

ANSELM

Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

CONTENTS

Introduction: Anselm's Life and Works 3

Part I: The Framework of Anselm's Thought

1. The Reason of Faith 13
2. Thought and Language 27
3. Truth 41

Part II: God

4. The *Monologion* Arguments for the Existence of God 59
5. The *Proslogion* Argument for the Existence of God 73
6. The Divine Attributes 95
7. Thinking and Speaking about God 111
8. Creation and the Word 123
9. The Trinity 133

Part III: The Economy of Redemption

- 10. Modality 149
- 11. Freedom 171
- 12. Morality 193
- 13. Incarnation and Atonement 213
- 14. Original Sin, Grace, and Salvation 241

Epilogue 253

Notes 255

References 293

Index 299



INTRODUCTION

Anselm's Life and Works

We are fortunate to know a good deal about Anselm's life. Anselm's friend Eadmer was not only an admiring biographer but also a discriminating historian, and his *Vita Anselmi* (*Anselm's Life*) remains an important source. More recently, Sir Richard Southern's excellent—one is tempted to say “unsurpassable”—biography, *Anselm: A Portrait in Landscape*, offers a comprehensive account of Anselm's life and works in their historical, institutional, and political context.¹ Our aim in this introductory chapter can accordingly be quite modest. We present only an outline of Anselm's life and career, emphasizing those aspects of the history that are helpful for interpreting Anselm's works.

Anselm was born in 1033 in Aosta, in those days a Burgundian town on the frontier with Lombardy. Anselm was a bright and likeable boy. There is some evidence that he was particularly close to his mother, Ermenberga, and had a strained relationship with his father, Gundulf. Certainly when his mother died in his early twenties, his father became very hostile and impossible to please, and Anselm left home in 1056. He wandered around Burgundy and France, probably trying out the teaching available from the entrepreneurial scholar-teachers who were so much a feature of that place and time.

In 1059 he arrived at the Abbey of Bec in Normandy. The attraction was almost certainly not the monastic life, since apart from a short-lived

bout of religious fervor in his teens Anselm had shown no particular yearning for the cloister, but the celebrated school and its even more celebrated master. The school was not just for monks; it accepted well-born students whose parents wanted them to have a grounding in the liberal arts. The school was under the direction of the prior, Lanfranc, who had a huge reputation as a scholar and teacher. He was also famous as a defender of orthodox Eucharistic doctrine against Berengar of Tours. (The controversy was already in full swing by the time Anselm arrived at Bec, although Lanfranc did not write up his part in it until somewhat later.) Lanfranc taught the standard works of rhetoric and logic and instructed students in the study of the Bible. Before long Anselm was taking part in the teaching himself. It is probably during this period that he wrote *De grammatico*, which is a sort of textbook on logic in dialogue form; it would fit with the kind of education on offer at Bec.²

In 1060 Anselm decided to become a monk at Bec himself, after some struggle over whether this was a good thing for his career (and a further struggle over how sinful he was being in thinking about his career). Once he made his decision, he threw himself into monastic life with his whole heart. He was, as Gillian Evans says, “remorseless in his spiritual exercises,”³ fasting to the point of unhealthiness and depriving himself of sleep to counsel others late into the night.

In 1063 Lanfranc was called away to be prior of the monastery at Caen, and Anselm became prior at Bec. He hated the job. It is perhaps easiest to get a feel for this aspect of Anselm’s life by considering a contemporary analogy. Imagine a philosopher whose great passions are for doing philosophy and for training graduate students. Reluctantly, because there is no one else who can do the job and his colleagues are importunate, he agrees to be department chair. He is not naturally a good administrator, and besides, he resents every moment of his administrative duties as a distraction from his “real work” of thinking about philosophy and shaping budding philosophers. But he carries out his duties as well as he knows how, and the unfortunate reward for his conscientiousness is further promotion. He becomes a dean and finally a provost, by which time he is completely at sea, lacking the support of his own deans in his constant battles with the president and trustees. The best he can do is to sneak some time for writing and philosophical conversation whenever he can, and make occasional fruitless efforts to be relieved of his disagreeable duties. Such is the story of Anselm’s career from 1063 on. Even as prior he was in over his head. He was

bad at handling money, easily flustered when things did not go his way, and inept at getting others to do what he wanted. He asked the Archbishop of Rouen for permission to return to the simplicity of his former life, but to no avail. It would not be the last time that Anselm would seek permission from a superior to lay aside the burdens of office.

Except for some prayers and meditations, Anselm did not write again until about 1075, twelve years after he took over as prior. There are probably two reasons for the long delay. One is simply that he was busy: in addition to his duties as prior, he had taken over the teaching when Lanfranc left. The second, and probably more significant, reason is that Anselm was not the kind of philosopher who writes to get his thoughts in order. Anselm tended to work everything out in his head first and only then write it down. So during that period he was working out his thoughts, no doubt trying them out in his teaching, until he had everything figured out to his own satisfaction. This fact about Anselm's approach to writing helps explain why the dating of Anselm's works, the progression of his career, is of very little relevance to interpreters. Anselm's thoughts do not really develop in any noticeable way; there is no early, middle, and late period, or anything like that. He had his fundamental ideas, and quite a lot of the detail, worked out in his head before he wrote his first book. So in general it is perfectly legitimate to use works from any period of his life to figure out what Anselm thought on a given issue.

