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in Jewish and Christian Tradition

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God's Sacrifice of Himself as a Man

Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur deus homo*¹

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1. *Uniqueness and Paradoxicality*: As the present volume attests, there are in the history of religion many stories of human beings offering to the gods both human and non-human sacrifices. These practices are usually meant either to placate and appease a wrathful, jealous deity or to ingratiate oneself into divine favor through this act of sacrificial devotion. More rarely, the sacrifice is an expression of thanksgiving to a particular deity for aid that has been rendered or for prayers that have been answered. Many of the deities who were importuned and worshiped by the ancient Greeks were believed to be mortal. For example, in one version of the legend, the god Dionysus was, as a child, sacramentally killed by the Titans, who dismembered him, boiled his members, and feasted ritually upon them. Zeus is said to have retrieved his uncooked heart, to have swallowed it, and to have produced a new Dionysus from this ingested organ.

The Christian story differs significantly from such Grecian and other sagas; for the Christian God cannot, qua God, either die or be put to death. Thus, Nietzsche is speaking contrary to Christian theology when in his work *Joyful Wisdom* he fictionalizes about the madman who comes to the marketplace one morning carrying in broad daylight a lit lantern. "I am looking for God," he proclaims. Where has He gone? "*Wir haben ihn getötet—ihr und ich*":² "*We have killed Him—you and I*," he answers. Thus, for Nietzsche, God is dead. In other words, the Judeo-Christian

¹ English: *Why God Became a [God]-man*. Anselm completed the *Cur deus homo* in 1098. The text of the *Cur deus homo* is available in English translation in Anselm of Canterbury, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert W. Richardson; Minneapolis: Banning, 2000). The translation is also found at www.cla.umn.edu/jhopkins/.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* III, 125 (in *Werke in drei Bänden* II, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1966). My translation.

idea of God is a decadent idea; and the God who is implored by Christians and Jews is as good as dead, for He remains silent and *absconditus*, never responding to His followers' worshipful entreaties. Nietzsche is perturbed, furthermore, by the seeming paradoxes at the core of the Christian story. One such putative paradox—not singled out explicitly by Nietzsche—is the following: the Christian religion forbids human sacrifice; and yet, this very religion began with, and is founded upon, the self-sacrifice of the man Jesus, understood to be the Christ, to be the dying and rising Savior of those who trust in Him.

If we are to believe Jonathan Smith, the Christian conception of such a Savior is unique in the history of religion. For in the history of religion, outside of Christianity, "there is no unambiguous instance . . . of a dying and rising deity."

All the deities that have been identified as belonging to the class of dying and rising deities can be subsumed under the two larger classes of disappearing deities or dying deities. In the first case, the deities return but have not died; in the second case, the gods die but do not return.³

To be sure, there is something both unique and initially paradoxical about the Christian story. Already in the eleventh century Anselm of Canterbury recognized this fact and wrote his *Cur deus homo* in order to elucidate it. That is, he recognized that the Gospels are unique insofar as their central account does not depict the sacrifice-of-a-human-being that is made along the lines of, say, Aeschylus's Iphigenia—i. e., a sacrifice made in order to placate, or to win the favor of, What-is-supernatural. Rather, the sacrifice on the Cross is meant to serve as an *example* of righteousness and is understood to be required by *justice*. There is no thought of favoritism or of appeasement. On the other hand, Anselm had to deal with the paradoxical-like question of how God, who alone has immortality⁴ and cannot die, can intelligibly be thought, qua incarnate, to make a sacrifice of Himself to Himself—a sacrifice that has redemptive value for mankind.

2. *Fundamental Issues:* *Cur deus homo* is written in the form of a dialogue, with the simple monk Boso asking questions and the more learn-

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade), vol. IV, 522^a.

⁴ 1 Tim 6:16.

ed monk Anselm replying; in an ancillary way, Anselm likewise poses questions to Boso. Of these mutual queries eight stand out as more pivotal than the others; and, thus, they constitute the architectonic of the dialogue: (1) Why could not God, out of mercy alone, simply have forgiven sinful human beings, without His having had to become incarnate and to die? (2) Why did not God create angels and human beings such that from the beginning they were unable to sin—as in the future life redeemed human beings will be unable to sin and as the good angels are now unable to sin? (3) How does sin dishonor God? (4) How grave is sin? (5) What payment needs to be made to God for having dishonored Him? (6) How does Christ's death suffice to return honor to God and to blot out all men's sins—past, present, and future? (7) Was Christ's death compelled? (8) How is the meaning of Christ's death to be elucidated theologically?⁵

2.1. Anselm goes to great lengths to show that God could not simply, out of mercy, overlook man's sin.⁶ (a) For were He to do so, something disordered would be forgiven. Sin results in a disordered relationship between intellect and will; furthermore, it is something disordered because it mars the beauty of the universe and tends to undermine the principles of moral justice that govern the universe. It would be unfitting for God simply to accept such a disordering. (b) Moreover, were God simply to forgive the sinner, He would be dealing with the sinner and the non-sinner in the same way. For He would be treating both as blameless, whereas only the latter is so. Consequently, such treatment would be unfitting. (c) Furthermore, were sin to go unpunished or unatoned for, it would be subject to no law. In this respect injustice would resemble God, who holds the prerogative of being subject to no law. This resemblance would be unfitting. (d) In another vein, redeemed men (Anselm says) are supposed to replace the angels who fell—replace them in order to complete the foreordained perfect number of inhabitants of the Heavenly City; in addition, redeemed men are supposed to be *equal* to the good angels, who have never sinned. Now, clearly, if human beings entered the Heavenly City stained by sin, they would not be equal to the good angels and, therefore, would not be replacements for the fallen angels. Accordingly, it would be unfitting for God simply

⁵ The ordering of these questions does not reflect the order in which they are raised within the dialogue.

