

# Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement: An Exegesis and Critique of *Cur Deus Homo*

ARTHUR POLLARD

In a century in which liberalism has prevailed in so many areas of life and in which theologically even many Evangelicals have lost their vision of judgment it is perhaps not surprising that Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* has encountered critical denigration. This tone was set in 1899 when that doyen of Germanic liberalism, Harnack, went so far as to say that 'no theory so bad had ever before his day been given out as ecclesiastical',<sup>1</sup> a view incidentally which either ignores or unaccountably elevates the very argument that Anselm sought to dispel, namely, that Christ's death was some sort of payment of the devil's due. By contrast, however, there have been more favourable estimates. Such was J K Mozley's 'If any one Christian work outside the canon of the New Testament may be described as "epoch-making", it is the *Cur Deus Homo* of Anselm'.<sup>2</sup> A work that has provoked such violently contrary reactions would seem to merit some consideration.

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 but at odds with his monarch, William Rufus, was in exile in Italy when he finished *Cur Deus Homo* in 1098. Short though the treatise is, its composition stretched over several years and appears to have taken its origin from the dispute about the incarnation between a group of Jews from Mainz and Anselm's friend, Gilbert Crispin.<sup>3</sup> It may well have been intended as a contribution to a broad theological system, following on his *Proslogion* with its *fides quaerens intellectum* approach to an ontological proof of God. If so, *Cur Deus Homo*, moving through the incarnation to the atonement as the instrument of justification, constitutes the soteriology of such a scheme. At its centre is the idea of satisfaction. Inevitably in a millennium from the death of Christ others had wrestled with the subject. There was Tertullian, for instance, whose view of satisfaction is saturated with notions of penance. Augustine too had pondered the concept of redemption, in which we may find elements of that persistent theory that such payment was in

1 A von Harnack *History of Dogma* vol VI 1899 p 78

2 J K Mozley *The Doctrine of the Atonement* 1915 p 125

3 See R W Southern *Saint Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* 1990 pp 198ff.

some way a purchase of the devil's claims. None, however, until Anselm seems to have reached the point where 'concern with the problems of sin-guilt and redemption lead... to an appreciation of the expiatory value of the cross'.<sup>4</sup>

Then Anselm came. 'It is remarkable that the bursting forth of a new spirit of inquiry, the dawning of a new era after five centuries of stagnation and darkness, should have commenced with the sudden appearance of a mind of such remarkable depth, clearness and living piety.'<sup>5</sup> A case of Taine's 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'. Even the title of Anselm's treatise is significant – *Cur Deus Homo*. The Religious Tract Society edition translates it 'Why was God made man?' and the Ancient and Modern Theological Library 'Why God became man', but, whether you have question or statement, the English versions assume a Latin verbal construction such as *factus est*, though Anselm does not use one. His words are 'Why God man', and, if we are at all to interfere with that, all we need or ought to do is to add an hyphen to convey the unity in Jesus Christ of God and man to sustain the enhypostatic union of divinity and humanity in the Second Person of the Godhead.

Basically then Anselm was asking what the incarnation was all about, and from that question there follows a host of others. Why was it necessary? Was it – and this was the kind of thing the Jews were asking Crispin<sup>6</sup> – possible?

And, if so, was it not derogatory to the dignity and impassibility of God? Even if the answers to these two queries about the earthly life of the Divine be 'No', there are yet more difficult ones to face. Why did he have to die? And how was that death to be understood? On this there were (and are) numerous theories around. One such was the *Christus Victor*, the climb on the cross to do battle as found in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* and, residually, in Watts' hymn as originally written, 'the wondrous cross Where the young Prince of glory died'. Or was Christ's death, in that very Jewish phrase, 'our passover sacrificed for us' (1 Cor 5:7)? If so, a sacrifice to whom? As suggested above, for Anselm it was certainly not sacrifice, payment or ransom to the devil. As he puts it almost ferociously, 'God owed nothing to the devil but punishment' (II.19). Sacrifice, payment or ransom then to whom? And as well as to whom, also for whom? It could, of course, only be for man, but what is the force of 'for'? Is it the equivalent of ἀντί (instead of) or ὑπέρ (on behalf of)? If the latter, the idea of penal substitution, often urged against theories such as those of Anselm, is at least modified, if not cancelled altogether. We have arrived at one of

4 J K Mozley *The Doctrine of the Atonement* 1915 p 125

5 W G T Shedd *A History of Christian Doctrine* vol II 1864 p 273

6 R W Southern *Saint Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* 1990 p 198

## Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement

his central concepts – satisfaction. It is God who needs to be satisfied, but even that leaves us with such questions as why it is both proximately and ultimately necessary.

