

Testing Faith: Thoughts for Saint Anselm's Day

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On the feast of Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Professor Jack Mahoney SJ assesses the lasting contribution to Christian thought of this eleventh century monk, and also notes some limitations we might yet need to overcome.

The feast of Saint Anselm on 21st April provides an appropriate occasion to offer reflections on his thought, especially reflections which are also relevant to the purpose of this Jesuit journal, *Thinking Faith*. Recognised now as the leading Christian thinker of the eleventh century, Anselm was born in Italy and became abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Bec in France before moving to England where he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury in the wake of the Norman conquest. He is best remembered today for his contribution to three areas of philosophical and theological reflection: his 'ontological argument' for the existence of God; his explanation of how Jesus atoned with his death on the cross for the fall of the human race; and his definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding.' Each of these elements of Anselm's thought can provide interesting food for thought.

So God must exist?

Anselm used several of the traditional arguments to prove that God exists, but he is best known philosophically for what became known as 'the ontological argument.' Most proofs aiming to show that God exists start from our experience of the world and argue from that to a divine cause. The ontological argument takes a different line, starting from the idea of God; and since Anselm first enthusiastically developed it, it has teased generations of thinkers, appealing to such diverse figures as Descartes (Copleston 1950: 164) and Bertrand Russell (Southern 1990: 128).



The original form of Anselm's proof (Migne *PL* 158: 227-8) was in a prayer addressed to God, which began by stating as axiomatic that God is a being than which none greater can exist. From this it continued,

'surely that than which nothing greater can exist cannot exist just in the mind. If it were just in the mind it can be thought of as existing in reality also: which is something greater. Therefore if that than which nothing

greater can exist is just in the mind, then that than which nothing greater can exist is something than which something greater can exist: which surely cannot be the case. Therefore undoubtedly something exists than which nothing greater can be thought, both in the mind and also in reality'.

While feeling we are being presented by Anselm with a sort of theological three card trick, we could try to express his thought more readably in quasi-syllogistic form as follows:

God is understood as that being than which no greater being can exist.

But a being which actually exists is greater than a being which is only thought to exist.

Therefore God actually exists.

In Anselm's own time objections were raised against his novel argument on the ground that he was only contrasting different types of ideas of God; although the Jesuit historian of philosophy, F. C. Copleston, explained in defence of Anselm's thinking that 'if the idea of God is the idea of an all-perfect Being and if absolute perfection involves

existence, this idea is the idea of an existent, and necessarily existent Being' (Copleston 1950: 163). To which, in spite of Anselm's elusive logic, one can only reply doggedly, Yes, but it is still only an idea.

A matter of honour satisfied

Anselm's second, and more substantial, major contribution to Christian reflection was his explanation of how Jesus atoned through his death on the cross for the original sin and fall of the human race from God's favour, an explanation which entered the Catholic Church's official teaching at the Council of Trent and is still to be found in the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. From the New Testament the death of Jesus on the Cross was viewed as a sacrifice offered by Jesus to God to atone for the sins of humanity, thus, as Jesus himself is reported as saying, giving his life as 'a ransom for many' (Mk 10:45). Unfortunately, in the subsequent reflections of some of the early Fathers the term which was used in the Gospel as just a worn out metaphor, a 'ransom', or in the Latin a 'redeeming' or buying back (*redemptio*), was taken literally, and they proceeded fatally to ask – and answer – such questions as: to whom was this ransom paid? why was it paid? and what were its terms? The result was that Jesus became depicted as paying his life over to the devil in an exchange agreed between God and Satan for the release of the captive human race and its return to its original lord. (Kelly 1978: 173-4, 185-6).

In his day, however, Anselm felt the need to meet the theological objections that the whole idea of God paying Satan a 'ransom' raised serious questions about the power of God, not to mention the questionable idea of the Devil having once had jurisdiction over fallen humanity (Southern 1991: 202-5). Anselm's major move was to remove the Devil from the stage, and to switch attention to the need for compensation to be made to God for the enormous offence which Adam and Eve had committed against him in disobeying him in the garden of Eden. Obviously, there was a need to make up for that grave dishonour, yet humankind in its sinful state could not begin to offer anything like sufficient compensation or proportional

satisfaction for such an offence. Only God himself could do this, Anselm argued, which he did by crossing the gulf between divinity and sinful humanity in the incarnation and by Jesus as a divine human being offering his suffering and death to God as appropriate compensation and atonement in order to make up for Adam's offence. By thus making an acceptable satisfaction for the first human sin Jesus cancelled out the original affront to God and with divine honour thus satisfied he restored the human race to God's friendship.

Anselm's theology of the atonement in terms of making up for the offence of sin and satisfying the divine honour was considered a distinct improvement on the patristic fantasies of a divine ransom being handed over to Satan, and it won favour among many other theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, (*Summa theologiae*, III, 1, 2). As a result it was taken up by the Council of Trent in 1547 in its decree that Jesus Christ 'merited justification for us by his most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction to God the Father on our behalf' (DS 1529). Echoing the Anselmian and tridentine doctrine, the 1994 Catholic *Catechism* has continued to teach (no. 615) that 'Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the father.'

