation, the virgin birth,

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<sup>66</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 181.

<sup>67</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 180-1.

<sup>68</sup> *Why God Became Man*, Commendation to Pope Urban II.

<sup>69</sup> *Why God Became Man*, Preface, chapter 8.

the atonement, the number of the elect, and so forth.<sup>70</sup> God's work of redemption is fitting because it accomplishes his original purpose for the creation; to leave the world marred and disordered by sin would be inappropriate. Just one brief interchange between Boso and Anselm is enough to show Anselm's program:

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<sup>70</sup> This is not to say Anselm always succeeded, as Southern (*Saint Anselm*, 201-2) explains:

Anselm is often blamed by his later critics for attempting to show that the incarnation was *necessary*. The traditional Christian view was that God could have chosen other methods, but he chose this because he willed it. This might suffice as an explanation for Christians; but it was clearly inadequate as an answer to the Jewish complaint that the chosen method was an unnecessary outrage to the dignity of God. Moreover, it was not an answer that could satisfy Anselm's own requirement that all God's actions should preserve the order of the universe and the dignity of God. In seeking a proof of the necessity of the Incarnation, therefore, Anselm was seeking to satisfy both his own criterion of 'fittingness' and the requirements of unbelievers against whom the argument was directed.

Of course, Anselm is not seeking to satisfy the autonomous requirements of unbelievers, only show that their objections to Christian faith are not rational. Whether or not some of Anselm's later interpreters were correct (as Southern implies) that Anselm taught the *absolute* necessity of the incarnation and atonement, is debatable. A biblical basis for Anselm's requirement of fittingness in his Christology is found in Hebrews 2:10: "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." Note the writer of Hebrews seems to consider both the incarnation and the atonement to have been "fitting."

B. There is just one thing that does not seem to be fitting for such a Father with regard to such a Son – the fact that God allows him to be treated in this way, even if it is with his consent.

A. On the contrary, it is most fitting that such a Father should agree with such a Son, if he has a desire which is praiseworthy in being conducive to the honor of God and useful in being aimed at the salvation of mankind, something which could not come about in any other way.

B. We are still involved in the question of how that death can be shown in accordance with reason, and necessary. For certainly, if it is not, it seems that the Son ought not to have wished it, nor the Father to have made it obligatory or permitted it. For the question is: Why God could not save mankind in any other way. Now it seems unfitting for God to have saved mankind in that way, and it is not self-evident how that death to which you refer is an effective means of saving mankind. For it is a surprising supposition that God takes delight in, or is in need of, the blood of an innocent man, so as to be unwilling or unable to spare the guilty except in the event that the innocent has been killed.

A. Since in the enquiry you are taking on the guise of the people who are unwilling to believe anything without a prior demonstration of its logicality, I wish to come to an agreement with you: that no inappropriateness where God is concerned – not even the smallest – shall be accepted by us, and that no logical consideration – not even the smallest – shall be rejected by us unless a more important logical consideration conflicts with it. For just as, in the case of God, what follows from any inappropriateness – however small – is impossibility, correspondingly what follows from a small logical consideration, if it is not defeated by a larger one, is inevitability.<sup>71</sup>

Here we see the interplay of appropriateness with rationality, both of which are the standard by which the argument will be measured and both of which are rooted in the nature of God. The “necessary reasons” Anselm gives for Christian doctrine do not make faith and revelation unnecessary, but show that faith and revelation are “irrationally” rejected by unbelievers.

### **THE AESTHETICS OF ANSELM’S WORLDVIEW**

Rationality is not the only dimension to fittingness. For Anselm, fittingness also has an aesthetic aspect: “[E]verything that God does follows a

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<sup>71</sup> *Why God Became Man*, chapter 10.

perfect order that is not only perfect in its rationality but also supremely beautiful.”<sup>72</sup> Beauty, in fact, becomes a key concept in Anselm’s Christology, particularly in *Why God Became Man*. Anselm tells Boso they are not only discussing “beautiful subject matter” but that it is “correspondingly beautiful in its logic.”<sup>73</sup> The purpose of redemption is to restore and enhance the creation’s original beauty, and to do so through fitting means.