Before embarking on an examination of Anselm's main thesis, however, a word is necessary about his methodology. With the famous sentence from his *Proslogion* – *credo ut intelligam* – in mind, we might well expect him to rely upon revelation. No such thing, for, though he may wish to see a coalescence of metaphysics and divinity, in *Cur Deus Homo* he deliberately omits this weapon from his armoury and relies almost entirely on reason. His givens are few: he believes (so that he may go on to understand); reason can lead in the direction he has to pursue because 'the rational nature was created for this end, that it might love and choose the highest good' (II.1); and that 'highest good' is God himself, whose supreme characteristics are mercy and love, justice and goodness. With these premisses accepted, his treatise, Anselm declares, 'proves by necessary reasoning that (Christ being left out of the question as though nothing were known of him) it is impossible to be saved without him' (Preface). That parenthesis with its phrase *remoto Christo*, which is repeated at key points (eg I.10 and II.10), reads almost like a gift to the opposition, but Anselm, though he may be engaged in apologetic, is never on the defensive. He is concerned rather to promote 'faith's logical refutation of the objections of unbelievers, who maintain its irrationality'.<sup>7</sup> Leaving Christ out, Anselm deals with what he regards as necessary truth – to establish by *a priori* reasoning his conception of what God can or ought, or ought not, to do in particular matters. On this basis he embarks on his *probandum*, namely that it was necessary for man's salvation that there should exist on earth a God-man who should die for man's sin and that this God-man was Jesus. He does so in dialectical confrontation with his interlocutor, Boso, putting the questions and objections.

In the first ten chapters of Book I Anselm seeks to establish the force of certain underlying concepts, namely, 'power and necessity and freewill' (I.2) – in other words, what God can do, what he must do and what he chooses to do. Necessity and freewill have always been uncomfortable bedfellows. As Milton put it of the Deity, 'Necessity and chance Approach not me, and what I will is fate'.<sup>8</sup> Two of the questions posed earlier about the incarnation were why it was necessary and about the crucifixion why did he have to die. Anselm is arguing that God exercised choice and, being God, he exercised the right choice, which also, he being God, was the necessary choice. What God chose to do and did he could not and would not have done differently. Hence his rejection of the argument that God could simply have forgiven man without the need of Christ's or any other

7 John McIntyre *St Anselm and His Critics* 1954 p 6

8 Milton *Paradise Lost* VII 172-3

death, because that would have compromised God's justice. But what then of the counter-question, 'What justice is there in delivering the most righteous man of all to death for the sinner?' (I.8). To this Anselm replies with the assertion that God the Father did not compel, but that Christ freely offered and that, had he not freely offered, there was no other way. Necessity, that is, seen from another angle – the necessity that love imposes.

The framework of Anselm's soteriology is familiar. 'Rational nature has been created righteous, that it may be blessed in the enjoyment of the highest good, that is God' (II.1), but man's sin and guilt have destroyed that enjoyment of communion. God's justice and majesty cannot ignore or condone that sin; and man can do nothing to reconcile himself to God. But – and this is Anselm's fundamental assumption – God's will and purpose in creating man cannot of necessity be frustrated. God himself must therefore by his necessary choice find the means of reconciliation; and this he does by way of the incarnation and the atonement as the only means of finding adequate satisfaction for sin. Here then are several familiar Anselmic concepts – sin, satisfaction, necessity and, in God's justice and majesty, hierarchy.

