

“From Doubt and Decline towards Dialogue:
Discussing Anselm’s *Proslogion* in the Religiously Pluralist Classroom”

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1. Introduction

I begin by asking for the inspiration of Anselm of Canterbury, taking a cue from the meditative prayer in chapter one of his *Proslogion*. If I was fortunate enough to have Anselm speak in my place this morning, I can imagine him saying, “Come now, conference participants! Let us flee for a while from the cares of academic specializations and research and publication protocols, casting aside these burdensome pursuits. Let us set aside time to enter the inner chambers of our classrooms and particular institutions, and there seek a pedagogical rationale for reading, discussing, and teaching religious texts within a liberal arts curriculum. For if we cannot offer a sustained and principled defense of the value of studying religion and theology in colleges and universities dedicated to free inquiry about fundamental existential questions, where will such intellectual practices occur?”

“But alas! wretched as we are, those of us intent on preserving a place for theological inquiries in higher education are bowed down in the current educational context. For both vocal secular critics of religion and pious caretakers of religion have replaced the search for ‘that than which-nothing greater can be conceived’ with the conviction that religion and piety are primarily reified markers of personal and collective identity. Be it our goal to look past these assumptions and set our sights upon the search for the truth, wherever truth leads us.”

The secularization of American higher education, and the accompanying marginalization of theological study in college and university curricula, is a process that has been occurring for centuries, as George Marsden noted in his book *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*.¹ The causes for this marginalization begin with the desire of Protestant denominations in the colonial and Federal periods to downplay creedal disagreements among themselves. They continue during Americanized Romantic-era attempts to locate the essence of Christian religion in interiorized piety and whiggish notions of progress, and reach a culmination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century initiatives to situate the university within a scientific paradigm in which achievement is gauged in terms of empirical measurement and technological ability. Marsden and other commentators have rehearsed this history in detail, and for many it may be a cause for commiseration. My purpose, however, is neither to bemoan these changes nor to praise them as the acme of modern liberalism. Rather I intend to argue that the secularization of Christian colleges and universities opens up new opportunities for reintroducing theology into the liberal arts curriculum in a religiously pluralist rather than in a confessionalist context. To illustrate these possibilities, I employ Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* as a test case, relying both on the text itself and also upon the historical environment within which the *Proslogion* was written, for Anselm too faced a profound shift in educational ideals during his day, and his writings indicate a need to confront a new

¹ See George Marsden, *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

audience in the emerging scholastic classroom and a new method of doing theology. Rather than denouncing the transformation that theology underwent as it expanded beyond the monasteries, Anselm retooled theology. Liberal-arts practitioners and theologians would do well to follow his example.

2. Increasing Professional and Religious Pluralism in Anselm's Context

Recent scholarship in medieval educational history has supplemented an earlier focus on the role of Benedictine monasticism with greater attention to the importance of cathedral schools and the Ottonian and Salian imperial courts in fostering an approach to philosophy centered upon the study of Cicero's oratory and service to the state. Stephen Jaeger's recent study of primary source documents from the tenth and eleventh centuries challenges medieval histories of the liberal arts that marginalize contributions from outside the sphere of monastic education.² A figure such as the monk-scholar Gerbert of Aurillac, for example, straddles the boundary between religious and secular education. Having left his position as abbot of the monastery of Bobbio, Gerbert spent his days teaching arts and rhetoric, until receiving the patronage of Emperor Otto III, with whose support Gerbert became Pope Sylvester II in the year 999. In his work *On the Rational and the Use of Reason*, Gerbert promoted a so-called "imperial philosophy" (*imperialis philosophia*), in which the logic and dialectic of Aristotle and Boethius were placed at the service of Otto's court. While Gerbert had learned grammar at the monastery of Aurillac, his

² See C. Stephen Jaeger, "Philosophy, ca. 950—ca. 1050, *Viator* 40/1 (2009): 17-40.

own introduction to logic came during his time at the imperial court and at the cathedral school at Reims studying with the teacher Gerannus.³