'Faith seeking understanding'

The third famous contribution which Anselm made to Christian thought was his concise definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' (*fides quaerens intellectum*). The phrase appealed to him so much that he mentions having planned at one time to use it as a title for one of his theological studies (Migne *PL* 158: 225); and it provides a view of theology which has stood the test of time and may be considered especially appropriate today.

To link belief in religion and its tenets with continuing intellectual enquiry into the content and the implications of such beliefs has the merit not only of respecting the divine revelation imparted to us by God but also of equally respecting the faculty of reasoning with which human believers have been endowed by their creator. Then belief and reason

interplaying in the mind will desirably produce results which do justice, or the least possible injustice, to the data of revelation, while also satisfying at least to some degree the human need for understanding and intellectual satisfaction. Of course, the point of theology is not to make beliefs totally transparent to understanding. Intellectual tension is inevitable whenever the creaturely human mind attempts to attain to some comprehension of the mystery of God and of God's activity in the world. One need not go so far as Sir Thomas Browne did in the seventeenth century in opining 'methinks there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith' (Browne 1963, I, 9). The whole of theodicy, that is, the trying to reconcile belief in the existence of a loving and powerful God with the experiences of pain and suffering which are encountered by many people in their lives, is the most striking witness to the legitimate strain which religious belief can bring with it. Yet it is part of the pride of Christianity, especially in its Catholic tradition, to hold out for some scope for the use of our God-given reason in seeking some understanding and acceptance as we reflect upon God and God's ways. Otherwise we succumb to a one-sided tendency of stressing belief to the exclusion of understanding and giving way to the arbitrary byways of fideism or to unreflective biblicism and fundamentalism.

Highly attractive as Anselm's definition of theology as faith seeking understanding remains, it could also be considered to suffer from two possible disadvantages. First, it might be thought of as somewhat over-cerebral, concentrating on purely intellectual activity, such as we have seen Anselm himself apparently reveling in as he developed his ontological proof for the existence of God. Secondly, allied to that, his description of theology as faith seeking understanding may not pay sufficient attention to the cultural environment of our understanding at any particular time, or to the surrounding context of human experience within which it is being exercised. That is why, as I once suggested elsewhere, it could be more enriching to view theology not as just bringing our understanding to bear on our faith but more as trying to provide a

dialectic between our belief and our experience. As I wrote,

It is, if we may so express it, a matter of trying to make faith-sense of experience, and at the same time of making experience-sense of faith; of finding an overall context of a meaning and purpose to life within which to locate all our ordinary experiences and interrelate them, and at the same time of continually checking such a vision of life against each new experience as it arises. This dialectical activity of submitting experience to the bar of belief and of submitting belief to the bar of experience is today a requirement of every believer, on pain of leaving one's experience unanchored and one's belief unsubstantiated' (Mahoney 1984: 112).

If the work of theology is thus more satisfactorily seen as the pursuit of a dialectic between our faith and our experience, as I suggest, it has to be recognized, however, that problems can arise when these two factors, what we believe and what we experience, fall out of balance or are in danger of contradicting one another. For example, when we consider today Anselm's 'satisfaction' interpretation of the death of Jesus which I have just described we may feel that it is out of harmony with our contemporary experience. The idea of considering Jesus as offering by means of a painful death some kind of compensation to God for a serious dishonour committed against the divine majesty is scarcely one with which we are disposed to sympathise today. It is more typical, and reminiscent, of a past era which took brutality almost for granted and which was also the age of chivalry, one when the protection of honour and the just vindication of injury to one's status were considered all-important features of life. As a consequence, if that particular theological interpretation of the death of Jesus, as an atonement for dishonour, is no longer considered acceptable it becomes necessary today to develop a theological interpretation more attuned to modern sensitivities, just as Anselm's was considered an advance in his day on the earlier patristic explanations which had been elaborated.

What this consideration further indicates is that St Anselm's definition of theology as 'faith seeking

understanding' contains another important element. It views theology as a 'seeking' (*quaerens*), as a quest; a continual drive to gain some human entry into the sanctuary of God's impenetrable mystery. Browning may be right in observing that 'a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?' A tentative reaching out is all that theology has to offer. It involves a continual testing of our faith in the light of increasing human experience, as it involves an unending interpreting of that experience in the light of our belief. As such it is a human activity which can never be completed nor perfect this side of heaven.

The endless journey which is thus involved for the Christian community in its quest and drive to theologize can recall Tennyson's aged Ulysses reminiscing on his long voyaging, yet still intent to continue 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.' The note of challenge was also well caught more prosaically by the Jesuit historian, James Brodrick, when he commented on the notorious theological controversy on grace between Jesuits and Dominicans that 'every problem in which God is concerned ends in mystery, and the difficulty facing the theologian is not to admit this but to admit it too soon' (Brodrick 1961: 216, n. 1).

In celebrating the feast of St Anselm appropriately it is useful to recall, by way of conclusion, how Socrates once observed that the unexamined life is not worth living (*Apology* 38a; Plato 1969: 72). In

the light of Anselm's definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, we might transfer the sentiment daringly to the unexamined faith. As he himself did observe, 'it seems negligence not to study to understand what we believe' (Migne *PL* 158: 362).

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