To start with sin, James Denney has remarked, 'It is the highest merit of Anselm that he sees it to be impossible for God to ignore sin, or to treat it as less real or less awful than it is'.<sup>9</sup> Sin, for Anselm, is a debt to God, 'not rendering to God what is his due' (I.11) or 'to take away from God what is his own' (*ibid*). The extent of its seriousness is such that 'nothing is less tolerable... than that the creature should take away from the Creator the honour due to him, and not repay what he takes away' (I.13). Moreover, what in human terms may seem insignificant is the magnitude of sin in the eyes of the Deity. A mere forbidden look, doubtless with our Lord's words in the sermon on the mount in mind, is Anselm's example. He expresses it in its extremest form to Boso thus: 'What if it were necessary either that the whole world, and all that is not God, perish and be reduced to nothing, or that you should do so slight an act against the will of God?' (I.21). Boso has to acknowledge that so slight an act ought not to be done.

Sin is a debt to God, an 'ought' that has not been observed, a necessity that has been flouted. We need, however, to note Anselm's Latin, for here is one of his key words, *debitum*, a word that goes beyond our predominantly commercial connotations to their roots within the moral and religious, to the idea of obligation that resides in our word 'ought'. But obligation in relation to what? And yet another keyword or idea in Anselm must now be noted. It is there in the quotation from I.13 above – 'the honour due to

9 James Denney *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* 1918 p 68

him'. It relates to feudal obligation and is integrally bound up with the concept of hierarchy. It is something to which we shall need to return.

Taking away from God's honour which is the effect of sin prompts the question as to how that honour can be restored. Anselm poses two alternatives, again keywords in his thesis, punishment (*poena*) or satisfaction (*satisfactio*). Before we consider these further, there is the prior question that Anselm puts: Does sin have to be punished? Is there such a necessity? Yes, says Anselm, despite God's freedom not to punish had he so wished. That 'Yes' is because God in his consistency just would not wish to do otherwise (I.12). His justice, which is comprised also within the idea of hierarchy, requires it. God's aseity, his consistency within himself, another key idea, of which more later, ensures it. 'Since it is not possible to bring sin into accordance with right order without satisfaction being made, except by punishing it, if it is not punished, it is let go without being brought into due order.' (I.12)

So then everyone who sins ought to render back to God the honour he has taken away, and this is the satisfaction which every sinner ought to make to God (I.11). The analogy Anselm uses is that of an injury done to another person, where, citing the law of his times, the offender 'ought to restore more than he took away' (*ibid*). This idea of satisfaction has been traced both to supererogatory penitence in Tertullian and to Teutonic theories of *wergild*. What it amounts to is payment beyond debt, but, given man's sin and the heinousness of the smallest sin, what can men do? Boso, in fact, retreats into Tertullianesque suggestions of fastings, denials and labours, but, says Anselm, not all of that will do. The most man can do is at best only what he owes to God, his *debitum*; but even man's most is not his own to offer, for 'what you give you ought not to consider it as part of what you owe, since you know that what you give you obtain not from yourself, but from him whose servant... you are' (I.20). Nothing to offer for infinite offence but what an offended God himself has given. What man has by grace he cannot pretend to give back as his own to the Giver.

Moreover, in the words of McIntyre, 'our satisfaction will have to be something greater than that for the sake of which we ought not to have committed the sin',<sup>10</sup> more, that is, than what we owe. Boso confesses that 'man the sinner owes to God, on account of sin, what he cannot repay, and unless he repays it he cannot be saved'. He therefore bids Anselm show 'in what way God saves men by his mercy, since he does not remit his sin unless he pays what he owes on account of it' (I.25). In other words, what is the necessary and efficacious *satisfactio*?

10 John McIntyre *St Anselm and His Critics* 1954 p 80

At this point we need to dwell a little on necessity, not least because in Book II, to which Anselm now moves, two chapter headings appear to deny it. In chapter 5 we read: 'That although it is needful for this to be done, yet God will not do it under compulsion of necessity', and again in chapter 17 'How he did not die of necessity, although he could not have existed except for the purpose of dying'. Anselm provides an immediate answer, distinguishing between objective necessity, obligation imposed from outside, and subjective necessity arising from integrity and self-consistency (or *aseitas*, the quality emanating from oneself). In his own words,

if anyone confers a benefit by that necessity which he is subject to against his will, no gratitude, or at any rate a smaller amount, is due to him. But when, of his own accord, he brings himself under the necessity of conferring a benefit, and willingly endures it, then indeed he deserves more gratitude for his benefit. For this should not be called necessity, but grace, because he undertook or held fast to his obligation, but of his own free will (II.5).