Beauty functions at many levels in Anselm’s work. For Anselm, God is beautiful, and this requires a beautifully ordered universe. Because sin has brought disharmony and ugliness into the world, God’s work of redemption through Christ must restore order. But beauty is also operative in Anselm’s literary style. In other words, Anselm’s beautiful content (meditations on and discussions of Christian doctrine and the Christian God) requires a beauty in style; form and content must match one another so that the medium *is* the message, so to speak. Anselm’s literary achievement, therefore, must not be overlooked. Just as nothing is superfluous in God’s nature or doings, so there is nothing superfluous in Anselm’s writings.

[H]owever extreme his statements, he never says more than he means, and he never means more than his argument requires... To give the

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<sup>72</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 181.

balance of the universe as perfect an expression as human words permit, required a corresponding balance in the prose which sought to represent it. He who would write about these supreme realities has an obligation to express them as fully as language allows.<sup>74</sup>

There is a clarity in Anselm's writings, a rationale for every step in his arguments, an order that puts everything in its logical and fitting place, and, given the subject matter, this is how it must be.

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<sup>73</sup> *Why God Became Man*, chapter 1. See also Preface.

<sup>74</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 218, 76. Southern, 73ff, explores Anselm's literary style quite comprehensively.

## **EVALUATING ANSELM'S INTELLECTUAL ACHEIVEMENT AS A CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST**

As we turn from a description of Anselm's thought to an evaluation of his work, our task will be to home in on his apologetic methodology, for here we see the grand and enduring achievement of Anselm. After a look at his basic approach to apologetics and his nascent presuppositionalism (much of which will recover ground already trod in our more general discussion of faith and reason), we will draw the various strands of Anselm's worldview together to show he has a marvelously powerful apologetic methodology. However, this apologetic approach has often been misdescribed and misunderstood by philosophers and theologians alike.

### **ANSELM'S APOLOGETIC**

It may seem at times that Anselm has rejected the possibility – or even the need -- of the Christian doing apologetics. Anselm writes to Pope Urban II that “the strength of the Christian faith needs [not] the assistance of my defense.” Argumentation cannot strengthen the Christian case because it is already rock solid. Trying to defend Christian theology is like trying to add supports to Mount Olympus, lest it collapse.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as indicated above,

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<sup>75</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 1.

Anselm did not believe Roscelin should be given a defense of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, nor be allowed to give his own defense of his novel doctrine. But as we have already seen more than once, this is not the total picture. Thus, Anselm goes on to say,

For our faith ought to be rationally defended against the impious, but not against those who admit that they delight in the honor of the name ‘Christian’ ...[to the non-Christian impious] it must be shown how irrationally they despise us.<sup>76</sup>

Roscelin is not given an apologetic because he is a hypocrite. He is being unfaithful to his baptismal pledge. He should know better than to call into question well-established Christian doctrines even while claiming to be a Christian. To do so is subversive and dishonest. To defend the faith before Roscelin would be, presumably, casting pearls before swine.

But Anselm clearly does believe there is a significant, albeit limited, role for Christian apologetics to play in answering unbelievers. In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Anselm offers just such a proof. Rather than appealing directly to Scripture (or the church’s teaching), he seeks to show the unbeliever has no ground to stand on in rejecting Christian faith:

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<sup>76</sup> *Letters*, 5.

We should not reply to this man by reference to the authority of Sacred Scripture, because either he does not believe Scripture or else he interprets it in a perverse sense...Therefore, his error must be demonstrated by reference to the reasoning by which he tries to defend himself.<sup>77</sup>

In setting aside explicit appeal to Scripture, Anselm does not give up his distinctively Christian presuppositions. He is not seeking to use only assumptions his opponent will accept nor is he seeking out some sort of “neutral territory” on which to do battle. He still begins with the certainty that the Triune God of Scripture exists. He is still founding understanding on faith. In other words, Anselm never lets go of the primacy of faith in all of his reasoning, even apologetical reasoning.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, chapter 2.