Anselm's next work, the *Monologion* (1075–76), was written in answer to a request. This fact suggests another point about his approach to writing that bears on interpreting Anselm. Anselm is highly reactive. Evans talks about his “firefighting” approach to administration,⁴ which is exactly right, but something similar is also noticeable in his philosophical and theological writing. Quite a large proportion of his writing is in response to a request or is a reaction to newly minted theological error. As a consequence, Anselm did not always deal systematically with issues even when he had a well-worked-out view. He stuck to the topics people asked him about, presenting only as much of the larger theoretical apparatus as was necessary to deal with the particular question being posed. Yet behind the sometimes widely scattered remarks we can often discern a fully elaborated systematic view on topics that Anselm never explicitly treated in a sustained way. Anselm's ethical theory is one such topic; his theory of modality is another, although he had planned a systematic treatment of modality that he was unable to complete.

In the case of the *Monologion*, Anselm tells us that the request came from the monks at Bec, who “have often eagerly entreated me to write down some of the things I have told them in our frequent discussions about how to meditate on the divine essence.” (Note the reference to “our frequent discussions”: Anselm had already worked out the arguments of the *Monologion* in his teaching.) The monks not only asked for the book, they dictated the form it was to take:

Having more regard to their own wishes than to the ease of the task or my ability to perform it, they prescribed the following form for me in writing this meditation: absolutely nothing in it would be established by the authority of Scripture; rather, whatever the conclusion of each individual investigation might assert, the necessity of reason would concisely prove, and the clarity of truth would manifestly show, that it is the case, by means of a plain style, unsophisticated arguments, and straightforward disputation.⁵

Anselm’s task was to prove a wide range of conclusions about God “by reason alone.”⁶

Anselm’s next book, the *Proslogion* (1077–78), was a direct outgrowth of the *Monologion*. Anselm never retracted anything from the *Monologion*; he was never dissatisfied with it in the sense that he came to regard one of the arguments as weak or one of the conclusions as mistaken. But he noticed that it involved, as he put it, “a chaining together of many arguments.”⁷ He wondered whether he could get the same conclusions—or at least most of them—more straightforwardly, using a “single argument” that proved everything we want proved in one fell swoop. The search for this single argument became an obsession with him. Anselm couldn’t sleep, he lost his appetite, and he couldn’t pay attention in church—which made him think the whole idea was a temptation from the devil. He tried in vain to stop himself from thinking about it.

Finally the idea came to him. In the *Proslogion* he wrote up the argument and showed how it could be used to generate a wide range of conclusions about the divine nature. The style of the work is just like that of his prayers and meditations, but the method is actually the same as that of the *Monologion*: reason alone, with no reliance on authority. This combination of prayerful style and philosophical content has bewildered interpreters who cannot believe that what is obviously a work of devotion does not rely surreptitiously on premises drawn from faith. Their incredulity,

however, simply shows that they do not accept Anselm's version of "faith seeking understanding" (the original title of the *Proslogion*, as it happens). Anyone who thinks faith seeking understanding makes sense will not find anything odd about a purely rational investigation that takes the literary form of a prayer. That's what Anselmian believers do: they prayerfully exercise their rational powers in order to understand what they already believe. If anything, what is odd is that the *Proslogion* is Anselm's only work of that sort.

In 1078 the abbot of Bec died, and the inevitable happened. Anselm begged the monks not to insist on his becoming abbot, and they begged him to accept the job. He gave in. Though he found his new duties even more burdensome than the old ones, he did at least manage to keep writing. In 1080–86 he composed three dialogues: *On Truth*, *On Freedom of Choice*, and *On the Fall of the Devil*.⁸ Anselm described them as "treatises pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture," but they were not Scriptural commentaries in any normal sense. Rather, they exhibited Anselm's techniques of argument and linguistic analysis as applied to a handful of Scriptural texts.⁹

In the meantime, developments elsewhere in the world were threatening to complicate Anselm's life even more. In 1089, Anselm's old teacher Lanfranc, who had been made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, died. King William II (William Rufus, so called either because of his red hair or because of his hot temper) left the see vacant so that he could make use of the archiepiscopal revenues—a favorite technique of his for funding his various military adventures. In the middle of all this, Anselm showed up in England in 1092 at the invitation of Hugh, Earl of Chester, who wanted to consult with him about some lands that were to be given to the abbey of Bec. Anselm was afraid that people would think he was angling for the archbishopric, but he went anyway. The monks at Canterbury loved him, and he enjoyed a flattering reception from many people of wealth and influence. There were cynics then, and there are cynics now, who doubt whether Anselm was really as hostile to the idea of being Archbishop of Canterbury as he claimed to be.¹⁰ Our view is that he sincerely and fervently did not want the job. We have already seen how Anselm detested administrative work, and the archbishopric was a huge and demanding administrative position. Worst of all, as archbishop he would not merely have to supervise monks; he would have to deal with William Rufus. And though Anselm could be pretty clueless about the world around him, he

was not so innocent that he didn't realize that William would be a world of trouble.