⁶ *Cur deus homo* I, 12 and I, 19.

to overlook man's sin. (e) Finally, the overlooking would be unfitting because it would be unwise. Anselm asks us to suppose that a rich man owned, and were holding in his hand, a pearl of great value and of great purity, which he permitted some envious person to knock out of his hand, with the result that it fell into the mire. It would be foolish for the rich man to pick up the unclean, unwashed pearl and to place it in its clean and costly receptacle. Similarly, it would be unwise of God to situate unpurified human beings in Heaven.

In the case of God, notes Anselm, "even the slightest unfittingness is impossible,"⁷ just as "necessity accompanies any degree of reasonableness, however small, provided it is not overridden by some other more weighty reason."⁸

2.2. But, thinks Boso, it would seem that God in His wisdom and omnipotence could have created angels and human beings such that from the beginning they were unable to sin—even as the good angels have already been thus confirmed in righteousness and as redeemed human beings will, in the resurrection state, be thus confirmed.⁹ Anselm expresses mild consternation at Boso's confusion; and he deals frontally with it: It is impossible, he says, that any creature should be identical with God. But only God is such that by nature He cannot sin. Hence, whoever by nature cannot sin would be identical with God—something which no creature can be. For no creature can be its own Creator; no being can bring itself into being, for it would have to have existed before it existed.

2.3. Now, sin dishonors God. For

when a rational nature wills what it ought to, it honors God—not because it confers anything on Him but because it willingly submits itself to His will and governance. And, as best it can, it stays in its proper place in the universe and preserves the beauty of the universe. But when it does not will what it ought, then it dishonors God from its own point of view. For it does not willingly submit itself to His governance; and it disturbs (as much as lies in its power to do so) the order and the beauty of the universe—even though it does not at all injure or tarnish God's power or dignity [in and of itself].¹⁰

⁷ *Cur deus homo* I, 20.

⁸ *Cur deus homo* I, 10.

⁹ *Cur deus homo* II, 10.

¹⁰ *Cur deus homo* I, 15.

In itself, notes Anselm, God's honor cannot be violated. Yet, were He to permit disobedience and wickedness to go unrequited, His doing so would seem to detract from His nature as Goodness and Righteousness—something unfitting.

2.4. In fact, sin is so grave, teaches Anselm, that any disobedience to God, who is Truth itself and Justice itself, ought not to be committed, even if by committing it, this very world and an infinitely multiple number of other such worlds could be preserved from destruction.¹¹ From a purely human point of view, such a sin might seem trifling—as Lot's wife's looking back at emblazoned Sodom and Gomorrah seems trifling.¹² But from the point of view of Supreme Justice, any deviation from justice is tantamount to endorsing the untruth that one's own greater good resides in injustice and self-will. It is tantamount to believing that God's decrees are arbitrary and capricious and that God does not have man's best interest at heart, so to speak, so that He is being despotic. Such a belief is, in its objective intent, rebellious: man steals himself from God's governance, rebelliously believing His governance to be in some respects unwise and unfair.

Anselm rejects the so-called Devil-ransom theory, fostered by Augustine in his *De trinitate* XIII, 12–15 and XV, 25, his *De libero arbitrio* III, 10, and his *Enchiridion* XLIX. According to this theory Adam's believing the Devil and yielding to his temptation resulted in his delivering himself and his descendants into the Devil's possession. The Devil continued to exercise this dominion until mankind was ransomed by God. This ransom came about through the Devil's unjustly acting against a perfectly just man—viz., Jesus—thereby forfeiting his claim against the human race. Thus, when He ascended, Jesus "led captivity captive" (Eph 4:8); i. e., He delivered the human race from the hands of the Devil, so that whoever chooses to follow Him will ultimately altogether escape from the Devil's control and influence. Accordingly, God dealt with Satan by way of justice rather than by way of force.

To this theory Boso objects in *Cur deus homo* I, 7. Man, he says, was never in the Devil's possession; rather, both the Devil and man were always in God's power. Furthermore, he says, the theory does not explain the need for the Incarnation. For God could have dealt with Satan by justly punishing him for having induced Adam into willing evilly.

¹¹ *Cur deus homo* I, 21.

¹² Gen 19:15–17 and 24–26.

That is, it would not have been wrong for God to deal with Satan by using force, since Satan was not really justly in possession of man. Thus, God would be just—not unjust—in forcefully freeing man from Satan's unjust possession. Through the words of Boso, then, Anselm is maintaining that Augustine's Devil-ransom theory does not explain *cur deus homo fieri oporteret*—why God had to become a [God]-man—in order to effect the salvation of fallen human beings.