<sup>78</sup> This is clearly seen in *Proslogion*, which, as we have seen is largely written in the form of a prayer to God and seems to be a meditative reflection on God’s nature as much as an apologetic for God’s existence. Yet Anselm explains the purpose of *Proslogion* in very apologetic terms in chapter 6 of *On the Incarnation of the Word*:

I wrote [*Proslogion*] especially in order [to show] that what we hold by faith regarding the divine nature and its persons – excluding the topic of the incarnation – can be proven by compelling reasons apart from [appeal to] the authority of Scripture...And I advanced these points (1) in order to defend our faith against those who, while unwilling to believe what they do not understand, deride those who do

But what does this mean? On the one hand, Anselm seems resolute in presupposing the faith he is seeking to prove. On the other hand, he seeks to prove the cogency of this faith apart from Scripture. How can we put all this together in a complete package?<sup>79</sup> The key is to remember that for Anselm there is no ultimate dichotomy between faith and the right use of reason. If there were such a dichotomy (an “ugly ditch,” so to speak), faith would never lead to understanding, but always away from it. Faith and understanding are compatible in the worldview of Anselm because both have their source in God. The same God that speaks in Scripture created the world and thus the two sources of revelation (nature and Scripture) form one harmonious whole from which we may learn about God. In other words, faith is grounded in Scripture, but also in the nature of things (as right reason can discover) because both are from God. To set reason against faith would ultimately be a

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believe, and (2) in order to assist the devout striving of those who humbly seek to understand what they most steadfastly believe.

I believe this combination of inward and outward facing apologetics also characterizes *On the Incarnation of the Word*, though it is obviously more polemical in tone.

<sup>79</sup> See Mackey, “Anselm, Gaunilo, and the Fool,” 179f, for an exposition of a similar dilemma.

denial of God the Creator. The nature of the world would no longer be grounded in the nature of God.<sup>80</sup>

### **A PRESUPPOSITIONALISM OF THE HEART<sup>81</sup>**

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<sup>80</sup> None of this should be taken to imply that reason can find all revealed truths out on its own, apart from revelation. Scriptural revelation certainly goes beyond nature in what it reveals, but there is no discrepancy between the two. A natural theology, worked up independently of Scripture, is not in view here, as shown earlier. Anselm (and I believe the Augustinian tradition in general) takes Scripture as a guide in interpreting the world. Human autonomy is forbidden not just in theology but in philosophy as well.

<sup>81</sup> This label comes from John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1994). Frame's book is a helpful introduction to the debate between Christian evidentialists and Christian presuppositionalists. Frame (88) gives a helpful summary of presuppositionalism:

(1) a clear-headed understanding of where our loyalties lie and how these loyalties affect our epistemology, (2) a determination above all to present the full teaching of Scripture in our apologetic without compromise, in its full winsomeness and its full offensiveness, (3) especially a determination to present God as fully sovereign, as the source of all meaning, intelligibility, and rationality, as the ultimate authority for all human thought, and (4) an understanding of the unbeliever's knowledge of God and rebellion against God, particularly (though not exclusively) as it affects his thinking.

Anselm meets criteria (1) and (2) in the opening paragraphs of *On the Incarnation of the Word*, where he forthrightly states his loyalty to the faith he received in his baptism and his commitment to defending it in an appropriate fashion. Criterion (3) is met by Anselm's definition of God in *Proslogion*. If God is not the source of all intelligibility and man's final authority, a still greater being can be conceived. Criterion (4) is met in all of Anselm's apologetic writings, and is especially seen in the epithet "Fool" given to his opponent in *Proslogion*.

Before looking specifically at Anselm's apologetic achievement, it might be helpful to summarize an Anselmian approach to faith and reason as it relates specifically to the apologetic enterprise. How can we crystallize Anselm's theological philosophy? Or his philosophical theology?

We have already seen that Anselm renounces intellectual self-sufficiency and requires humility. For man to attain understanding, he must have a pure and child-like faith – specifically, faith in God. Anselm allows for no neutrality. Intellectual questions have an inescapable pistic/moral component.

This makes Anselm something of a “Christian presuppositionalist.” The Christian is never to set aside his faith commitment to God even as he does philosophy and apologetics. He does not bracket out of view the doctrines he holds to by faith. Rather than first requiring God to submit to his autonomous intellectual criteria, Anselm submits to God from the outset. He reasons on a platform of faith, expecting God to grant understanding as the reward of faith. Because God is the Creator of man's reason, reason must learn its proper function and limits from God's revelation. Even when Anselm does not appeal explicitly to Scripture, he is not seeking to be free from Scriptural authority. While he does seek to give reasons that are

“independent” of Scriptural exegesis narrowly considered, he is not setting aside his Christian assumptions.<sup>82</sup>