For a while the king ignored the pleas for Anselm's appointment that were coming from various quarters. But when the king fell dangerously ill and began to fear the eternal consequences of his plunder of the Church, he sent for Anselm. At the urging of barons and bishops alike, the king declared that Anselm was the most suitable man for the office of Archbishop. Not a single voice was raised in objection, except for that of Anselm himself, "who wore himself almost to death in his objections."¹¹ In the end, however, Anselm yielded to the general will and to the unanimous advice of those whom he consulted on the matter. He was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093.

Around this time Anselm was also involved in theological controversy of a sort he found particularly distasteful. A monk named John wrote to Anselm that Roscelin of Compiègne had posed a dilemma for Trinitarian theology: either the three persons of the Trinity are three distinct things, like three angels or three souls, or else the Father and Holy Spirit were incarnate along with the Son. It appears that Roscelin wanted to maintain the standard view that the Son alone was incarnate, so he concluded that the three persons of the Trinity are three distinct things. Anselm immediately began to compose a rejoinder. For two reasons, however, he set it aside without completing it: first, he had heard that Roscelin had recanted;¹² and second, he figured that Roscelin's error was too obvious to require refutation. Neither reason for abandoning the work would hold good indefinitely, however. Some years later, after Anselm had become archbishop, news reached him that Roscelin had recanted his recantation; and "certain brothers," who apparently did not find Roscelin's error as obvious as Anselm did, "compelled" him to explain how they were to escape Roscelin's dilemma.¹³ Anselm accommodated his brethren by completing a letter *On the Incarnation of the Word* addressed to Pope Urban II. To the revised version of his solution of Roscelin's dilemma Anselm added arguments about why it was most fitting for the Son to be incarnate, rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit.

Not long after becoming archbishop, Anselm began work on *Cur Deus Homo* (1095–98), an attempt to defend the rationality of the Christian doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement. At the same time, however, his conflicts with the king were growing more and more acrimonious. There were several issues, and it is worth pointing out that Anselm did not

always have the support of his own bishops, who were mostly recruited from the younger sons of Norman nobility and were not surprisingly as much the king's men as they were churchmen. At his wit's end, Anselm decided to go to Rome to seek the pope's advice. Three times the king refused permission for Anselm to leave for Rome, but Anselm finally decided to go anyway. The king would not allow him to return to England.

Thus Anselm was in exile from 1097 until William died in 1100. In 1098 Anselm completed *Cur Deus Homo*, though he complains that "if I had been allowed freedom from distractions and enough time to work on it, I would have included and added quite a few things that I have left unsaid."¹⁴ Anselm's great editor, F. S. Schmitt, believed that Anselm would have "included" (or interpolated) the discussions "of power, of necessity, of will, and of certain other things" to which he refers in *Cur Deus Homo* 1.1 and "added" (or appended) a treatment of original sin. Anselm never put his thoughts on power, necessity, and will in final form, but sketches of a discussion of those topics are preserved in an unfinished work that we know as the "Lambeth Fragments." He did, however, supply the missing appendix, a work *On the Virginal Conception, and On Original Sin*, probably completed 1099–1100.

This period of exile kept Anselm busy in other ways as well. In 1098 Urban convened the Council of Bari to discuss reunion of the Eastern and Western churches, and he asked Anselm to defend the Western view that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, as opposed to the Eastern view that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father. Anselm later turned his speech to the council into *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, which he finished in 1102. It was also during this period that Anselm learned about the investiture controversy. "Investiture" refers to the delivery of various insignia of office. The investiture controversy was over the role of laypeople—kings and emperors—in the investiture of bishops and archbishops. It had long been customary for kings to invest bishops with their crozier and ring, symbols of their pastoral authority and sacramental role. Though lay investiture had been prohibited under Pope Gregory VII in 1077, it seems clear that Anselm was happily ignorant of the whole controversy; he had accepted the pastoral ring and staff from William Rufus when he was made Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm was therefore deeply distressed at the Vatican Council of 1099 to find Urban II pronouncing a sentence of excommunication not only on laity

who participated in investiture but on clergy who accepted the symbols of office from lay hands.

Anselm was conscientious to a fault, and now that he understood his duty, he was uncompromising in carrying it out. When he returned to England at the invitation of the new king, Henry I, he refused to do homage to Henry, and he refused to consecrate bishops whom Henry had invested. Henry would not relinquish what he regarded as a royal prerogative. So in 1103 Anselm went to Rome in company with a royal messenger to seek advice from the pope about how to satisfy both the claims of the king's honor and the demands of Anselm's conscience. The new pope, Paschal II, took Anselm's side and sent him back to England, but Henry would not allow him back unless Anselm submitted to the king's terms and renounced his obedience to the pope. When Anselm, predictably, refused, Henry seized the possessions of the archbishopric. After a year and a half of tense negotiations, a compromise was reached: Anselm would do homage to Henry for the temporal possessions associated with the archbishopric, and Henry would give up any role in investing bishops with the symbols of their spiritual authority. On the strength of that compromise Anselm returned to England in 1106.