We can link with this the words in I.10: 'For this is simple and true obedience, when the rational nature, not of necessity but willingly, keeps the will that it has received from God.' Quoting these words, Colin Gunton remarks: 'Jesus as the God-man freely offers his life to the Father'.<sup>11</sup> What Jesus is able, willing and of himself is required to do, he does. Thus in Anselm power, will and necessity are reconciled in the concept of grace.

Man cannot make satisfaction; only someone else of his own freewill can. If man cannot, it must be someone greater than man. Here, however, is the problem. The satisfaction, being one 'which no man can make except God, and no one ought to make except man, it is necessary that one who is God-man should make it' (II.6). The one making the satisfaction must be greater than all that is not God (*ibid*), that is, he must be God. He can only be God, but he has also to be man. Man sinned and man must therefore make satisfaction for his sin, but since men cannot, 'it is needful that one born from them do this' (II.8).

Anselm then argues that it must be the Second and not either of the other Persons of the Godhead who performs this task (II.9). That Person is the *Deus-homo*, the God-man, two natures in one Person, who chooses to lay down his life as a debt (II.11). At this point Boso has got himself tied up with the possibility that Christ is able to sin. We are again in the realm of power, will and necessity. Anselm's answer is: 'All power follows the will' (II.10). Christ had the capability (the Latin is *potestas* meaning

11 Colin Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement* 1988 p 92

## Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement

'ability' rather than 'power'), but he did not have the desire. Hence, as McIntyre puts it, 'what Boso had called *action ex necessitate*, St Anselm would call action of the truly free will because it is action *a se*'<sup>12</sup> – in other words, acting out of aseity or his own integrity. Thus Christ is the sinless one.

So much for the Person. What of his work? Typically Anselm asks the fundamental questions first. Why was Christ's death necessary, anyway? Why did God submit his beloved Son to crucifixion? And 'what justice is there in delivering the most righteous man of all to death for the sinner?' (I.8). He has begun this chapter with what might well be considered the all-embracing escape clause: 'The will of God ought to be a sufficient reason for us when he does anything, though we may not see why he so wills it, for the will of God is never unreasonable' (*ibid*). Irrefutable as that is, however, Anselm is committed to reason further. He therefore argues that God did not require Christ's death but only obedience and that Christ of himself (his aseity) offered his death (I.9; II.16). The problem is formidably profound, and Anselm treads a delicate tightrope in seeking to hold the Father's will and Christ's free will together. He is on the edge of all the human-divine heresies that have beset Christology through the ages. This is surely where aseity matters again, for in the *se* both Father and Son are seen as One.

What then was the value of Christ's death? As Anselm has insisted throughout, God's honour must be satisfied. At this point then we need to pause to look at what he meant by 'honour'. This is also where ideas of hierarchy, of God's justice and majesty, need also to be addressed. To quote Southern, 'Due honour is equated with the well-known secular *servitium debitum*; it is capable of being paid, withdrawn, restored', and again 'Supreme justice requires the preservation of God's honour'.<sup>13</sup> In the feudal society of Anselm's time, as again Southern points out, a man's honour comprised 'his estate, ... his due place in the hierarchy of authority, his family background, and his personal honour'.<sup>14</sup> That is the analogy for the highest status that Anselm can imagine for the position of God. 'God's honour is simply another word for the ordering of the universe in its due relationship to God'.<sup>15</sup> Man had disrupted that harmony; God required its restoration.