2. 5. So then, what payment must be made to God in order to repair the apparent dishonor done to Him by a wayward and disordered act of self-will? According to Anselm, two things must occur in order that the debt incurred by sinning be satisfied: first of all, obedience to God must be resumed; and, secondly, amends must be made for the injury inflicted. In general, one who steals must repay more than he has stolen—because of the fact that he must not only return the stolen property but must also make amends for the inflicted grievance. Similarly, since Adam through stealing himself, as it were, from God's possession did an injustice to God, thereby dishonoring Him, (1) he must give himself back to God through repentance, (2) he must resume his acts of obedience, and (3) he must make amends for having transgressed against his Lord, who had given him life and health and safety and nourishment and companionship and happiness—in short, who had given him all that he was and had.¹³

But if any act of willful disobedience to God is so grave that it ought not to be committed even in order to spare an infinity of worlds, and if the payment must be proportional to the gravity of the wrong-doing, then the payment will need to be such that it is something greater in value than the value of an infinite number of beautiful, orderly, life-fostering, and life-sustaining worlds. No human being can make such a payment—the payment of something that is greater than every existing thing besides God.¹⁴ Indeed, only God *can* make such a payment; but only man *ought* to make the payment. Therefore, if payment is to be made, it will have to be made by a God-man. Here Anselm invokes the tenets of orthodox Christian theology: the triune God will, in the person of the Son, assume a human nature, thereby becoming incarnate as the God-man, identified by Anselm at the end of the *Cur deus homo* as the historical Jesus, the Son of God, who is two natures in one person.

¹³ 1 Cor 4:7.

¹⁴ *Cur deus homo* II, 6.

And the human nature is an Adamic human nature, having come from Mary, who was a descendant of Adam, i. e., was a member of the Adamic race, as are we all.

2. 6. But how will Christ's death serve to satisfy the debt incurred by sin, and why must the one who makes payment be of Adam's race? On Anselm's view one who makes satisfaction of the incurred debt must be of Adam's race because otherwise the Adamic human race would not be restored to its full dignity, and thus God's original plan in creating man would seem to be a failure—something unfitting.¹⁵ Anselm is conceiving of the race as like a family; indeed, we ourselves sometimes use the expression "the family of man." Thus, only a family-member can redress the wrong done by another family member and can thereby not only restore honor to the aggrieved party but also restore honor and dignity to the family as such.

In accordance with the following rationale, thinks Anselm, the God-man's death suffices to more than outweigh the gravity of all sins; for the God-man will offer to God something that is of more value than everything that is not God: viz., He will offer up Himself, His human life, for the glory of God the Father. In effect, God offers Himself to Himself for man's sake. The God-man is fully divine, even as He is fully human. Insofar as He is God, He cannot die; and insofar as He is human, He is not condemned to die, since His human nature is sinless and since only sinful human beings are under the sentence of mortality. Thus, when the God-man allows Himself to be killed rather than to tell a lie, He honors God, who is Truth itself. To speak now historically rather than abstractly: Jesus, the God-man, could have saved His life by denying that He was Messiah, by denying that He was the Son of God, by repudiating His statements "I and the Father are one"¹⁶ and "Before Abraham was, I am."¹⁷ Instead of making such a repudiation, He stood by the truth (according to Anselm's orthodox theology) and refused to tell the lie; and He foresaw that His doing so would occasion His death, which He freely accepted. Now, since any aggression against the Person of God is incomparably grave, i. e., is graver than all other sins that are not against the Person of God, and since *the good of Jesus's life is as good as the putting Him to death is evil*,¹⁸ His giving up His life—

¹⁵ *Cur deus homo* II, 8.

¹⁶ John 10:30.

¹⁷ John 8:58.

¹⁸ *Cur deus homo* II, 14.

i. e., His acceptance of death, His voluntary self-sacrifice—is infinitely meritorious. Such merit deserves to be rewarded. But since Jesus, qua God, is in need of nothing, He may rightly and fittingly ask the Father to transfer the reward to whomever He Himself chooses.¹⁹ He asks that it be transferred to those human beings who penitently beseech Him to do so. In summary, the merit of Christ's voluntary surrender of His life for the sake of the truth is of more worth than is an infinity of worlds such as our own.

2. 7. But Boso sees a further problem. Even if we grant that only through the death of a God-man could God rightly have arranged for man's salvation, still it seems that the God-man, Jesus, did not voluntarily accept death but rather had to die, whether or not He chose to. For suppose we grant, with Anselm, that the reason Jesus was born free of original sin is twofold: (1) because of Mary's having become purified, prior to His birth, through her faith in His future death and (2) because His conception was free of all concupiscence, since Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit rather than through sexual intercourse. It follows that Jesus could have been born free of sin only if He was actually going to die. And so, once having been born, He had to die. Otherwise, Mary's faith would not have been true faith and Jesus would not have been born without the guilt of original sin.²⁰ Anselm goes on to argue that Jesus did not die against His will but died voluntarily because—as Son of God, i. e., as God the Son—He accepts, *from eternity*, this earthly mission. And *in the order of time* His self-surrender of His life for the honoring of God, and of God's justice, serves to defeat the Devil, to whose temptation-to-escape-suffering He did not yield. ("O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will but as Thou wilt."²¹)

2. 8. Theologically, Jesus's death poses certain conceptual difficulties. Anselm writes of Jesus: "Since He Himself is God—viz., the Son of God—He offered Himself to Himself (just as also to the Father and the Holy Spirit) for His own honor. That is, [He offered] His humanity to His divinity, which is one and the same divinity common to the three

¹⁹ *Cur deus homo* II, 19.

²⁰ *Cur deus homo* II, 16. In his *De conceptu virginali* Anselm offers an alternative explanation for how it is that Christ was born without the guilt of original sin.