Anselm had not managed to do any writing during his second exile. After his return, however, he completed one more work: *De concordia* (1107–08), in which he attempted to reconcile human free choice with divine foreknowledge, predestination, and grace. By this time he had become seriously ill and was so weak that he had to be carried around on a litter. It was becoming clear that he would not live to write a treatise on the origin of the soul, as he had hoped. On Tuesday of Holy Week, April 21, 1109, Anselm died peacefully, surrounded by the monks of Canterbury.



THE REASON OF FAITH

The published description for a course in the philosophy of religion taught at a major American university begins with these words: “There is a fundamental tension between Western philosophical thought, which emphasizes the import and efficacy of reasoned argument, and religious traditions, which stress the primacy of faith over reason.” Many discussions of the relationship between faith and reason assume some such *prima facie* incompatibility between religious faith and philosophical reason, though few put the dichotomy in such stark terms. Even authors who wish to make room for both faith and reason in their systems are careful to delineate a distinctive role for each. In Thomas Aquinas, for example, certain truths are accessible to unaided reason, but others receive assent by faith alone; and one cannot have both faith and rationally grounded knowledge (*scientia*) with respect to one and the same truth.

Anselm does not assume any incompatibility, even a *prima facie* one, between faith and reason; nor does he assign a distinctive role to each. So rather than saying that Anselm has a view about the relationship between faith and reason, it is perhaps better to say that he has a view about “the reason of faith”: the *ratio fidei*. “The reason of faith” is perhaps not idiomatic English, but the best idiomatic translations of *ratio fidei* are misleading. “The rational basis of faith” suggests something external: arguments in support of doctrinal formulations that have an apologetic or

protreptic purpose. "The logic of faith" suggests something internal: the rational coherence of the doctrines of faith, the way they "all hang together" logically. Anselm's *ratio fidei* means both these things at once; it refers to the intrinsically rational character of Christian doctrines in virtue of which they form a coherent and rationally defensible system. This is what we will mean by "the reason of faith."

Anselm holds that the doctrines of the Christian faith are intrinsically rational because they concern the nature and activity of God, who is himself supreme reason¹ and exemplifies supreme wisdom² in everything he does. And because human beings are rational by nature, we can grasp the reason of faith. Anselm's central discussions of the reason of faith are found in the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, the letter *On the Incarnation of the Word*, and *Cur Deus Homo*. We will look first at the boldness of Anselm's claims on behalf of the power of reason in the *Monologion* and their apparent tension with his insistence in the *Proslogion* that faith must precede understanding. We will then resolve this tension by examining two of Anselm's later works, *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Cur Deus Homo*, in which Anselm is more open about the boldness of his project and about the grounds of his confidence in the ability of perfected human reason to discover the reason of faith.

The *Monologion* and *Proslogion*

In the prologue to the *Monologion* Anselm tells us that he wrote the work in response to the requests of his monks: "Some of the brethren have often eagerly entreated me to write down some of the things I have told them in our frequent discussions about how one ought to meditate on the divine essence, and about certain other things related to such a meditation, as a sort of pattern (*exemplum*) for meditating on these things."³ Thus in an important way the work is addressed to those who are already Christians and wish to meditate on what they already believe. Anselm's monks wanted a sort of road map for thinking about God. But, as Anselm goes on to tell us, they asked for a guide that did not presuppose belief: "They prescribed the following form for me in writing this meditation: absolutely nothing in it would be established by the authority of Scripture; rather, whatever the conclusion of each individual investigation might assert, the necessity of reason would concisely prove, and the clarity of truth would

manifestly show, that it is the case, by means of a plain style, unsophisticated arguments, and straightforward disputation. They also insisted that I not disdain to answer even the simple and almost foolish objections that would occur to me."⁴ In other words, the monks of Bec were asking for a template for philosophical reflection on God, starting from premises that were (in principle at least) accessible even to those who do not accept the authority of Scripture or the fathers of the Church. And that is what Anselm provided.

This template for philosophical reflection includes more than arguments for the existence of God and accounts of the divine attributes. It includes extensive discussion of the Trinity, including arguments that clearly seem to be intended as philosophical *proofs* that God is triune. The evidence from within Anselm's works that these arguments are indeed meant as philosophical proofs of the doctrine of the Trinity is overwhelming. Not only does Anselm say in the *Monologion* that he wrote the work in accordance with his monks' demand that "absolutely nothing in it would be established by the authority of Scripture,"⁵ but in *De incarnatione Verbi* he says that both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* were written "mainly so that what we hold by faith concerning the divine nature *and persons*, leaving aside the Incarnation, could be proved by necessary reasons, independently of the authority of Scripture."⁶ So the reluctance of some commentators to take Anselm at his word must rest entirely on external considerations. Their incredulity most likely derives from the fact that Anselm's program runs afoul of the familiar distinction between what Aquinas called "preambles to faith," doctrines that can be proved by reason alone, and "mysteries of the faith," doctrines that must be taken on faith. As William E. Mann puts it, "That God is triune in nature is a 'mystery' in a special, theological sense of the term: it is communicated to humans by divine revelation, it is beyond the powers of natural human reason to demonstrate, and so if it is to be accepted, it must be accepted as an item of religious faith. . . . Despite operating under a number of constraints that may appear to us to preclude successful completion of his project, he proceeds self-assuredly, confident that reason can demonstrate, not that the doctrine is true (for then it would not be a mystery) but that it is free from contradiction—more than that, that It All Makes Sense."⁷