God's honour must be satisfied and that satisfaction must be greater than all that is not God. Only Christ fulfils the necessary requirement, but he also goes further because his death possesses a merit which more than

12 John McIntyre *St Anselm and His Critics* 1954 p 149

13 R W Southern *Saint Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* 1990 p 225

14 Southern p 225

15 Southern p 226

satisfies. Arguing from proportionality, Anselm claims the total efficacy of the atonement: 'Sins are as hateful as they are evil and that life is as precious as it is good. Whence it follows that that life is more precious than sins are hateful'. Whereupon Anselm asks: 'Do you think that a good so great, so precious can suffice to pay what is due for the sins of the whole world?', to which Boson replies: 'Verily it is worth infinitely more'. The dialogue continues:

Anselm – You see then how this life may overcome all sins if it is given for them.

Boson – Plainly.

Anselm – If, then, to give life is the same as to accept death, just as the giving of this life outweighs all the sins of men, so, too, does the accepting of death. (II.14)

Lest, however, the whole soteriological scheme should appear as a transaction between different and separate beings, Anselm firmly places the whole matter in a trinitarian context near the end of the work: 'Since he himself [Christ] is the Son of God, he offered himself for his own honour to himself, as he did to the Father and the Holy Spirit' (II.18). When Anselm adds the suggestion of offering 'his human nature to his divine nature', he seems to come dangerously near to heresy again, but the whole passage does serve to ensure that Christ's death is seen not as a legal transaction but an act of unmerited grace.

Anselm next looks at the application of the merits of Christ's death in terms of the Father's recompense for it to the Son, but there is nothing which the Father has which the Son has not. That being so, we have reached another problem – 'If so great and well deserved a reward is paid neither to him nor to anyone else, the Son will seem to have accomplished his great work in vain' (II.19). Another beneficiary must be found. So 'To whom could he assign the fruit and recompense of his death more suitably than to those for whose salvation... he made himself man and to whom... by his death he gave an example of dying on behalf of righteousness?... Or whom will he more justly make inheritors of what is due to him... and of the superabundance of his own fulness than his parents and brethren, whom he sees bowed down by so many and great debts and pining away in profound misery, so that what they owe for their sins may be forgiven them, and what they need, on account of their sins, may be given them?' (II.19).

So much then for Anselm's theory. What of its value? It has been described as 'the most influential view for understanding the atonement of



any Western theologian',<sup>16</sup> but after considering this and other law-based theories F W Dillistone concludes that 'no strictly penal theory of atonement can be expected to carry conviction in the world of the twentieth century'.<sup>17</sup> Whether that be so or not, and there seems at least some scope for questioning it, one has to recognise first of all in reaching an estimate of *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm's determination to give a reason for the faith that was in him, to show by 'necessary reasoning' what he believed. Thus the incarnation is acceptable not just because Christians believe it but because in its relation to the atonement it can be shown to be rationally necessary. In the process of proving this Anselm is able not only to dismiss earlier less worthy theories, but also to confront objections of the kind that could simultaneously charge God with arbitrary anger against man and yet, relying on his *sola voluntas*, were able at the same time to allege his freedom to dispense with the need for redemption altogether. He was able also to meet the more fundamental and difficult objection, especially in that he insisted so much on the essential justice of God, which he couched in the question: 'What justice is there in delivering the most righteous of all men to death as a sinner? What man, if he condemned an innocent man that he might liberate one who was guilty, would not himself be judged worthy of condemnation?' (I.8). Even Dillistone agrees that, if you accept his premisses and categories, Anselm's dialectic satisfies, as instanced not only in his own day but also 'in the imaginations of Protestants who from the seventeenth century onwards became increasingly familiar with the structures of capitalism'.<sup>18</sup> Changes in the status and esteem of certain economic systems since Dillistone wrote a quarter of a century ago may suggest that Anselm is not so outdated after all.

However that may be, it surely remains that, in Southern's words, 'the rationality of Anselm's theology is based on the principle that there is nothing arbitrary in God'.<sup>19</sup> The Deity is seen as a feudal overlord with men as his vassals in a stratified and hierarchical relationship. His position depends on the maintenance of his honour, and man owes obedience and obligation to him. In this ordered state of things God sustains his creation. In our own less ordered society some of these images may appear inimical. Southern speaks of 'this rigorous and... repressive regime',<sup>20</sup> but Dillistone again has to concede that 'the model of God as supreme overlord, holding the universe and all estates of men under his control, establishing an order in which everyone is obligated to offer appropriate service to his superior in the social scale, is confirmed and validated by