²¹ Matt 26:39.

persons."²² So, on the one hand, the Son can be said to have offered up Himself to the Father; but, on the other hand, God can be said to have offered up Himself to God. But in neither case is the divinity being offered up but only the life of the humanity, which is able to die, although it is not under any necessity of dying. But if Jesus died as a man and not insofar as He is God (for the divine nature is impassible and immutable), how can it rightly be said that *God sacrificed Himself* on the Cross? Here, then, we must speak more carefully and must take the foregoing expression to mean that the Incarnate Second Member of the Trinity (God the Son) offered up His human nature to His divinity—i. e., to God as a whole (viz., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Indeed, we must speak still more carefully; for it is not the whole of His *human nature* that dies and that is resurrected: it is only His *human body*, not also His *human soul*, that dies. (The whole of human nature consists of both a body and a rational soul.) In the end, then, Jesus, the God-man, sacrifices His human life by letting His human body be put to death for the sake of righteousness and truth. His soul and His divine nature and His divine person continue on and are reunited with the body at His resurrection. Yet, since any harm done to Christ's body is also an assault on His person, the sin of putting Him to death is, in and of itself, incomparably more sinful than is any other conceivable sin that is not against His person, declares Anselm. This declaration allows Anselm to proceed to assess the merit of Christ's self-surrender of His bodily life as infinitely meritorious. In any event, the consistency and the intelligibility of Anselm's reasoning depend upon one's presupposing his orthodox Trinitarianism and Christology.

In conclusion, then, Anselm holds that the death of Christ is sufficient to atone for all the sins of all mankind. And in dying, the Incarnate God, in the person of the Son, offers up His humanity to His divinity in order to procure the salvation of His fellow-human beings.

3. *Six Misunderstandings of Anselm's Theory of Atonement:* A number of misconstruals of Anselm's position have gained currency and must be set straight.

3. 1. *Infinite Sin:* To begin with, interpreters have misunderstood Anselm's doctrine that any sin—no matter how trivial it may seem to us to be—is so serious that it ought not to be committed even in order to

²² *Cur deus homo* II, 18.

save from destruction our entire world and an infinite number of other such worlds. This conception of Anselm's is combined by interpreters with Anselm's further claim that a sin against the person of God (such as occurred in the crucifying of Christ) is the greatest conceivable sin. Thereupon it is concluded by these same interpreters that the Jews—who instigated Christ's death, who rejected Pilate's offer to release Jesus, and who cried out "His blood be upon us and upon our children"²³—bear infinite guilt. Yet, nothing could be more out of line with Anselm's teaching. For in *Cur deus homo* II, 15 Anselm explicitly states:

A sin done knowingly and a sin done in ignorance are so different from each other that the evil which these men could never have done knowingly, because of its enormity, is *venial* [my italics] because it was done in ignorance. For no man could ever will, at least knowingly, to kill God; and so those who killed Him in ignorance did not rush forth into that infinite sin with which no other sins are comparable. Indeed, in order to ascertain how good His life was, we considered the magnitude of this sin not with respect to the fact that it was done in ignorance but as if it were done knowingly—something which no one ever did or ever could have done.

At times, interpreters take Anselm to be teaching that *any* sin against God is an infinite sin. Walter Kasper, for example, in re-iterating Anselm's position, writes: "Sin is directed against the infinite God and therefore is itself infinite."²⁴ This statement, however, embodies a misunderstanding, since, for Anselm, no actual sinful act is infinitely sinful, incurring infinite guilt—even though the payment for sin must be an infinite payment, as Anselm explains.

3. 2. *Use of the Word "homo"*: A second misconception relates to Anselm's use of the Latin word "*homo*," translatable into English variously as "man," "a man," "the man," "mankind," "human nature," "a human nature," "the human nature," "human being," and so on. (Latin has neither a definite nor an indefinite article, though it can use various substitutes, when needed.) The title "*Cur deus homo*" is often translated as "*Why God Became Man*." And this translation is unobjectionable as long as it is understood as the equivalent of "*Why God Became a Human Being*," "*Why God Assumed a Human Nature*." But too often it is construed as indicating that God assumed not a particular human nature—

²³ Matt 27:25.

²⁴ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (trans. V. Green; New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 219.

though, to be sure, a perfect one—but universal human nature, thereby becoming man as such, rather than a particular man, a particular human being with a particular human nature. Ferdinand Christian Baur, for example, in his *Die christliche Gnosis*, states that "Christus als Mensch, als Gottmensch, ist der Mensch in seiner Allgemeinheit, nicht ein einzelnes Individuum, sondern das allgemeine Individuum."²⁵ Anselm, however, does not hold a view such as Baur's. In order to make this point clear, I have translated the title "*Cur deus homo*" as "*Why God Became a [God]-man*," for this is the topic that Anselm addresses, and this is the meaning that he intends to convey.²⁶

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that when Anselm speaks of God's becoming a [God]-man, he always means "man" in the sense of "human being" and not in the sense of "male" (*vir* in Latin). God the Son assumed a human nature (*homo*), thereby becoming a human being (i. e., a man [*homo*]). Nonetheless, it is true that Anselm also holds the view that it was more appropriate for God the Son to become incarnate as a male rather than as a female. God the Son becomes the Son (not the Daughter) of the Virgin. But the question can be raised—and Anselm raises it in *Monologion* 42, as well as at the end of *De incarnatione verbi* 17—as to why the first two members of the Trinity are referred to as Father and Son, rather than as Mother and Daughter. While acknowledging that the Supreme Being is without sexual distinction, Anselm nonetheless reasons that *Father* and *Son* are the preferable symbols:

Is it [preferable to call them father and son] because among those natures which have a difference of sex it is characteristic of the better sex to be father or son and of the inferior sex to be mother or daughter? Now, although this is by nature the case for many [beings], for others the reverse holds true. For example, in some species of birds the female sex is always larger and stronger, the male sex smaller and weaker.