Although logic in these decades remained subordinate to a practical understanding of the liberal arts as a benefit for a career in secular administration, over time the influence of the cathedral schools filtered back into monastic settings, including the monastery at Bec where Anselm taught. Anselm's teacher Lanfranc was a key figure in this development. Having come to this new monastery after studies in the liberal arts and law, as prior Lanfranc began to admit students who were not planning to enter a monastery, either at Bec or elsewhere, in order to raise money for the abbey.⁴ By the late eleventh century, a number of these students at Bec had entered administrative careers, bolstered by their studies in history and law.⁵ Anselm's resuscitation of the literary dialogue in medieval Latin literature needs to be interpreted against this shift in the student population at Bec. Even though Anselm eventually reversed Lanfranc's decision to admit external students at Bec, the use of dialogue manifest in Anselm's early work *De Grammatico* (*On*

³ See Richer of Saint-Rémi, *Histories* [3.45], vol. 2, ed. and trans. Justin Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 66—71.

⁴ See Alex J. Novikoff, "Anselm, Dialogue, and the Rise of Scholastic Disputation," *Speculum* 86 (2011): 387—418. The primary sources dealing with Lanfranc's education, including the biographical material from Milo Crispin and Gilbert Crispin, are surveyed in H. E. J. Cowdrey, *Lanfranc: Scholar, Monk, and Archbishop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5—10.

⁵ See Sally N. Vaughn, "Anselm, Lanfranc, and the School of Bec: Searching for the Students of Bec," in *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Commemoration of Denis L. T. Bethell*, ed. Marc A. Meyer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 155—81. Also, see Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance*, The Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Grammar) endured in his later theological dialogues, most notably *Cur Deus Homo* [Why God became Human?]⁶

Even an early work of Anselm's such as the *Proslogion*, which is not composed in the genre of a formal dialogue with different literary characters, displays the transition from soliloquy towards dialogue and argument in the response that it generated and Anselm's rejoinder. In the preface to this work, Anselm describes it as an *alloquium*, an address or allocution. In his later response to Gaunilo, however, Anselm appeals to those who have knowledge of *disputandi argumentandique* (debating, discussing, proving, arguing) to come to his defense against Gaunilo's objections.⁷ Indeed Anselm's entire literary output displays an evolution in the direction of debate, and there are for Anselm culpable and praiseworthy debaters. For example, in the beginning of his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Anselm distinguishes between the arguments of those who proudly deny what their intellects cannot grasp and the arguments of those who humbly live the Christian faith.⁸ By the time Anselm wrote the later *Cur Deus Homo* [Why God became Human], he no longer waits for the response from the likes of Gaunilo as he explicitly anticipates debate and organizes the first part of the dialogue around meeting the "objections of unbelievers."⁹

⁶ Novikoff criticizes Richard Southern's lack of appreciation of Anselm's debt to Lanfranc on this point. See Novikoff, "Anselm, Dialogue, and the Rise of Scholastic Disputation," 405.

⁷ See Anselm, *Reply to Gaunilo* 7.

⁸ See Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.

⁹ See Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, preface and 1.

3. Reading the *Proslogion* with Awareness of Religious Pluralism

Interpretive awareness of Anselm's transitional educational context helps to balance understandings of the *Proslogion* that reduce this work to an exercise in a completely interiorized version of *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. The *Proslogion* certainly qualifies as such a search but one that is neither solipsistic nor exclusivist. Rather, once we know more about Anselm's historical context, we can appreciate that Anselm's search in the *Proslogion* is marked by an environment of religious pluralism and debates, but not debates that mirror our contemporary polemics between religious believers and skeptics. First, Anselm wrote this treatise against the background of the intra-Christian schism between the churches of Rome and Constantinople that occurred in 1054, and the result of that schism continued to influence Anselm's theological career, as he gave an address at the Council of Bari in 1098 crafted to convince Eastern Christians of the Latin doctrine of the trinitarian *filioque*, the procession of the Son from the Holy Spirit as well as from the Father. Second, Anselm was part of a generation of Christian theologians who were coming into increased contact with anti-Christian polemical works by non-Christian authors, much of which was in dialogue form. *The Account of the Disputation of the Priest*, a ninth-century Jewish text, is an example of this genre. *The Account* attacks the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation on the grounds that the divine nature is incompatible with such a religious teaching. At the beginning of his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Anselm refers to the writings of his fellow scholastic Roscelin, who at the Council of Soissons in 1092 was accused by Anselm and others of teaching tritheism. Roscelin's nominalist

