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## Introduction

Anselm of Canterbury is at once one of the best- and least-known of medieval thinkers. Two chapters of his third major work (*Proslogion* 2 and 3) are almost notorious. Commonly said to contain the first “ontological argument” for God’s existence, they are widely read and studied even at the undergraduate level, and they continue to puzzle both atheist and theist philosophers. Yet the rest of Anselm’s writings have been less subject to scrutiny. Many philosophers and students of philosophy know little about them, which is regrettable. Anselm had much more to offer about God than a single argument for His existence. And he also had much to say on a range of other topics, some of it still well worth attention.

The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the range of Anselm’s thinking in a way that will help them to reflect on it for themselves. So, as well as including a chapter on the arguments to be found in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 (chapter 7), and one on Anselm on God in general (chapter 6), the volume includes accounts of how Anselm thought about a number of other matters. Readers who work seriously through Anselm’s writings will find that he had things to say on matters of religious epistemology, logic, the nature of truth, the reality and significance of human freedom, and the evaluation of human behaviour. In what follows, therefore, readers will find discussions of Anselm covering all these concerns. They will, in addition, find discussions of how Anselm can be situated against his intellectual background, one dominated by the Bible and the writings of St. Augustine (354–430), and of how he applied his mind to questions arising from key Christian doctrines such as the teaching that God is somehow three in one, and the claim that people are saved by virtue of Christ.

The present volume forms part of a series devoted to major philosophers, and one might wonder whether there is anything philosophical to be gained from a study of Anselm on Christian theology. Yet a sharp distinction between philosophy and theology (nowadays a rigid one with some people) would have seemed puzzling to Anselm, not to mention many of his intellectual ancestors and heirs. For Anselm, what mattered was thinking well about matters of importance. So, even when he is discussing items of Christian doctrine (as opposed to what are clearly “philosophical topics”), he aims to draw on the best he can provide in the way of right thinking. In other words, Anselm’s theology is very much that of a philosopher (taking “philosopher” to mean “someone concerned to argue for conclusions in a cogent way”). So, unless we (surely unreasonably?) rule in advance that no discussion of Christian doctrine can be of philosophical interest, Anselm is of interest as a philosopher (on the understanding of “philosopher” just given) even as he attempts to do what might simply be described as “theology.” For he clearly had a formidable intellect, which shows itself in almost everything he wrote, as the chapters which follow indicate. He never wrote anything which one might imagine editors of contemporary philosophical journals to be happy to publish. It is, however, significant that editors of many contemporary philosophical journals happily publish articles on aspects of Anselm’s thinking.

Anselm’s life was not one of which Hollywood is likely to make a film. As Gillian Evans notes in chapter 1, it was basically the life of a Benedictine monk. Born in 1033, Anselm joined the Abbey of Bec in 1060. He was only twenty-seven at the time, and he lived in a monastic context until the time of his death in 1109. As Evans also explains, however, to say this is not to imply that Anselm spent his entire life behind the walls of a cloister, nor is it to say that his thinking was bound by any walls. Even as Abbot of Bec (1078–93) Anselm had to travel on monastic business, and from 1093, when he became Archbishop of Canterbury, he was much involved in what are sometimes quaintly called “worldly affairs.” Readers of Anselm should, however, note that what we now think of as universities are very much the successors to monasteries such as those (at Bec and Canterbury) in which Anselm lived. There was nothing in Anselm’s day that seriously compares with what we mean by the word “university.” But there were places in which people treasured the

literature of antiquity and thought about the questions it raised. When he first arrived at Bec, Anselm encountered a school presided over by Lanfranc (c. 1005–89), himself a notable medieval intellectual, and Anselm spent much of his monastic life teaching and discussing. He was not an academic in the modern sense, but much of his time was devoted to thoroughly academic matters. Anselm's world was one in which people felt free to argue. Some fruits of these arguments can be found in Anselm's writings.

In spite of their origin and their profoundly theological orientation, many of Anselm's writings appeal to nothing other than what any thinking person might be expected to accept. Take, for example, the prologue to his *Monologion*. Here Anselm explains that he wrote the book at the instigation of some of his fellow monks, who wanted "a kind of model meditation" on things he previously said to them about "the essence of the divine." The word "meditation" echoes the Rule of Saint Benedict, in which monks are encouraged to chew over and think about (to meditate on) texts like the Bible. So Anselm is clearly out to help his fellow monks when it comes to what they are all about simply by being monks. As he proceeds, however, he does not seem to be preaching only to the choir. His brief, he says, is to proceed on this basis:

Nothing whatsoever to be argued on the basis of the authority of Scripture, but the constraints of reason concisely to prove, and the clarity of truth clearly to show, in the plain style, with everyday arguments, and down-to-earth dialectic, the conclusions of distinct investigations.