But, surely, the Supreme Spirit is more suitably called father than mother because the first and principal cause of offspring is always the father. For if the paternal [cause] always in some way pre-

²⁵ "Christ as man, as God-man, is man in his universality; He is not a particular individual but is the Universal Individual" (my translation). Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religionsphilosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1835; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), 715.

²⁶ Cf. Anselm's *De incarnatione verbi* 11.

cedes the maternal cause, then it is exceedingly inappropriate for the name "mother" to be applied to that parent whom no other cause either joins or precedes for the begetting of offspring.²⁷

So although Anselm prefers the masculine symbols *father* and *son*, and although he uses the words "man" (*homo*) and "men" (*homines*) generically when he speaks of man's fall and redemption, he is not doing so in a way that nowadays some people would regard as sexist. And we must remember, too, that Anselm, in his *Oratio ad Sanctum Paulum* (*Prayer to St. Paul*), refers to Jesus as our Mother, who—like a mother hen—gathers Her chicks under Her wings: "Sed et tu IESU, bone domine, nonne et tu mater? An non est mater, qui tamquam gallina congregat sub alas pullos suos? Vere, domine, et tu mater."²⁸

3.3. *A Feminist Critique.* Some Feminists, nevertheless, seek to fault Anselm's reasoning in the *Cur deus homo* on the grounds that it makes God into a sadistic Overlord.²⁹ For in the name of justice Anselm is led to make the following claim: "It is impossible for God [in and of Himself] to lose honor. Either the sinner freely repays what he owes or else God takes it from him against his will. For either a man willingly exhibits due subjection to God (be it by not sinning or be it by making payment for his sins), or else God subjects him to Himself against his will *by tormenting him* [my italics] and in this way demonstrates that He is his master—a fact which the man refuses to acknowledge voluntarily."³⁰ Certain Feminists object to depicting the Divine Being as directly causing suffering—as tormenting someone. As Dorothee Sölle writes: "Each attempt to view suffering as immediately or mediately caused by God is in danger of thinking sadistically about God."³¹ And Elga Sorge objects to viewing *as a loving act* God the Father's delivering His Son over to death on the Cross: "To be able to interpret—of all things!—*killing*

as an act of love is probably something reserved for men, or, certainly, for persons blinded patriarchally."³²

Contrary to the foregoing opinions, we may say that God the Father's arranging for human salvation by means of His allowing His Son to be put to death is not a sadistic conception either for Anselm or for any orthodox Christian theologian or even apart from all theology. Anselm takes great pains to exhibit the divine rationale and to argue that human salvation is possible only through the compassionate self-sacrifice of a God-man. But even leaving aside his necessary appeal to orthodox theology, it is wrong to suppose either (1) that an act of self-sacrifice, and the commissioning thereof, is, necessarily, sadistic or (2) that all punishment administered by an omnipotent being is, necessarily, sadistic. And why need our envisioning of such punishment be, necessarily, from the perspective of the patriarchally blinded? Indeed, the beauty of the *Cur deus homo* lies in the fact that Anselm succeeds in presenting a theory that balances divine justice with divine mercy—a view that sees God as taking suffering (including suffering of soul) upon His incarnate human nature so as to be able to spare man from eternal suffering. In short, one might, perhaps, with arguable plausibility suggest that the doctrine of Hell is a sadistic doctrine.³³ But to claim that self-sacrifice cannot be done out of love is altogether implausible and tendentious. Even in secular literature, such as Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, self-sacrifice is deemed an act of fellow-feeling and of goodness. For in that novel Sydney Carton, through the use of a drug and a disguise, changes places with Charles Darnay and is guillotined in his stead. And Carton experiences something edifying in his self-sacrifice: "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."³⁴

Contrary to Elga Sorge's previous judgment, Anselm, and orthodox Christian theology generally, do not judge the act of *killing* Jesus to be an act of love. Rather, they judge Jesus's *undergoing of death* (in obedience to the Father's command) to be an act of love. The difference between

²⁷ *Monologion* 42.

²⁸ *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi Opera Omnia: ad fidem codicum rec.* (ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt; Seckau 1938–61; repr. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1968), vol. III, 40. [Vol. III is contained in tome II.]

²⁹ See Regula Strobel, "Feministische Kritik an traditionellen Kreuzestheologien," in *Vom Verlangen nach Heilwerden: Christologie in feministisch-theologischer Sicht* (ed. Doris Strahm and Regula Strobel; 2nd ed.; Fribourg: Edition Exodus, 1993), 52–64. Strobel refers to Dorothee Sölle, Elga Sorge, and Christa Mulack, among others.

³⁰ *Cur deus homo* I, 14.

³¹ Quoted from Regula Strobel, op. cit., 52 (my translation).

³² Quoted from Regula Strobel, op. cit., 53 (my translation).