contention that the persons of the Trinity must be separate substances in order to avoid admitting that the Father and the Spirit would also have had to become incarnate alongside the Son is found in a work attributed to one of his contemporaries, the Islamic theologian al-Ghazālī. A dialogue format was precluded in *On the Incarnation of the Word*, as the work was addressed directly to Pope Urban II, but later in the dialogue *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm's interlocutor Boso praises Anselm's arguments for the Incarnation, claiming that it should serve as proof for Jews and pagans.¹⁰

Twentieth-century philosophers and theologians have split much ink and typeface over the issue of whether the *Proslogion* is an exercise in natural theology or, as twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth held, *a priori* theological support for those already initiated.¹¹ One contemporary interpreter outlines such a dichotomous choice as follows:

Loyalty to Christian identity remained for Anselm the first responsibility of theological interpretation and the only authentic basis for theological reasoning. Anselm would not have shared the belief that a progressive and sure epistemological foundation was at hand, immanently accessible, to which he could lead the unbeliever and from which they could share common assumptions.¹²

¹⁰ See Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 121—25; al-Ghazālī, *Réfutation Excellente de la Divinité de Jesus-Christ d'après les Évangiles*, ed. and trans. Robert Chidiac (Paris: E. Leroux, 1939); Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 2.22.

¹¹ See Karl Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, trans. I. W. Robertson (London: SCM, 1960).

¹² Jeffrey C. Pugh, "Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm as Contemporary," *Theology Today* 55/1 (April 1998): 35—45, at 43. Later in the article Pugh writes, "Seeking to justify itself within its cultural context, it [theology] runs the risk of connecting its theology so strongly to the culture that its construals of God will diminish when the cultural forms it arose within pass into yet another" (44). By contrast, I hold with Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904—84) that "A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix."

I must simply disagree. For Anselm, the criterion of theology is first and foremost the truth of God rather than the maintenance of religious identity, which is a derivative issue. Moreover, the narrator's self-understanding shifts in the course of the *Proslogion's* first chapter, as I will argue momentarily. Debates over the role of reason versus faith in the *Proslogion* would assume a helpful new guise if Anselm's original audience was taken into account. Anselm was not addressing a group of eighteenth-century deists. Theology and philosophy, and the accompanying distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge, were not as clearly distinct as they would become some two centuries after his time. The fool he references from Psalms 14 and 53 does not provide a clear-cut case of religious atheism but according to the psalmist, an example of moral corruption. The pressing concern in the opening chapters of the *Proslogion* is what kind of god God is, a more intelligible concern given the religious differences in Anselm's context. Let's see what a reading of the opening chapters of the *Proslogion* can look like through an interreligiously informed hermeneutic.

Anselm concludes chapter one with a quotation from Isaiah: "unless I believe, I will not understand" (*nisi credidero, non intelligam*; Is 7:9). This well-known verse is also included in Anselm's letter to Pope Urban II at the beginning of his work *On the Incarnation of the Word* and clearly served as a guiding principle in his writings; it is often used as support for a fideist approach to the *Proslogion*.¹³ Yet there are

Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), xi.

¹³ See Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.

too many other passages in Anselm's writings that appeal to rational persuasion of non-Christians for readers to stretch Anselm's citation of this verse into a global epistemological principle that would hold good for all persons.¹⁴ Anselm himself may begin reasoning from a position of religious faith, but many of his readers have not.

The second chapter's famous definition of God as "that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought" acquires a different cast when it is accepted as a premise about God than as a self-evident proof or, as Kant held, an exercise in trying to derive existence from reasoning, a charge that would be better leveled against the argument for God in Descartes's *Third Meditation*.¹⁵ As Katherin Rogers notes, Anselm's theological premises are intended to achieve two goals at the same time: first, deepening the religious belief of insider participants, and second, persuading outsiders.¹⁶ While this definition of God is not separable from the religious belief of insiders, neither is it a neutral lowest common denominator. Since the definition is at its root apophatic, God as "that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought" by itself

¹⁴ In addition to *Cur Deus Homo* 2.22, for another example see *On the Incarnation of the Word* 6.