But the distinction between mysteries and preambles—at least in its most familiar, Thomist form—rests on an Aristotelian epistemology that is foreign to Anselm. For Aquinas, because we come to know God (as we

come to know anything) on the basis of sense-experience, we can know philosophically only those things about God that show up somehow in the objects of the senses; and sense objects do not tell us that God is triune, any more than a painting tells us that its creator was married. Since Anselm does not embrace this Aristotelian view of knowledge, he has no reason to embrace the distinction between preambles and mysteries that Aquinas's Aristotelianism supports. Someone who is inclined to accept some version of that distinction will of course think that Anselm's constructive Trinitarian project in the *Monologion* was misguided and doomed to failure, but that is no good reason to think that Anselm was not trying to do exactly what he claimed to be doing.

Though he is cagey about admitting it in the *Monologion*, Anselm is aware that in making a constructive rational case for the doctrine of the Trinity, he is abandoning the method (though certainly not the content) of Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Augustine had stated explicitly that one must first appeal to Scripture in order to establish that God is a Trinity; only then can one provide rational defenses of Trinitarian doctrine for those windbag argument-mongers (*istis garrulis ratiocinatoribus*) who demand them.⁸ Anselm knew *De Trinitate* well, so it is reasonable to assume that he was fully aware that his own Trinitarian arguments violated Augustine's strictures, though his deference to Augustine prevented him from acknowledging this fact openly. Even in *De incarnatione Verbi*, where he acknowledges his innovations, he tries to play down their extent and significance:

if anyone will think it worth his while to read my two little works, the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* . . . I think he will find in them discussions of this matter that he will not be able to refute and will not wish to belittle. If in those books I have said anything that I did not read elsewhere (or do not remember having read elsewhere) . . . I do not think I should be reproached in any way. For I have not said it as if I were teaching something that our teachers did not know or correcting something they did not say well, *but as saying something that they were silent about*—something that nevertheless does not contradict what they said, but harmonizes with it.⁹

While Anselm is correct that his *conclusions* do not contradict anything Augustine said, he is arguably disingenuous in suggesting that his method of reaching those conclusions is harmonious with that of Augustine.

Nonetheless, Anselm does not think his unparalleled boldness is hubristic. As we noted earlier, Anselm's unusually high estimate of the power of human reason ultimately derives not from his confidence in human beings, but from his confidence in God—from his conviction that God, who is supreme wisdom and exercises supreme reason in everything he does, has made human beings rational by nature. Furthermore, even though Anselm's constructive arguments for Trinitarian doctrine are not drawn from Scripture, as Augustine's were, he would insist that his rational investigation remains under the control of Scripture. For Anselm believes that "Holy Scripture contains the authority of every conclusion of reason"¹⁰ and "gives aid to no falsehood";¹¹ consequently, he is confident that if his rational arguments go astray in some way, Scripture will provide the materials to correct them.

Though Anselm tried not to draw attention to the boldness and innovation of his philosophical project in the *Monologion*, one of the work's earliest readers saw very clearly what Anselm had done, and he was not at all happy with it. Anselm submitted the work to Lanfranc, by then Archbishop of Canterbury, for his approval. We do not have the text of Lanfranc's assessment, but we do know that he took a dim view of Anselm's avoidance of Scriptural authority. One can imagine that he was especially put off by the way in which Anselm occasionally gives reason the job of approving the text of Scripture. For example, in chapter 33, after reaching some philosophical conclusions about the Word, Anselm comments that "he is not improperly called . . . [God's] image and figure and character"¹²—as though philosophical approval were needed for the language of Colossians 1:15 ("He is the image of the invisible God") and Hebrews 1:3 ("He is the splendor of his glory and the figure [in Greek, *charactēr*] of his substance"). Anselm's reply to Lanfranc is very telling. He assured his former superior that the *Monologion* contained nothing that could not be found in Scripture or in Augustine. But he made no changes to the *Monologion* itself, and he never submitted another work for Lanfranc's approval. He was unwavering in his conviction that it is legitimate for the Christian to explore the reason of faith without reliance on authority.