³³ E. g., note Marilyn M. Adams's line of reasoning in her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 41–43. Some points critical of Adams are made by Katherin A. Rogers in her article "A Defense of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* Argument," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 187–200.

³⁴ Last sentence of the novel.

the active and the passive voices here is a difference that makes all the difference, so to speak.

3. 4. *The Parallel with the Abraham-Isaac Story*: Occasionally, the death of Christ is likened to the Old Testament account of Abraham and Isaac. As it is said, both Abraham and God the Father were willing to sacrifice their respective only-begotten son. And in both cases, it is presumed, the sons were willing to be sacrificed. In the former case the sacrifice was not actually made, whereas in the latter case it was. Let it be said, however, that these similarities are dwarfed by the differences of the two cases, so that any parallelism becomes relatively insignificant. To mention only one consideration: the sacrifice made by God the Father was made in order to accomplish the salvation of mankind—something not the case with the intended sacrifice of Isaac. But, if we care to note a second thing, Isaac did not foreknow that he was to be the intended victim, and he did not go to Mount Moriah in order to die. By contrast, on Anselm's theory, Jesus foresaw His death and was born into the world in order to sacrifice His life. Finally, Jesus's death can intelligibly be regarded by Anselm as a self-sacrifice, whereas in no sense could Isaac's intended death be considered to be a self-sacrifice.

3. 5. *Relationship between rationes convenientes and rationes necessariae*: Confusion has arisen about Anselm's distinction between "fitting reasons" (*rationes convenientes*) and "compelling reasons" (*rationes necessariae*). The confusion results from Anselm's having spoken of certain fitting reasons as also compelling and from his having envisioned certain compelling reasons as also fitting. Thus, he can sometimes refer to fitting reasons as necessary and to necessary reasons as fitting; and his doing so has tended to blur that very distinction. And yet, not unsurprisingly, the distinction is really very clear, once we explore Anselm's terminology more fully. We have already seen (in 2. I. above) that, according to Anselm, the slightest unfittingness is impossible in the case of God and that in our reasoning about God even a small degree of detectable fittingness amounts to rational necessity, provided our conclusion is not outweighed by stronger reasons on the other side. In other words, *rationes convenientes* are conditionally necessary, whereas *rationes necessariae* are "unconditionally" necessary, inasmuch as there cannot be had (Anselm believes) any over-riding weightier reasons.

A clarifying example of Anselm's distinction occurs in *Cur deus homo* II, 16, where Anselm is attempting to draw from Scripture a theological

conclusion that is not found explicitly in Scripture. He poses the question of whether or not Adam and Eve, whose sin precipitated the Fall, will be among the redeemed. And he reasons that they will be. For at no time in the history of the human race could there have been a period when no human being was saved—lest it seem that God's purpose in creating the human race would have been thwarted:

We must not believe that there was any time—from the point of man's creation—in which this present world with the creatures created for men's use was so empty that in it there was no member of the human race who shared in the end for which man was created. For it seems unfitting that God would even for a moment have permitted the human race . . . to have existed in vain, so to speak. For to some extent these men would seem to exist in vain as long as they did not seem to exist for that end for which they were especially created.

Accordingly, Boso agreeingly asserts: "We can conclude that this view is not only fitting but also necessary." Boso does, however, place conditions upon this rational necessity: "For if this view is more fitting and more reasonable than the view that at some time there was no one concerning whom God's purpose in creating man was being accomplished, and if nothing opposes this reasoning, then necessarily there was always someone who shared in the aforementioned reconciliation. Hence, we must not doubt that Adam and Eve shared in that redemption, even though Divine Authority does not openly state this." Although Boso uses the conditional word "if" (*si* in Latin), Anselm goes on to reason that it would indeed be incredible (*incredibile*) that God would exclude Adam and Eve from His original plan. Thus, Anselm is making the strong claim that the opposite view about Adam and Eve could not be more reasonable than is the inference that Adam and Eve are among the redeemed. So, in the end, Anselm implicitly removes the conditions from the rational necessity, so that the conclusion about Adam and Eve is not only fitting but also (absolutely) necessary to believe. And the necessity in question is theological, not logical, necessity. For it is a necessity that holds in the light of certain theological presuppositions. Yet, although this kind of necessity may be said to be *conditional* upon the presuppositions, nonetheless it is properly referred to as *unconditional* necessity because the theological presuppositions are *absolute* presuppositions, so that the inferences supported by them are as theologically necessary as theological inferences ever get.

Finally, let it be clear that the necessity is rational necessity, that it is the kind of necessity that governs our inferences. It is not a necessity that constrains God to act. Although God never acts without a reason,³⁵ it would be bizarre to state that He is compelled to act reasonably.

3. 6. *Not a Real Sacrifice*: Occasionally, one encounters the claim that the God-man's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross was not a real sacrifice—or at least, not a sacrifice effective in showing love³⁶—because it involved suffering only with respect to His human nature. That is, since the divine nature is impassible (according to Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, et al.), God qua God experiences no suffering, so that the prospect of, and the event of, crucifixion and death presented no divine anguish, no divine distress. Hence, God cannot be said to have suffered with us either in the circumstances surrounding His death or at any moment whatsoever during his earthly life. Now, someone who cannot dread death (whether a painful death or not) and cannot *grievingly* foresee that his plans, aspirations, memories, loving-relationships, etc., will be terminated by his death cannot rightly be thought of as sacrificing himself; for he is giving up nothing whose anticipation brings with it a sense of loss. Moreover, as Anselm's theory is interpreted as teaching, the God-man can never be unhappy—not even in the face of death. So in giving His life (in the sense of letting it be taken from Him), He makes no *sacrifice*. At most, it is said, Anselm can assert that Jesus lets Himself be *martyred* for the truth, rather than saving His life by denying, untruly, that He is God. And martyrdom, it is said, is not the same thing as sacrifice.