¹⁵ Anselm, *Proslogion* 2, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87; see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A592/B620—A602/B630. A critique of Kant's rejection of the "ontological argument" is given by Pugh, "*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*."

¹⁶ See Katherin Rogers, "Can Christianity Be Proven? St. Anselm of Canterbury on Faith and Reason," in *Anselm Studies* 2, eds. Joseph C. Schnaubelt et al. (Kraus International, 1988), 459-479, at 466. Also, note Brian Davies, "Anselm and the Ontological Argument," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, eds. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157—77, at 174—76.

reveals no positive content about God or about the image of God.¹⁷ The premise is analogous to the limit of a convergent mathematical sequence, especially given Anselm's further assertion in chapter fifteen that God is "something greater than can be thought."¹⁸ Human thoughts can approach God by way of comparison in the manner of a geometric asymptote, tending toward but never attaining identity with the divine. This apophatic claim therefore is also comparative, as the existence of God is only indirectly revealed by comparison with other thoughts. While the thoughts of Anselm and other religious participants are in large part determined by the specific content of their respective traditions, exemplified in the opening chapter of the *Proslogion*, the advantage of Anselm's premise in chapter two for interreligious dialogue and debate is that this apophatic definition of God is not confined within any particular network of signs, symbols, or doctrines.

Critics can rightly note that this apophatic approach means that the question of God's existence is not one of evidence or of ontology, as pace many subsequent interpreters Anselm does not equate God with Being or with Existence. This is true, but this is precisely what lends Anselm's misleadingly called ontological argument strength in a religiously pluralistic context. If the issue of God's existence were to be settled by evidence empirical or metaphysical in nature, then the argument would necessarily acquire an esoteric character. If God were the same type of being as the hypothetical island that Anselm's interlocutor Gaunilo posited in his short treatise *On Behalf of the Fool*, then the *Proslogion* could only be convincing to readers who

¹⁷ Readers of Anselm's *Proslogion* know that after chapter five there are several chapters characterizing God's qualities, although these are followed by chapter fifteen's assertion that God is greater than can be thought.

¹⁸ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 15, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 96.

shared Anselm's esoteric knowledge, a functional example here of what Gotthold Lessing termed "the accidental truths of history."¹⁹ This would be the case with any knowledge received solely from scripture, tradition, or ecclesiastical authority. In assessing Anselm's argument, Gaunilo was searching for categorical evidence to correspond to the idea of "that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought." Finding no such correspondence, Gaunilo rejected the argument.

In the *Proslogion's* opening soliloquy, Anselm himself had pursued this course before shifting his focus. In chapter one, Anselm laments that visual confirmation of God's existence is not forthcoming, writing: "By what signs, under what aspect, shall I seek you? Never have I seen you, Lord my God, I do not know Your face. . . . What shall Your servant do, tormented by love of You and cast off 'far from Your face' [Ps. 31:22]?"²⁰ Unlike Gaunilo, however, Anselm's consciousness of his wretched state moves him from seeking a vision towards recognizing his desire to encounter God, and Clive Barrett notes how the language in the opening chapter of *Proslogion* shifts from vision to conception as the prayer proceeds.²¹ Anselm prays, "I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves."²² Colin Grant noted that for Anselm "the existence of God is a question of meaning, not of evidence"; this opening prayer marks a shift towards interiority and fixes meaning within the speaker's desire for God, a desire

¹⁹ See Gotthold Lessing, *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*, trans. Henry Chadwick (London: A. & C. Black, 1956), 51—53.

²⁰ Anselm, *Proslogion* 1, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 85.

²¹ See Clive Barrett, "A Careful Reading of St. Anselm's Ontological Argument," *Philosophy and Theology* 23/2 (2011): 217—30, at 220.