Although in one obvious sense Anselm was writing the *Monologion* for Christians, he did not mean for the arguments to be accessible or persuasive only to believers. Instead, he begins the work by announcing that he is addressing "anyone [who] does not know, either because he has not

heard or because he does not believe," the doctrines about God and creation that Anselm sets out to prove—provided only that he is at least "moderately intelligent." He sets out to offer arguments by which a reader can "convince himself... by reason alone."¹³ So Anselm clearly supposes that any reasonably intelligent person, Christian or not, can follow the pattern for philosophical reasoning that he lays out in the *Monologion*. But there is no reason to suppose that Anselm believes just anyone could have done the thinking without being told the pattern. It is only later, however, that Anselm will explain why not everyone can produce the reasoning that everyone can follow.

In some ways the *Proslogion* appears to be engaged in a rather different enterprise from the *Monologion*. It takes the form of a prayer addressed to God, so it explicitly adopts the attitude of someone who already believes and is "trying to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes,"¹⁴ as Anselm says in the prologue. Whereas the first chapter of the *Monologion* assures us that the arguments to come will be accessible and persuasive to any reasonably intelligent person, the first chapter of the *Proslogion* is a "rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God" that relies heavily on Scripture and could be uttered sincerely only by a believer, concluding with an affirmation that "Unless I believe, I shall not understand."¹⁵

Yet before we conclude that the arguments of the *Proslogion* were intended only for believers, we must also take into account the ways in which the project of the *Proslogion* parallels that of the *Monologion*. Anselm suggests that the *Proslogion* differs from the *Monologion* only in the greater simplicity and unity of its arguments.¹⁶ Moreover, it is quite clear that Anselm meant his argument to be persuasive to the unbeliever, the Psalmist's fool who "has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"¹⁷ For the fool understands that than which nothing greater can be thought, and no one who genuinely understands that being can fail to see that it "exists in such a way that it cannot, even in thought, fail to exist."¹⁸ Thanks to the argument of *Proslogion* 2, God's existence is "so evident to the rational mind"¹⁹ that Anselm could not fail to understand that God exists even if (like the fool?) he did not want to believe in God.²⁰ And in fact Anselm expressly says in a later work that he wrote both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* "mainly so that what we hold by faith concerning the divine nature and persons, leaving aside the Incarnation, could be proved by necessary reasons, independently of the authority of Scripture."²¹

Yet if Anselm does indeed mean for the arguments of the *Proslogion* to be persuasive even to unbelievers, why does he begin with an impassioned “rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God” and the declaration, “Unless I believe, I will not understand”? The *Proslogion* itself offers no clear answer to this question. We will return to it after examining *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Cur Deus Homo*, which provide the materials for an elegant solution.

On the Incarnation of the Word

In *On the Incarnation of the Word* Anselm’s primary target is the heresy of Roscelin.²² But before he settles into his refutation of Roscelin, Anselm “preface[s] a few words in order to curb the presumption of those who with abominable insolence dare to raise as an objection to one of the articles of the Christian faith the fact that they cannot grasp it by their own intellect.”²³ It is crucial to understand that these words are not addressed to unbelievers but to professing Christians. Anselm thinks it is perfectly legitimate for *unbelievers* to raise objections against the truth or intelligibility of Christian belief, and it is incumbent on the philosophically capable believer to answer those objections—that, after all, is why Anselm will write *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm had delineated the different epistemic responsibilities of believers and unbelievers with exceptional clarity in a letter written to Fulk, Bishop of Beauvais, not long after he first learned of Roscelin’s heresy:

It is utterly foolish and silly to fall into wavering and doubt about what has been most firmly established on the solid rock, simply on account of one person who does not understand it. Our faith should be defended by reason against the impious, not against those who profess to rejoice in the name of Christian. It is just to demand from [professing Christians] that they hold unshaken the pledge made in baptism, whereas [unbelievers] should be shown rationally how irrationally they scorn us. For a Christian ought to progress through faith to understanding, not reach faith through understanding—or, if he cannot understand, leave faith behind. Now if he can achieve understanding, he rejoices; but if he cannot, he stands in awe of what he cannot grasp.²⁴

In Anselm’s view, Roscelin is a professing Christian who has sinfully left faith behind because he could not understand. So before Anselm diagnoses

Roscelin's metaphysical errors, he must rebuke the spiritual failures that allowed Roscelin to go astray.

A Christian must begin with faith. And faith, Anselm thinks, is not simply an epistemic attitude but a spiritual discipline marked by an obedient will: "First our heart must be cleansed by faith; Scripture describes God as 'cleansing their hearts by faith.' And first our eyes must be enlightened by our keeping God's commandments, since 'the command of the Lord is bright, enlightening the eyes.' And first we ought to become little children through our humble obedience to the testimonies of God, in order that we might learn the wisdom that the testimony of the Lord gives, for 'the testimony of the Lord is sure, giving wisdom to little children.'"²⁵ An important part of this obedient faith is meditation on Scripture: "the more abundantly we take nourishment in Holy Scripture from those things that feed us through obedience, the more acutely we are brought to those things that satisfy us through understanding."²⁶