The foregoing misunderstanding serves to bring out, once again, the fact that Anselm's orthodox Christology is a necessary condition of the viability of his theory of Atonement; for the foregoing observations derive from an impugning of that orthodoxy. Anselm does maintain that although Christ shares some of our misfortunes, He is not unhappy.³⁷ But, at the same time, Anselm takes seriously the New Testament's presentation of Jesus as groaning in spirit (John 11:33) and as saying, "My

³⁵ *Cur deus homo* I, 8 and II, 10.

³⁶ See Adams's exploratory discussion in *Horendous Evils*, 121, 168–70, and 174. On p. 174 she writes: "I prefer a version of my Christological hypothesis according to which God the Son suffers in *both* natures—in the Divine nature . . . and in the human nature . . ." (On p. 121 the reference in footnote 30 needs to be corrected to read: "*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 2, chap. 12 . . .")

³⁷ *Cur deus homo* II, 12.

soul is sorrowful even unto death" (Matt 26:38). He reconciles the apparent discrepancy between the passage in *Cur deus homo* and the passages in Scripture by recourse to the doctrine of the hypostatic union of Jesus's two natures—i. e., the doctrine of the intimate union of the divine nature with the human nature in the Person of God the Son. This union is so close that it allows for Jesus to be said to suffer with respect to His human nature (though not with respect to His divine nature). Yet, it is the God-man, Jesus, who suffers in and through the human nature: the human will, the human intellect, the human body. And it is the God-man who is not unhappy, in and because of the divine nature. (A person, not a nature, is rightly said to be happy.) According to Anselm the reason that the God-man is not unhappy is that He willingly accepts this human condition and willingly undergoes the sacrifice of His life. The fact that He does not grieve over this sacrifice-as-such does not render it less a sacrifice and more an instance of martyrdom. He accepts being made a curse; for it is written "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23). Thus, Anselm can both concede that Jesus dreads death (as witnessed by His agony in Gethsemane) and is not unhappy; for "as something-beneficial which someone possesses against his will does not conduce to his happiness, so to experience something-detrimental wisely and willingly, without being compelled to, is not [a cause of] unhappiness."³⁸ Happiness, after all, is a state of being, whereas sorrow and distress are transient feelings.

So, in last analysis, Anselm can be seen as insisting upon the real nature of Christ's sacrifice—i. e., as insisting upon the intelligibility of our speaking of Christ as willingly and obediently sacrificing Himself. However, this intelligibility is dependent upon the intelligibility of the theological doctrine of the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures and upon the following theological concession: Just as the soul apart from the body cannot experience the pain of a material fire, so God the Son—in and of Himself—cannot, apart from incarnation, experience pain and suffering. Yet, God-incarnate can be said to experience both physical pain and psychological distress—in and through His human nature.

Finally, there is a sense in which self-sacrifice and martyrdom are not mutually exclusive. If one let's himself be slain because of his belief in a putative noble-truth that he chooses to continue affirming rather than choosing to renounce, then he is appropriately said to be a martyr

³⁸ Loc. cit.

for the truth. However, if he foresees that his entering into a given situation (such as entering into Jerusalem, for example) will force upon him the making of such a choice, and if he could avoid that situation but chooses not to do so, in order thereby to die in witness of the truth: his martyrdom just is a self-sacrifice.

4. *The Key Problem Facing Anselm's Account*: As brilliant as Anselm's *Cur deus homo* is in the history of Western spirituality, its reasoning nonetheless embeds an ineliminable fallacious inference—one pointed out by Wolfgang Gombocz and others.³⁹ Put concisely, Anselm's basic argument, as we have seen, is that only an Adamic man *ought* to make satisfaction on behalf of his race; but only God *can* make satisfaction; therefore, satisfaction must be made by a God-man, if it is to be made at all.⁴⁰ Now, this argument (as I pointed out many years ago and as Gombocz accentuates and expands upon) is invalid by virtue of its equivocating on both the word "ought" and the word "can." Let us consider these briefly. With respect to human beings Anselm uses the word "ought" (*debere*) in the sense of "to owe": only an Adamic man *owes* However, with respect to Christ, Anselm uses "ought" in the sense of "should if He chooses to." For Christ, although He is a man, is a sinless man. Unlike all other Adamic human beings, He does not owe to God a debt that has resulted from His sinning. Nor is He under obligation to make restitution on behalf of His fellow-human beings. Nor is He under the sentence of death, as are all other human beings. Accordingly, qua God-man, He does not owe to God any payment (other than obedience); it is not true to say of Him that He ought (*debere*) to make satisfaction (i. e., that he *owes* [*debere*] the making of satisfaction). But, in another sense, He *ought* to make satisfaction inasmuch as He wills to redeem His fellow human beings; and this redemption can be accomplished only by His freely yielding up His life.