In a letter to Anselm, Lanfranc expressed disapproval of the *Monologion* because of its lack of appeal to ecclesiastical authority, and one can easily see why Lanfranc was worried. Even though its conclusions are of theological significance, the *Monologion* is clearly out to offer philosophical rather than theological reasoning. The same can be said of much else that Anselm wrote and it would, therefore, be absurd to deny him the title "philosopher."

During his lifetime, Anselm met intellectual opposition from at least two notable figures, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers (dates unknown) and Roscelin of Compiègne (d. 1125), and, though his "ontological argument" is exceedingly well known, it has also been much criticized. It was even rejected by no less a medieval heavyweight than Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–1274), according to whom it claims more

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knowledge of God's nature than people actually have, and according to whom it also moves illicitly from what a word means to the conclusion that something exists to correspond to it (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 10–11; *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2,1). Other medieval authors, however (especially those with more of a taste for Augustinian ways of thinking than Aquinas had), were happy to cite Anselm as an authority, and in the last hundred years or more he has been studied and written about with considerable admiration.

Interest in medieval ideas is now something of a growth industry, and Anselm ranks as one of the figures most worked over in this connection, especially at the hands of people with an interest in philosophy of religion. However, with the exception of R. W. Southern's magisterial *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), and apart from some notable works by Jasper Hopkins (for example *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, Minneapolis, 1972) and G. R. Evans (for example *Anselm*, London, 1989), there is little on Anselm to which students and general readers can be referred. That is the chief reason for this book. We believe that it fills a gap, and we hope that its readers will find that it does so in a useful way, one which might prompt them to further reflection on Anselm.

G. R. EVANS

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# 1 Anselm's life, works, and immediate influence

A book like this has to give a picture not only of the modern philosophical and theological interest of its subject's writings, but of the context in which he wrote. For a writer whose works have been the subject of debate for nearly a millennium, there is the additional task of seeking to convey the changing nuances of expectation with which he was read century by century. All this is of more than historical importance. To discuss in translation the thought of someone who chose his words very carefully in Latin is not necessarily to discuss exactly what he wrote. And to analyze ideas out of context is to discuss matters which, while they may be of high philosophical interest in themselves, may also not be exactly the topics or the solutions Anselm had in mind.

Anselm of Bec and Canterbury is read as a thinker in his own right and not merely as a prominent exponent of a mode of thought belonging to a particular period of medieval thought. Nevertheless, he was in a number of respects a man of his time and the thought itself was conditioned by personal and historical circumstances which need to be understood if his ideas are to be interpreted with sensitivity to what preoccupied him and what he meant to say. This chapter is biographical and historical; it seeks to provide a brief but necessary context and to encourage the reader to consider in this light the "Anselmian" complexion of the topics covered in other chapters.

## THE SOURCES: FRIENDS AND WITNESSES

The evidence about Anselm's life and writings includes a body of materials unusually full for a figure of his period, and coming from

sources often close to their subject. Anselm had a biographer who was Boswell to his Johnson in a way which was extremely uncommon in the confined and convention-ridden hagiographical world of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Eadmer met Anselm in 1079 when Anselm was forty-six and Eadmer probably barely twenty. They met again when Anselm came to England and entered on his period as archbishop, and from 1092/3 they were in one another's company a good deal in the community at Canterbury where Anselm did his best to recreate the life he had formerly enjoyed at Bec.

Eadmer's *Life* (*Vita Anselmi*) is first-hand in places, for he was living with Anselm in the same community for many of his later years. Parts of his account are drawn from Anselm's own replies, on the occasions when Eadmer questioned him about his youth and early life with this biography in mind. Only from Anselm himself can Eadmer have obtained the description of his well-born Italian parents, the generous but spendthrift father and the conscientious mother who was careful with money.<sup>1</sup>

In about 1100 Anselm was made aware that Eadmer was writing his *Life*. Once he had given this information some thought, he asked Eadmer to destroy what he had written. Eadmer did as he was told, but he admits that he made a copy. Nevertheless, from that point it was difficult for him, in conscience, to go on actively working on it. So the *Life* is weaker on the events towards the end of Anselm's life. After Anselm's death, when the need for a record of his miracles became more important, Eadmer's *Life* began to mutate from biography to hagiography as, with successive copyings, Eadmer added a little to the miraculous stories.