16 John Driver *Understanding the Atonement* 1986 p 50

17 F W Dillistone *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* 1968 p 214

18 Dillistone p 194

19 R W Southern *Saint Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* 1990 p 227

20 Southern p 222

large sections of human experience in history'.<sup>21</sup> None of this incidentally seems to run contrary to the idea of God as the Almighty. John Stott's criticism, more precisely pointed as it is, may well be more acceptable: 'When God is portrayed... in terms reminiscent of a feudal overlord who demands honour and punishes dishonour, it is questionable whether this picture adequately expresses the "honour" which is indeed due to God alone'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, it is not the position, but the character, of God which raises the questions. Even so, Stott acknowledges among the 'greatest merits of Anselm's exposition... the unchanging holiness of God (as unable to condone any violation of his honour)',<sup>23</sup> whilst Gunton, noting Jesus' self-offering, rejects what he calls 'the language of cosmic legality' in asserting that 'God is not primarily a judge who exacts a compensating penalty from Jesus as a man'.<sup>24</sup> So much for Hastings Rashdall's characteristically vivid and immoderate view that Anselm's 'notions of justice are the barbaric ideas of an ancient Lombard king or the technicalities of a Lombard lawyer',<sup>25</sup> and so much also for those, in Southern's words, 'who have imagined Anselm's God as a jealous tyrant, greedy for recognition and honour, [who] have failed to recognise that the feudal image, however unsatisfactory in some of its implications, stood for rationality prevailing against the inroads of self-will and chaos'.<sup>26</sup>

Some of these later statements about God lead us to look at comments on the divine human relationship and more particularly on Anselm's ideas about sin and the nature of the atonement. Criticism has been directed against what has been regarded as his quantitative conception of sin. Much has been made of the Latin sentence which stands at the head of Book I, Chapter 21: '*quanti ponderis sit peccatum*' (what a heavy weight sin may be), so that R C Moberly, for instance, can claim that sin 'as quantitative [is] external to the self of the sinner, and measurable, as if it had a self in itself'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Anselm's consideration of sin as a *debitum* falls under the same censure in what is taken to be a commercial view of the atonement (see, for example, the remarks of Dillistone above, p 312). Reference has already been made to the moral significance, the 'oughtness', of *debitum* (p 307 above), and surely in counter to the allegations of quantitativity one must notice the very serious doctrine of sin which Anselm espouses. It is hardly a matter of mathematical calculation when even the most trifling act contrary to the will of God is such that man cannot provide satisfaction for it. No wonder John Stott regards another of Anselm's greatest merits as being his perception of 'the

21 F W Dillistone *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* 1968 p 194

22 John Stott *The Cross of Christ* 1986 p 120

23 Stott p 119

24 Colin Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement* 1988 p 92

25 Hastings Rashdall *The Idea of the Atonement in Christian Theology* 1985 p 355

26 R W Southern *Saint Anselm: Portrait in a Landscape* 1990 p 227

27 R C Moberly *Atonement and Personality* 1901 p 370

extreme gravity of sin'.<sup>28</sup>

Moberly's criticism, however, must be explored further. He is concerned, as his title indicates, with the relation of atonement to personality or, perhaps more accurately, of personality to atonement. He finds Anselm's theory insufficiently personal. The barrier to reconciliation between man and God is a state of affairs outside the sinner; God himself is insufficiently personified; and the event of the cross itself is 'rather external to us, a transaction taking place in a different space and time from ours'.<sup>29</sup> To all this must be added criticisms that are indeed directed also against Milton in his characterisation of the Deity in *Paradise Lost*, namely, that the First and Second Persons of the Godhead are too distinctly individual and in danger of appearing separate, and even opposed, in their embodiment of different moral qualities.<sup>30</sup> This last is a perennial problem for theologians, but met in Anselm's case first by his belated and insufficient acceptance of the atonement as the act of God in Trinity (II.16), secondly by his specific insistence that 'the mercy of God is seen to be in perfect harmony with his justice' (II.20), but lastly and principally by virtue of the aseity of the Godhead. It is precisely Anselm's high view of divinity – his stress on God's majesty and justice as part of his overall integrity, his aseity – that sets up the difficulty in the first place. We are, in fact, back to *necessitas*, the action of God which proceeds necessarily from his essence. L W Grensted puts it neatly: 'That which God does springs from that which God is... We must not refuse to think of God in terms of the highest conception of human personality available to us'.<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, that may even have the effect of distancing some of his activity from us and making it seem external to us – 'in a different space and time from ours'. Idealising can have such an effect.