Such spiritual formation enables the Christian to "experience" the truth of Christian doctrine: "There is no room for doubt about what I say: one who has not believed will not understand. For one who has not believed will not experience, and one who has not experienced will not know. For as much as experiencing a thing is superior to hearing about it, so much does the knowledge of someone who has experience surpass that of someone who merely hears."²⁷ As Anselm uses the word, to experience (*experior*) something is to have firsthand acquaintance with it.²⁸ Somehow, then, believers who have "developed spiritual wings through the firmness of their faith" will be able to know the truths of Christian doctrine as matters of lived experience. They have "set aside the things of the flesh" and are living according to the spirit, and Scripture promises that "the spiritual man judges all things, and he himself is judged by no one."²⁹

In dealing with the loftiest matters, reason can go astray more easily than it can make progress; "let no one, therefore, be in a hurry to plunge into the thicket of divine questions unless he has first sought in firmness of faith the weight of good character and wisdom, lest he should run carelessly and frivolously along the many side-roads of sophistries and be snared by some obstinate falsehood."³⁰ Anselm emphasizes three aspects of faith that keep reason from going astray: humility, obedience, and spiritual discipline. In humility we recognize the lowliness of our own minds and the loftiness of divine truth; such a recognition makes us appropriately

cautious in our reasoning and saves us from groundless obstinacy in defending our positions. In obedience we accept Scripture and the teachings of the Church, which provide a determinate goal at which all our thinking must aim; this goal keeps reason from jumping the tracks. And through spiritual discipline we clear our minds of “bodily imaginations” so that we can “discern those things that ought to be contemplated by reason itself, alone and unmixed.”³¹

Anselm’s thesis in these prefatory remarks is as clear and emphatic as one could possibly want: Christians must have faith before they can have understanding. Because Roscelin sought understanding without submitting to faith, his reason failed. Yet Anselm does not suppose that his only recourse is to point out Roscelin’s spiritual failures or to recite the authoritative texts that he will then call on Roscelin to accept. Bad reasoning occasioned by sinful conduct is still bad reasoning, and it is to be counteracted by good reasoning. Indeed, as Anselm clearly recognizes, an appeal to authority would be useless in this case: “The reply to this man should not be made using the authority of Holy Scripture, since either he does not believe Scripture or he interprets it in some perverse sense: for what does Holy Scripture say any more clearly than that there is one and only one God? Instead, his error should be exposed on the basis of reason, which he tries to use to defend himself.”³² Of course, even if Anselm makes the truth “so evident . . . that anyone with understanding will see that nothing that is said against it has any power of truth,”³³ Roscelin might still reject it out of a sinful, arrogant attachment to his own views. But Anselm clearly seems to think Roscelin is capable of following a rational argument that exposes his error. The heretic’s reason is untrustworthy because it is not steered by faith, but it is not disabled altogether.

Cur Deus Homo

Both *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Cur Deus Homo* were written in part to provide intellectual support for faithful Christians who wanted to know how to respond to objections to Christian orthodoxy. In *On the Incarnation of the Word* the objections came from Roscelin, who as a Christian ought to have begun with faith. In *Cur Deus Homo*, by contrast, they come from unbelievers. In both cases, however, Anselm is confident that reasoned argument can meet the objections.

If anything, *Cur Deus Homo* shows a greater confidence in the power of reason than *On the Incarnation of the Word*. The project of *On the Incarnation of the Word* is largely negative: it shows that Roscelin's objections to Christian orthodoxy rest on philosophical confusions and have no rational force. By contrast, *Cur Deus Homo* purports not only to neutralize the objections of unbelievers but to offer conclusive positive arguments in support of the contested Christian doctrines. Since those arguments "proceed as though nothing were known of Christ,"³⁴ there is nothing in them that unbelievers are entitled to reject.

One might explain the primarily negative or defensive character of *On the Incarnation of the Word* by noting that Anselm had provided positive arguments elsewhere for the Trinitarian doctrine that Roscelin was denying. But those arguments appear in the *Monologion*, another work whose arguments are purportedly accessible to unbelievers; so it begins to look as if Anselm thinks reason works more powerfully on unbelievers than on heretics. It is not difficult to imagine why this might be. Unbelievers lack the direction and insight conferred by faith, so they cannot discover the reason of faith on their own; but if they are patient and honest, they can at least follow the reasoning of a believer. Heretics, by contrast, have the guidance of faith available to them but actively repudiate it; they are, by definition, neither patient nor honest. The best the believer can do is expose the heretic's errors in reasoning. One can only hope that the heretic will acknowledge the error and start the search for understanding all over again, this time in the right way: having "first sought in firmness of faith the weight of good character and wisdom."³⁵

