



St. Anselm Frederick Mayer

Anselm came from a noble family in Piedmont, where he was born in 1033. In his youth he entered the monastery of Bee in Normandy. In 1093 he became archbishop of Canterbury and took part in the dispute between the papacy and the secular lords.

Throughout his career Anselm tried to improve the moral condition of the clergy. There was a strain of mysticism in him, and faith was an intensely personal matter to him. His three main works are the *Monologium*, which deals with the being of God; the *Proslogium*, which contains his famous proof of the existence of God; and the *Cur Deus homo*, which contains his doctrine of atonement and indicates how man can be saved through Christ.

In the philosophy of Anselm, faith is the central theme. Belief in the truth of Christianity, then, is primary. Thus we understand his statement *Credo ut intelligam*. Revelation must be accepted before we can start philosophizing. Reason, thus, is merely an aid to revelation. The Platonic influence played an important part in the development of Anselm's philosophy. Like Plato, Anselm was a realist, and he believed that universals exist outside of particular things. Such essences as truth, beauty, and goodness do not need particular exemplifications, he thought, for their existence is autonomous.

In attempting to prove the existence of God, Anselm pointed to the relativity of all concepts. Since perfection varies in the created substances, he declared, there must be a universal perfection. He believed that finite things are not self-created, thereby pointing to a universal author, namely God. Furthermore, all beings share a certain amount of goodness, indicating that a supreme goodness exists in which all beings participate.

Anselm's main quest in the *Proslogium* is an understanding of God:

Be it mine to look up to thy Light, even from afar, even from the depths. Teach me to seek thee, and reveal thyself to me, when I seek thee, for I cannot seek thee, except thou teach me, nor find thee, except thou reveal thyself. Let me seek thee in longing, let me long for thee in seeking; let me find thee in love, and love thee in finding. Lord, I acknowledge and I thank thee that thou hast created me in this thine image, in order that I may be mindful of thee, may conceive of thee, and love thee; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong-doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except thou renew it, and create it anew. I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe— that unless I believed, I should not understand.¹

Now the fool will say that there is no God, Anselm maintained, yet even the fool is

convinced that something exists in man's mind, of which nothing greater can be conceived.

For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality."²

Anselm identified this being with God.

And it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, Our God.³

As early as Anselm's own time a monk, Gaunilo, felt that a concept in our mind does not necessarily have an objective existence. For example, we may think of a perfect island in the middle of the ocean, but the island does not necessarily exist. A vigorous controversy flared up between the two, and Anselm tried to refute Gaunilo by showing that the existence of the island is contingent, whereas the existence of God is necessary. In short, he declared, when we think of the greatest being we necessarily think of God.

What are the attributes of God? How can he be characterized? Anselm, like Augustine, described the unity, eternity, goodness, and perfection of God. He made it clear that God does not exist in space or time, but that all things exist in God.

"But if through thine eternity thou hast been, and art, and wilt be; and to have been is not to be destined to be; and to be is not to have been, or to be destined to be; how does thine eternity exist as a whole forever? Or is it true that nothing of thy eternity passes away, so that it is not now; and that nothing of it is destined to be, as if it were not yet?

Thou wast not, then, yesterday, nor wilt thou be tomorrow; but yesterday and today and tomorrow thou art; or, rather, neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow thou art; but simply, thou art, outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow have no existence, except in time; but thou, although nothing exists without thee, nevertheless dost not exist in space or time, but all things exist in thee. *For nothing containest thee, but thou containest all.*⁴

All beings need God for their sustenance, wrote Anselm. In God, we find life and wisdom.

Therefore, thou alone, O Lord, art what thou art; and thou art he who thou art. For, what is one thing in the whole and another in the parts, and in which there is any mutable element, is not altogether what it is. And what begins from non-existence, and can be conceived not to exist, and unless it subsists through something else, returns to non-existence; and what has a past existence, which is no longer, or a future existence, which is not yet,— this does not properly and absolutely exist.

But thou art what thou art, because, whatever thou art at any time, or in any way, thou art as a whole and forever. And thou art he who thou art, properly and simply; for thou hast neither a past existence nor a future, but only a present existence; nor canst thou be conceived as at any time non-existent. But thou art life, and light, and wisdom, and blessedness, and many goods of this nature. And yet thou art only one supreme good; thou art all-sufficient to thyself, and needest none; and thou art he whom all things need for their existence and well-being.⁵

In his doctrine of salvation, Anselm explained how mankind became doomed to damnation through the fall of Adam. The fall, he said, was a deliberate violation of God's will, and only Christ's atonement could bring about the freedom of man. The restoration of man he regarded as a miraculous act which indicates the mercy of God.

But after man was made he deserved, by his sin, to lose his existence together with its design; though he never has wholly lost this, viz., that he should be one capable of being punished, or of receiving God's compassion. For neither of these things could take effect if he were annihilated. Therefore God's restoring man is more wonderful than his creating man, inasmuch as it was done for the sinner contrary to his deserts; while the act of creation was not for the sinner, and was not in opposition to man's deserts. How great a thing it is, also, for God and man to unite in one person, that, while the perfection of each nature is preserved, the same being may be both God and man! Who, then, will dare to think that the human mind can discover how wisely, how wonderfully, so incomprehensible a work has been accomplished?⁶

In this way we can understand the compassion of God: "We have found it, I say, so great and so consistent with his holiness, as to be incomparably above anything that can be conceived. For what compassion can excel these words of the Father, addressed to the sinner doomed to eternal torments and having no way of escape: 'Take my only begotten Son and make him an offering for yourself; or these words of the Son: 'Take me, and ransom your souls.' For these are the voices they utter, when inviting and leading us to faith in the Gospel. Or can anything be more just than for him to remit all debt since he has earned a reward greater than all debt, if given with the love which he deserves."⁷

In his theory of knowledge Anselm showed that man rises from sense experience to intellectual knowledge and finally grasps the divine majesty through a mystic light. The highest good for man, Anselm asserted, is the contemplation of God's majesty. We are in bondage as long as we are guided by worldly desires and as long as we are subject to sensual appetites. We achieve emancipation and freedom when we are guided by God and when we realize that only through God do we have life and being. Unlike Eriugena, however, Anselm remained orthodox in his theology. In emphasizing the gulf which separates man from God, he was certain that without the Church man cannot be saved.

NOTES

¹ Proslogium, Ch. I (translated by Sidney N. Deane).

² Ibid., Ch. II.

³ Ibid., Ch. III.

⁴ Ibid., Ch. XIX.

⁵ Ibid., Ch. XXII.

⁶ Cur Dens homo, Bk. 11, Ch. XVI.

⁷ Ibid., Ch. XX.

Frederick Mayer. *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. New York: American Book Company, 1950.
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