In relating faith to reason as he does, Anselm is able to steer clear of many of the pitfalls that have trapped various Christian apologists and non-Christian thinkers through the ages. He avoids an irrational view of faith such as that of Tertullian (“I believe because it is absurd”) and Nietzsche (“Faith’ means not wanting to know what is true”). But he also avoids the rationalism of the Kantian liberals (“Religion within the bounds of reason alone”). Anselm gives us a genuinely unique and thoroughly Christian approach to matters of epistemology. Theology and philosophy, faith and reason, work hand in hand and contribute to the apologetic enterprise, each in its own way. Confession of the faith and demonstration of the faith

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<sup>82</sup> Because this may not be immediately obvious to all, and may even be controversial with some, consider the form of Anselm’s ontological argument as an example. There is no explicit appeal to Scripture, no proof-texting. Anselm simply appeals to the idea of God as the perfect being. But whose idea of God does Anselm have in mind? Who decides what divine perfections are? I would contend that only if Anselm’s argument is broadly presuppositional (assuming the Christian definition of God and his perfections, which, as we have seen, is hinted at in *Proslogion* anyway) is the argument workable. For example, on Buddhist principles, the argument self-destructs since the perfection of Nirvana is thought of as a kind of nothingness. Furthermore, the fact that Anselm formulates the argument in the context of prayer indicates he is presupposing God right along. In his

interpenetrate one another; as reason unpacks what is confessed, its internal rationale becomes clear. In a post-Cartesian world, Anselm's approach no doubt seems hopelessly authoritarian to many, but perhaps it is time he received a new hearing.<sup>83</sup>

It is critical to see that the motto "Faith seeking understanding" plays a dual role for Anselm. It summarizes both his process of attaining knowledge as well as his theoretical approach to epistemology, which in turn gives

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apologetic, as in all his thinking, faith is the basis of understanding, not its end result. He is not so much doubting God's existence as meditating on it.

<sup>83</sup> Consider one popular form of argumentation against a Christian appeal to the authority of God. Anthony Flew, in *God and Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1957), 15, 17, writes:

An appeal to authority here cannot be allowed to be final and overriding. For what is in question precisely is the status and authority of all religious authorities...[It is] inherently impossible for either faith or authority to serve as themselves the ultimate credentials of revelation.

Of course pitting Flew and Anselm against one another is hardly fair because of the centuries that separate them, but it should be possible, knowing what we do of the contours of Anselm's thought, to sketch how he would begin to answer Flew. The rough shape of his response would certainly point out that Flew has determined in advance that God cannot be God. He has already settled the question, *a priori*, that God cannot be the ultimate authority. Moreover, Flew locates the ultimate authority in himself. Scripture's credentials are not self-establishing; rather, Flew submits Scripture to whatever tests the inquirer sets up. But why should man's autonomy be self-validating? Flew has not avoided the problem of an appeal to authority. Instead he has replaced God's authority with the authority of his own mind. After pointing out these things, Anselm might then go on to use arguments

direction to his apologetic. We have already seen the process at work:

According to Anselm, one believes Christian truth, leading to an experience of God, resulting in genuine understanding. The understanding attained allows one to demonstrate the inner logic of the truth confessed. From a theoretical point of view, reason is founded on faith and functions in submission to what is received by faith.

### **THE POWER OF THE ANSELMIAN APOLOGETIC**

How does Anselm fare as a Christian apologist? Does he actually defeat the Fool? Does he turn away the challenge of Roscelin? Anselm clearly believes non-Christians irrationally reject the faith of the church. But has he truly demonstrated this?

The Fool of the *Proslogion* is shown to be foolish because at the most basic level of linguistic analysis, his rejection of God involves him in blatant contradiction. Reflect on the way in which the argument works: Anselm defines “God” as that “than which nothing greater can be thought.”<sup>84</sup> If we take the unbeliever’s statement “God does not exist” and plug in Anselm’s definition of God in place of the word “God,” we find the Fool’s subject and

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such as his *Proslogion* proof or some other analytic-transcendental type of argument, as will be discussed in the next subsection.

<sup>84</sup> *Proslogion*, chapter 2.

predicate contradict one another: “That than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist.” But “that than which nothing greater can be thought” *must* necessarily exist because it is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in the mind. The Fool has claimed that the greatest of all *beings* has no *being*! How absurd!