²² Anselm *Proslogion* 1, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 87,

that impels Anselm to think in a comparative manner that aims at constant transcendence of particular entities.²³ Interpreted in this light, chapters one and two of *Proslogion* represent Anselm's own liberation from what we can call the "epistemology of the fool" as defended by the likes of Gaunilo. The fool is one who does not make the transformation from exterior images to recognition of one's internal neediness and desire for God, one who does not enter "into the chamber of your soul (*in cubiculum mentis tuae*)" to which Anselm alludes in chapter one of the *Proslogion*.

The meaning that the idea of God holds for the thinker, however, is not to be equated with a subjectivist frame of reference, as if Anselm's assertion in chapter two that to exist jointly in the mind and in reality is greater than merely mental existence specifically *because of* the power of the human mind. That would be to mistake Anselm for a modern philosophical idealist in the manner of someone like J. G. Fichte. Nor is meaning in Anselm's sense of that word defined by a constructivist epistemological paradigm in which individual choice is the root variable that determines meaning. At the beginning of chapter three, Anselm claims "that-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought" "cannot even be thought not to exist."²⁴ To his thinking the very process of thought compels the thinker and directs the mind towards a definite conclusion. In a contemporary world in which religious belief and unbelief hide behind terms of values and identity in order to avoid intellectual scrutiny, Anselm's assertion relativizes without homogenizing the starting points of

²³ See Colin Grant, "Anselm's Argument Today," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57/4 (Winter 1989): 791—806, at 794.

²⁴ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 3 in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 88.

the *Proslogion's* stakeholders in light of an external standard of measurement that the author regards as self-evident. This is the mirror image of much contemporary religious agnosticism, in which believers and unbelievers homogenize their differences by subsuming them beneath a functional antinomy of sorts, a socialized framework of tolerance in which each side agrees that it must disagree with the other side because no rational conclusion can be reached.

4. Conclusion

The possibility for a discussion about the *Proslogion* among Christians and non-Christians and among religious believers, religious non-believers, and religiously uncommitted students hinges upon mutual willingness to embrace what Gyula Klima has called "constitutive reference" as opposed to "parasitic reference." The latter option is a staple in the methodological naturalism that reigns in the social sciences and the humanities in the contemporary academy. When we refer to an entity parasitically, we do so by reference to *what others think* about that entity without sharing in their conceptions about it. Constitutive reference by contrast is the act by which we intentionally refer to an entity by the mental description that we ourselves have of that entity, without such a description being determined by reference to other people's thoughts.²⁵ Much could be said about the logical and epistemological consequences of this distinction in reading Anselm. For my purposes, I would like to call attention to the implications of this distinction for a religiously pluralist classroom. To read Anselm "constitutively" rather than

²⁵ See Gyula Klima, "Saint Anselm's Proof: A Problem of Reference, Intentional Identity and Mutual Understanding," in *Medieval Philosophy and Modern Times*, ed. Ghita Holmström-Hintikka (Boston: Kluwer, 2000), 69—87, at 77—83.

"parasitically" in this case means that teachers and students engage Anselm's argument directly rather than burying it beneath historicist and theological assumptions that exemplify parasitic references. Examples of such parasitic references would be shoehorning the *Proslogion* into a mold of medieval thought or a mold of exclusively Christian philosophy or theology. Parasitic references can also be determined not by the text itself but by the academic setting in which we read Anselm, when for example the *Proslogion* is characterized predominantly as part of the Great Books heritage or the Roman Catholic tradition, or as a medieval classic. The *Proslogion* is part of all these groupings, but to leave off at that point marks a failure to address Anselm's claims on their own merits.

Some may fault my thesis as paying short shrift to the communal context within which books are read. That is a point worthy of further discussion. While the communal and ecclesial presumptions with which we read Anselm are important and inevitably influence our reading of his texts, I think that those assumptions become debilitating when they are determinative of our readings, especially in educational contexts in which formerly confessional or religiously orthodox institutions have transformed themselves into more pluralist and secular schools. I do not claim that this development has been a positive one on balance, but as Marsden notes, it has happened whether religious believers like it or not. Given his willingness to engage religious outsiders real and imagined in his own era, Anselm provides twenty-first century students with a model for how creedal belief

and sincere dialogue can coexist in the university classroom nine centuries after his time.²⁶

²⁶ I give thanks to Mr. Paul Rezkalla for research assistance with this paper.