Eadmer was a historian; he wrote another book, *The History of Recent Events* (*Historia Novorum*) in which he was able to tell the story of Anselm in another mode, which he intended to be complementary to the *Life*. In its preface he explains that his contemporaries are anxious to know about the deeds of those who lived before them, desiring to be comforted and fortified by the examples they have set. The story that Eadmer has to tell begins with the Norman Conquest and the archbishopric of Lanfranc at Canterbury. Then he introduces Anselm, his spiritual "hero," a man as good as he is learned and at the same time dedicated to the contemplative life. So the *History of Recent Events* becomes something not wholly separate in its purposes from the *Life*.

Anselm became famous for his conversation and for the addresses he gave to communities of monks on his travels. Talk is of its nature evanescent, but Anselm had loyal and diligent admirers, who made an attempt to preserve a record. One of these was Eadmer himself. Another was the monk Alexander of the Canterbury community. There seems to have been a third who cannot so confidently be identified.

The chronicler William of Malmesbury (c. 1080 – c. 1143) took a keen interest in the preservation of the Anselmian literary remains,<sup>2</sup> and he records, consciously treading in the footsteps of Eadmer, a number of features of Anselm's archbishopric.<sup>3</sup> Guibert of Nogent, who regarded Anselm as a major influence on his life, describes in his autobiography (*De Vita Sua*) how Anselm visited the monastery at Fly and how he helped him "manage his inner man" using a conventional phrase for the soul or "inner man" (*interior homo*). Gundulf, a friend and pupil of Anselm and monk of Bec who became Bishop of Rochester, is the subject of a *Life* by one of the Rochester community. It provides another significant contemporary view of Anselm and the flavour of his dealings with others. There is a description of the way Anselm would talk and Gundulph would weep, watering with his tears the seeds Anselm was sowing.

Anselm's pleasure in finding someone able to meet him even briefly on his own ground as an equal is obvious in the delight he took in the reply to the *Proslogion* argument which he received from the monk Gaunilo of Marmoutiers. That can be seen even where there is no body of writing from the friend in question to tell us what he thought. Boso, who arrived at Bec about 1085, and eventually became its fourth abbot, was apparently one of the relatively few of his own monks who could give Anselm a good argument. He included in *On the Virgin Conception* a recognition of the way Boso had taken the lead among his friends in encouraging him to complete the *Cur Deus Homo*.<sup>4</sup> The *Life* of Boso describes his arrival at Bec and the impact, both intellectual and pastoral, that Anselm had on him.<sup>5</sup> When Anselm moved to England, he asked to have Boso with him, and Boso crossed the sea to join him. Anselm trusted him enough, according to the *Life*, to send him to the Council of Clermont in 1095, when he was not able to go himself. Anselm's exile found Boso returning to Bec, but on his return from his second exile, Anselm asked the Bec community if

he might have Boso back to be his companion and Boso returned to England.

#### ANSELM'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Eadmer's story of Anselm's life is not without its tales of the miraculous and its improving moral lessons. But it is also true biography in the sense that it preserves a great deal of what Anselm trustingly told to the enquiring Eadmer as a friend and confidant. One of the conventions of the hagiographer was the inclusion of a vision, usually the vision of the saint's mother while she was pregnant with him. Anselm evidently provided his own, genuine, vision. He told Eadmer that he had had a dream when he was a small boy. His mother had told him that God is in heaven and rules over all things and he had imagined heaven as resting on top of the mountains which surrounded his home. In his dream he was told to climb to the top of the mountain and there he found God sitting like a great king in his court. They talked and the king's steward brought him white bread to eat. When he woke, he believed he had been in heaven.<sup>6</sup> Eadmer says he became a studious boy, pious and generally beloved, partly perhaps as a consequence of this vision.

The small boy became an adolescent. He lost interest in study; his mother died, and with the loss of this "anchor" he was afloat on a sea of worldly enjoyments. Eadmer describes the break-up of the family. Anselm's father became hostile. Nothing Anselm could do would please him. Anselm decided to leave home, giving up his hope of inheriting the family estate, and for three years he wandered in Burgundy.<sup>7</sup> Probably he was doing what other young men of his generation did, and "sampling" the teaching on offer from various peripatetic masters in this generation before the first glimmerings of what were to become the universities were visible. In due course, Eadmer reports, he arrived at the newly founded abbey of Bec, where Lanfranc (c. 1005–89) was famously teaching at the invitation of the founder-abbot Herluin (d. 1078),<sup>8</sup> who was himself not a lettered man but a retired soldier.