Anselm has offered an all or nothing proof, as Southern points out: If God exists, there must be a level of existence at which it is impossible to think of God as not existing. But at what level can this impossibility be made to appear? Must demonstration await the experience of the Beatific Vision? Or can it, at the very opposite extreme, be made out at the level of linguistic-logical analysis? The latter is what Anselm claimed for it.<sup>85</sup>

To follow Kant in labeling this an ontological proof is to miss the point.<sup>86</sup> It is an *analytic* proof at the most fundamental level of human experience and language. The Fool is a fool because he does not know how to use the most basic words and grammar.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 135-136.

<sup>86</sup> In fairness to Kant, it should be remembered that he had the Cartesian, rather than the Anselmian, version of this argument in view.

<sup>87</sup> Mackey explains (“Anselm, Gaunilo, the Fool,” 177):

But Anselm has given us more than analytic proof for God's existence. In a sense, he has offered us a transcendental proof, the strongest kind of proof possible.<sup>88</sup> According to Anselm's proof, the statement "God does not exist" is not simply a false statement. Consider these two examples of indicative statements, representing two types of propositions:

[A] This statement is in Portuguese.

[B] This statement is false.

Statement [A] is false because the statement is in English, not Portuguese. But sentence [B] defies the categories of truth and falsity; it is simply nonsense and refutes itself. It is a combination of words that appears to have a

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The Fool of the Psalms could not perceive the workings of YHWH in Israel's history. So Anselm's Fool cannot comprehend the immanent necessity of God in the workings of his own language and thought...Anselm's Fool is misled by linguistic appearances. He thinks that because he can say *non est deus* it is possible to mean it. He does not perceive the deeper sense of his own language: that *Deus* and *est* really say the same thing, so that his very words rightly understood would lead him to acknowledge the divine being.

<sup>88</sup> Of course, Kant is the most famous champion of transcendental argumentation in the history of philosophy, but transcendental arguments been used by a variety of philosophers. The main feature of a transcendental argument is that it argues from the impossibility of the contrary. Transcendental arguments seek to establish the preconditions of intelligible human experience.

coherent meaning, but really does not. Anselm's argument is that the atheist's statement "God does not exist" is just this kind of self-destructive statement.<sup>89</sup>

Mackey brings out the transcendental nature of Anselm's argument: Anselm's purpose in the *Proslogion* proof is to show the Fool that God's existence is a necessary condition of both faith and understanding. God must exist in order to be the object of faith, and He must exist to be the source and norm of understanding. Indeed His existence is a condition of the Fool's denial, if that denial is to be meaningful at all.<sup>90</sup>

Because the Fool's denial of God's existence presupposes God's existence, God's existence has been necessarily demonstrated. In other words, the Fool's assertion "There is no God" is like a debater's assertion "There is no air." The debater is relying on air even as he denies it. Similarly, the Fool is dependent upon God's existence for his language to have intelligibility even as he rejects God. He is sawing off the branch he is sitting on.

Turning to Roscelin, we have already seen how his unbelieving nominalism leads him to absurdity. Here it will be enough simply to show

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<sup>89</sup> Such sentences are sometimes called autophagic, i. e., self-eating.

<sup>90</sup> Mackey, "Anselm, Gaunilo, and the Fool," 178.

that Anselm has once again invoked a kind of transcendental argument against his non-Christian opponent.

Anselm claims that Roscelin's denial of the equal ultimacy of the one and the many in the Godhead reduces human experience to absurdity. Intelligible human experience relies on just the kind of unity-in-diversity that is found in the orthodox doctrine. Because the nature of things in the world reflects the nature of God, its Creator, neither the absolute diversity of nominalism nor the blank oneness of realism is sustainable. As Anselm claims in *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Roscelin cannot distinguish between his horse and its color. If his nominalism is pushed to its extreme, but seemingly logical conclusion, he has no categories or classes, only particulars, so experience must be a whirlwind of confusion. Once again, Anselm has shown no mercy to his opponent: Roscelin's position is not just false, but self-refuting non-sense. The doctrine of the Trinity, right along with the doctrine of God's objective existence, serves as the pre-condition of intelligible human experience.

### **THE BEST PROOF OF ALL: THE JOY OF BELIEVING**

A study of Anselm's apologetic would be incomplete if it did not include the greatest of all testimonies that Anselm offered in defense of the

faith, namely, the joy that comes from believing. For Anselm, God is not only the precondition of faith and understanding, but also of joy. This joy is crucial to Anselm's whole apologetic enterprise because his arguments, however strong they may appear to a believer, are not likely to persuade unbelievers to worship God.<sup>91</sup> But the joy of faithful understanding just might.