³⁹ Wolfgang L. Gombocz, "Anselm von Aosta als Schrecken der 'europäischen' Anthropologie? Anmeldung der philosophischen Pflicht 'Cur Deus Homo' zu durchkreuzen," in *Entwicklungslinien mittelalterlicher Philosophie. Vorträge des V. Kongresses der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Philosophie* (ed. Gerhard Leibold and Winfried Löffler; Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1999), part 2, 73–86. Idem, "Cur Deus homo als 'europäische' Last: Einwände vor allem gegen den Theologen Anselm," in *Cur Deus Homo* (ed. Paul Gilbert et al.; Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1999), 453–70. Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 195–97.

⁴⁰ *Cur deus homo* II, 6.

Likewise, an equivocation occurs with respect to the modal word "can." As I earlier wrote:⁴¹

When Anselm says "Only man ought to," he is also tacitly saying "Only man can"; and this sense of "can" is different from the sense of "can" in the statement "Only God can." Only God can—in the sense that only God has the power to make satisfaction; only man can—in the sense that only man can consistently be thought to make satisfaction. That is, only God *can effectively*; only man *can acceptably*. For it is theologically unacceptable (i. e., inconsistent with other theological tenets) for man to be forgiven immediately, apart from any satisfaction's having been made; and it is theologically unacceptable (inconsistent) for anyone who is not a man (of Adam's race) to make payment for . . . [Adam's] and his descendants' debts.

This equivocation on "can" is significant because Anselm states that a sinless non-Adamic man *cannot* make satisfaction for the Adamic human race because he would not be of that race. But this sense of "cannot" is different from the sense in which he cannot make satisfaction because he lacks the power to do so. To be sure, a non-Adamic human being would lack the power. Yet, there is a second reason why he cannot make satisfaction: viz., he *cannot* because he *ought not*. But this "ought not" is not meant in the sense that he does not *owe* (though, indeed, he would not owe anything except continued obedience) but in the sense that his sacrifice is not *appropriately* transferable.

We may re-state the entire matter more pointedly:⁴²

Only Adam and his natural descendants ought₁ in that only they owe; but Jesus ought₂ in that He wills to. Only God can₁ in that He has the power to; but only man can₂ in that no other alternative is theologically admissible. Anselm's confusion occurs when he infers, invalidly, that because only man ought₁ and only God can₁, only a God-man ought₂ and can₁.

The foregoing line of reasoning evidences Anselm's main fallacy. However, following upon this fallacious inference of his there come subsidiary confusions. For he implies

that only Adamic man can₂ because only Adamic man ought₁—that is, that non-Adamic man can₂ not because he ought₁ not. But

⁴¹ Hopkins, *Companion*, 196–97.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 197.

if Jesus both ought₁ not and can₂, why should the case be different for a non-Adamic man? Why, in other words should we predicate “can₂not” rather than simply “can₁not” of a non-Adamic man? Clearly, a non-Adamic man who was not also God could₁ not render satisfaction, for he would not have the power to make a payment greater than everything which is other than God. But why could₂ not God have become incarnate by assuming a non-Adamic human nature in order for a non-Adamic God-man to render satisfaction?⁴³

Anselm’s only answer to the last question is that a non-Adamic man’s sacrifice would not restore the honor and dignity of the Adamic human race—restore it by virtue of a *member of that race’s* making satisfaction and defeating the Devil on behalf of the entire race.

In the end, then, Anselm must discard His simple argument to the effect that only a man *ought*; only God *can*; and, therefore, only a God-man both *ought* and *can*. For the conclusion is a non-sequitur and, as such, requires additional premises in order for it to be derived. And it now, too, becomes clear that Anselm’s theory of divine sacrifice is plausible mostly in the combined contexts (1) of feudal honor (including family honor) and (2) of the ecclesiastical penitential system. The former context promotes the idea that honor is due to an individual in proportion to his rank or social position or ontological degree of perfection. The latter context fosters the notion that penance must be done for each sin and that the penance must be proportional to the gravity of the sinful act. Nowadays, however, in Western societies, class distinctions tend to be minimized, the spirit of political egalitarianism tends to prevail (“one man, one vote”), and paradigms related to kings and royalty—paradigms such as that of *lèse majesté*—no longer hold sway. Similarly, the idea of there having to be a strict proportion between penance and pardon is less widely accepted. Accordingly, Anselm’s theory—as insightful as it was in the medieval context—will hold less appeal to many in the twenty-first century. But were the notions of honor and of rank to be restored, Anselm’s theory of Atonement might once again become more widely embraced. And *a fortiori* this acceptance might well become still more broadly based were there to be a renewed appreciation of the notion of holiness.

⁴³ Ibid., 197.

5. *Concluding Recapitulation:* We have seen, then, that in his *Cur deus homo* Anselm teaches that incarnation and death were the only means whereby God could accomplish the reconciliation of human beings with Himself, once the human race had fallen. In and through Jesus—who is the God-man, two natures in one person—God lovingly effects the supreme sacrifice of Himself qua human to Himself qua divine. This salvific sacrifice of a human being *by* the Divine Being, *to* the Divine Being, *on behalf of* all human beings who will avail themselves of it—this sacrifice is unique and unrepeatable.⁴⁴ And the account of it—whether the simple presentation in the Pauline epistles or the more elaborate theological expansion in Anselm’s *Cur deus homo*—is unparalleled in the history of religion.

For Further Reading in addition to the items in the footnotes:

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⁴⁴ Heb 9:25–28.