In one striking respect what Anselm says in *Cur Deus Homo* about his own exploration of the reason of faith goes beyond what he had been willing to admit not only in *On the Incarnation of the Word* but in the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* as well. In the *Monologion* Anselm had professed an unwillingness to say anything new. He assured Lanfranc that everything in the *Monologion* could be found in Scripture or in Augustine, and he stated that readers should treat as merely tentative or provisional any conclusions that cannot be found "in a greater authority."³⁶ In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, as we have seen, he gingerly acknowledges that he may in fact have said things in the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* that had not been said before; but he is not quite ready to claim openly that he has developed arguments that had never occurred to the fathers of the Church. By the time he writes *Cur Deus Homo*, however, he unabashedly acknowledges

that he is doing something altogether new. True, the fathers of the Church thought so deeply and wrote so well that “we cannot hope for anyone in our day or in the years to come who will be their equal in the contemplation of the truth.” But that is no reason to confine ourselves to repeating what they have already said: “For ‘brief are the days of man,’ so even our holy fathers and teachers were not able to say everything they could have said had they lived longer; and the reason of truth is so abundant and so deep that mortals cannot come to the end of it.”³⁷ Anselm does not go so far as to say that it is permissible to *contradict* the fathers, as opposed to merely supplementing them; but he does in fact reject a venerable patristic view through the arguments against the ransom theory that he puts into the mouth of Boso.³⁸ He just avoids saying outright that that is what he is doing.

What one must never do is contradict Scripture or the teachings of the Church. Yet even this restriction leaves considerable room for intellectual exploration. In some cases multiple interpretations of Scripture are possible.³⁹ Moreover, “there are matters in which it is possible to hold any of a number of views without danger . . . If in such matters we expound the divine writings in such a way that they support different views, and we find no passage that settles what we must unhesitatingly hold, I do not think anyone ought to find fault with us.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, Anselm puts forward one explanation of the reasonableness of the Incarnation in *Cur Deus Homo*, but because the reason of faith is inexhaustible, other explanations—equally true, equally sufficient—are possible;⁴¹ and in fact Anselm will offer one of his own in *On the Virginal Conception*. Finally, just as the reason of faith is inexhaustible, so too are the gifts of grace that God provides for those who seek to explore it.⁴²

Discovery and Demonstration

Recall our earlier perplexity about the *Proslogion*. On the one hand, both internal and external evidence shows that Anselm meant his arguments in that work to be persuasive to the unbeliever. On the other hand, he prepares for those arguments in a way that seems to exclude the unbeliever, with a passionate cry to God and an acknowledgment that “Unless I believe, I will not understand.” In light of Anselm’s methodological reflections in *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Cur Deus Homo* we can now make sense of both aspects of the *Proslogion*. As we have seen, Anselm

thinks that Christians must start from faith in order to progress to understanding. It is no accident, therefore, that Anselm changes the second-person plural of the Old Latin text of Isaiah 7:9, "Unless you believe, you will not understand," to a first-person singular. It is Anselm, the author of the work, who as a Christian must have faith in order to achieve understanding. Not every reader of the work will be in same position as its author. The first chapter of the *Proslogion* both represents and enacts the humility, obedience, and spiritual discipline that are necessary for discovering the reason of faith. No unbeliever can achieve such discovery, but a patient, honest, and "moderately intelligent" unbeliever can follow and appreciate the demonstration or defense of the reason of faith that is discovered by the faithful believer. Thus, the fool cannot grasp the reason of faith in the same way as someone who has the "experience" that comes from belief; yet there is always something the believer can say to the fool that the fool can understand. And (although Anselm does not say this explicitly) the fool who is convinced by the demonstration has not attained understanding of the same kind, or in the same degree, as the believer who formulated the proof. The convinced fool, no longer a fool, has simply been brought to a state in which faithful inquiry is possible for him. He can now retrace not only the believer's reasoning, but the spiritual discipline that made such reasoning possible by yielding an understanding born of experience.

But the first chapter of the *Proslogion* does more than represent, in a generic sort of way, the attitudes of heart and mind that are necessary to discover the reason of faith. It also ponders the very features of the believer's spiritual life that lead Anselm to his discovery. Anselm loves God and desires to know him, yet God seems distant, absent, and inaccessible. Anselm experiences the problem of divine hiddenness as both an epistemic and a moral challenge: God is the only object of knowledge that would both fully occupy his intellect and fully unify his thinking, and knowing God would fully satisfy his desire and achieve the purpose for which he was created. Out of his reflection on these challenges arises a single conception of God that accommodates and indeed accounts for all the data of his experience as a believer. Because God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, he is both present to Anselm's mind and immeasurably distant from it. He both inspires Anselm's search and frustrates it, resisting any easy resolution but promising ultimate fulfillment.

So the first chapter of the *Proslogion* records a pattern of reflection on the inner life of a believer engaged in the spiritual formation that, Anselm argues, gives rise to a kind of firsthand insight that can appropriately be called “experience.” The chapter also invites other believers into that same reflection so that they too can experience God as that than which nothing greater can be thought and thereby come to understanding, which is “intermediate between faith and vision.”⁴³ Yet such understanding is not an incommunicable mystical epiphany. It is a rational grasp of the intrinsically rational character of the one who is supreme reason, and so it can be conveyed to anyone who has the power of reason, regardless of whether such a person has had the experience of faith. Thus, although the fool cannot pray chapter 1 of the *Proslogion*, he can, if he makes the effort, appreciate the compelling argument of chapter 2. Anselm never raises the further question of whether the fool actually *can* make such an effort without a willing spirit that is already a gift of grace, a first spark of the fire of faith.⁴⁴