At Bec an innovative kind of school had been set up by Lanfranc. Pupils were flocking to him who had no plans to become monks, but wanted a good education – itself a striking sign of the times. Lanfranc, like Anselm, was an educated and able Italian. Anselm found him



lecturing on works of classical logic and rhetoric, as well as teaching the study of the Bible, and his own intellectual formation in these areas was correspondingly strengthened.

The chronicler Orderic Vitalis later described this school, leaning heavily on the account in the *Life* of Eadmer. "A great foundation of the study of the liberal arts and the study of Scripture was laid at Bec by Lanfranc and it was magnificently expanded by Anselm." Anselm was apparently soon involved by Lanfranc in the teaching, for he must have been a useful acquisition to the little school.<sup>9</sup>

After he had been at Bec for a time, Anselm decided to become a monk himself. It struck him that he was leading a life of simplicity, hard work, dedication, and lack of sleep which would be very little different if he became a monk of Bec. There was some inward wrestling, described by Eadmer, who must have heard of these musings from Anselm's own lips. To stay at Bec would mean being eclipsed as a teacher by the older and more established Lanfranc. To go to Cluny, as was then fashionable, would mean abandoning his studies; in that way he could spare himself the risk of intellectual pride by submerging himself in ritual. Then again, he could go somewhere else, and stand out as a local intellectual leader. Then he came to himself and realized that if he seriously wanted to become a monk, he should not be considering where the best career advantage might lie.<sup>10</sup> He asked advice. He went to Lanfranc and set out his options as he saw them: to become a monk; to go into a hermitage; or to return to his home, for by now his father was dead and his inheritance of the family estates had come to him. He had an idea of living there and helping the poor. He chose the (still flourishing) community of Bec.<sup>11</sup>

Having made his decision, he committed himself completely. Here we depend on Eadmer's praise of the wholeheartedness with which he put from him all worldly interests and set about mastering the Scriptures and practicing "speculation," the word used at the time (probably because that was the way Boethius used it), to describe theological study.<sup>12</sup>

Eadmer puts Anselm's theological acumen down to his spirituality. The three years he spent in prayers and spiritual exercises when he first became a monk gave him a power of seeing into divine mysteries, he says. Indeed, by Eadmer's account, he could even see through solid walls.<sup>13</sup> He was remorseless in his spiritual exercises,

in fasting and vigils and prayer, and untiring in his encouragement of others. This bred resentment and a dislike of him in some quarters, but Eadmer says he won round the resentful by his peaceable behavior.<sup>14</sup>

With beginners in the monastic life, Anselm could be a hard taskmaster. The young monk Osbern became his special protégé and Anselm first treated him gently and then increasingly harshly in order to strip away his childishness and make him grow up in the faith. Osbern suddenly died, just as he reached his spiritual maturity,<sup>15</sup> and Anselm's grief is noticeable in his letters in the year after Osbern's death, as he wrote round asking for prayers to be said for his soul.<sup>16</sup> This picture of a severe and demanding Anselm contrasts with the quite different picture of a gentle Anselm that Eadmer paints later in his *Life*. Anselm in conversation with an abbot was told about the bad behaviour of the abbot's young monks. The abbot said he beat them day and night and their behaviour did not improve at all. Anselm drew a comparison for him with the way a sapling would respond if, after it was planted, it was enclosed so tightly and remorselessly that it could not grow normally. Naturally boys would grow up twisted if they were denied freedom to develop. The boys needed encouragement and gentle persuasion.<sup>17</sup>

By now Anselm had become prior, in succession to Lanfranc, who had moved to Caen in 1063. He found his duties burdensome and a distraction and disruptive of his former tranquillity. Anselm tended to react to events rather than to seek systematically to control them. He was manifestly not naturally a good administrator. Letters to Lanfranc<sup>18</sup> are revealing about these shortcomings, for example in the efficient handling of money. He even went to the Archbishop of Rouen to ask whether he might be allowed to return to his former simple life. He did not get his wish. He was told that it was his duty to continue with his pastoral burden and that if a higher office was offered him he ought to accept that too.<sup>19</sup>

When Lanfranc left, Anselm also took charge of the teaching at Bec. His pupils continued to be both clerics and lay students, according to Orderic Vitalis. In fact, it is probable that with the departure of Lanfranc the school ceased to take external pupils, such as the sons of the local nobility, and became a true monastic school, in which Anselm was able to foster in a leisurely way over the long term the development of the minds and souls of young and more