Eadmer describes for us Anselm's joy when the argument of *Proslogion* came to him after long searching: "Then suddenly one night during Matins, the grace of God shone on his heart, the whole matter became clear to his mind, and a great joy and jubilation filled his inmost being."<sup>92</sup> Anselm also closes *Proslogion* with a prayer of thanks for the fullness of joy discovered in God himself.<sup>93</sup> This joy is specifically the joy that comes from God's gift in granting understanding of one's faith.

So faith's pursuit of understanding is also a pursuit of joy. It is important to note once again that reason adds nothing to faith in and of itself. The function of reason is to bring clarity to the things believed. But with this clarity comes a deep and profound joy, for we are brought closer to the Beatific Vision, when faith will finally give way to sight and all will be

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<sup>91</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 136.

<sup>92</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm*, 128.

<sup>93</sup> *Proslogion* chapter 26.

eternal bliss. The experience of God attained when faith has found understanding is one of unmatched and unmatchable joy.

## **CONGRUENCE AS A MASTER THEME IN ANSELM**

We have now seen Anselm's reworking and outworking of the Augustinian motto "faith seeking understanding" in numerous philosophical, theological, and apologetical contexts. Anselm pursued this program with consistency and clarity throughout his career. His total corpus embodies an amazing coherence. For Anselm, the faith into which he had been baptized was already guaranteed; his quest was to come to an understanding of the inheritance he had received. The final end of that quest was joy unspeakable.

For Anselm every doctrine of faith has its place in the system of revealed religion as a whole, whether or not we can come to grasp it. By divine grace, the faithful seeker of understanding is rewarded with some measure of joyful insight into the logic of God's truth. The gap between what we believe and what we understand is not due to some irrationality in Christian teaching, but the limitations imposed upon us by creaturehood and sin. Ultimately, then, for Anselm, faith and reason are totally congruous; it is sin that makes things incongruous. Since faith and reason both have a common source, God, they cannot be in conflict. The conclusions of faith and reason must be identical.

But this theme of congruity reaches beyond faith and reason, to pervade every aspect of Anselm's Christian worldview. "Faith seeking understanding" has a corollary, namely, fittingness. Fittingness means nothing is arbitrary. Every Christian doctrine has its rationale in the nature of things; things are what they are in the nature of the case. But, of course, the nature of things is determined by the nature of God, and thus we have circled back to where we began. God's own inner rationality is the source of fittingness within the created order and within his plan of redemption. Sin, which brings disorder and chaos into the creation, is driven out by the incarnation and atonement, so that God's fitting purpose for the creation may be finally accomplished. For Anselm, as for the Apostle Paul, all things are of God, through God, and to God.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, fittingness also means every Christian doctrine has not just an inner rationality but an inner beauty, an inner harmony. This beauty is rooted in God's own beautiful nature<sup>95</sup> and is embodied in Anselm's literary style. Anselm's elegance is not mere adornment; it is not superfluous. The beauty of the truths he is discussing and defending requires this kind of aesthetic treatment. In short, there is a beautiful congruence between God (or

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<sup>94</sup> Compare Romans 11:36.

God's nature), the works he has done, and the doctrine he has revealed. This beauty is then crystallized in Anselm's way of discussing those works and expressing that doctrine. All is enfolded by the divine beauty and Anselm's beautiful prose gives us a glimpse of this.

All this is to say that congruence is a kind of master theme in Anselm. Everything fits together in his worldview because God has wondrously put everything in its proper place. Anselm's task is to draw out this congruence between reason and faith, nature and God, creation and redemption. Anselm the monk is congruous with Anselm the philosopher. Anselm the faithful theologian is congruous with Anselm the rational apologist. For Anselm, prayer and proof, mysticism and rationality do not – and indeed cannot – be in conflict. What gives Anselm's worldview such coherence is not simply the compatibility of faith and reason, but the congruence of everything God has made and done with everything God has revealed. Ultimately this congruence extends to God himself with his world as a whole. The incarnation, then, is the final proof of fittingness: God “fits” into his world in the person of the Logos made flesh, that is, Jesus Christ. Here is the final rationale, the final proof for the faith of Anselm. Anselm's project was to call us to faith in this

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<sup>95</sup> Compare Psalm 27:4.

Logos as the one who gives rationality and beauty to all things. What could be more logical?

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