How then does Anselm portray God's relation with men? To consider this we must approach first through one of those events by some regarded as external to us, by the cross interpreted as atonement. Anselm's model has been variously attributed to the examples of Roman private law (that the *satisfactio* is a gift to God's honour much like the compensation over and above the hurt suffered) and of Teutonic *wergild* with its ideas of offering in proportion to the honour or worth of the offended party. Various criticisms can be and have been entered against this theory of satisfaction. Why does God have to be satisfied? Does not Anselm's process of necessary and inexorable reasoning make God the prisoner of his own honour? Does it not make him the object of reconciliation rather than the author? In so far as Christ offers satisfaction and the Father

28 John Stott *The Cross of Christ* 1986 p 119

29 Colin Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement* 1988 p 94

30 J K Mozley *The Doctrine of the Atonement* 1915 p 130

31 L W Grensted *The Atonement in History and Life* 1929 p 23

receives it, does it not put them on opposing sides? Does not the whole transaction, as we must regard it, become external and impersonal? Does it not confine salvation to one event between Jesus Christ and the Father at the expense of 'salvation being realised through the involvement of the *triune* God in human history'?<sup>32</sup> Has it not become more 'an exercise of power rather than love: "the Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, had determined to show the loftiness of his omnipotence by no other means than death" (I.9)'?<sup>33</sup> Does it not over-emphasise what Christ did at the expense of what happened to him, what he suffered?<sup>34</sup> Does it not also merely equate salvation with the remission of penalty? And by making Christ's death a measurable *quantum*, more than paying for man's sins, is there not first no link between his death and his life and, secondly, nothing left for God freely to forgive? In sum, do not the whole transactional presumptions preclude any idea of God's love in any sort of personal relationship with man? For Scott Lidgett the Anselmic approach makes Christ a *deus ex machina*, excludes all the ethical qualities of the atonement and destroys the spiritual influence of Christ's death because we do not enter into it.<sup>35</sup>

This is a severe indictment, some points of which, however, have been confronted in earlier parts of this paper. Nevertheless, some aspects of it must be accepted, not least those out of which Scott Lidgett's comments arise. One might say, for lack of a better word, that Anselm's scheme lacks warmth. We look in vain for that mystical sense of participation to be found in Gregory of Nyssa and John Damascene that Christ's death and resurrection produce a ferment within men such that death and sin are destroyed and righteousness and life are imparted. Likewise, there is none of that exemplary emphasis on Christ's sacrifice as it is apprehended in Abelard. James Denney indeed considers it:

[the] most conspicuous [demerit in Anselm] that [he] gives no prominence to the love of God as the source of the satisfaction for sin, or to the appeal that that love makes to the heart of sinful men... It is not by the spontaneous grace of God; it is not by a free movement of mercy, the wonderfulness of which comes upon us again and again; it is not by the love that shines into our hearts as we look at the 'friend of sinners' in the pages of the gospel, that the satisfaction for sin is explained; it is deduced by what Anselm calls a rational necessity, and belongs to the world of metaphysics, not of spiritual experience.

32 Colin Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement* 1988 p 93

33 Gunton p 93

34 cf W Pannenburg *Jesus – God and Man* 1968 p 277.

35 Scott Lidgett *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* 1901 pp 137–8

## Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement

For Denney Anselm had, in fact, failed to reconcile metaphysics and divinity. He concludes: 'This is what comes of constructing arguments about Christianity *remoto Christo*, arguments that will appeal equally to Jews and pagans as to Christians'.<sup>36</sup> This is, of course, polemical, but he has a point.

Yet despite these deficiencies and despite the criticisms of the paragraph before that, we have not destroyed Anselm's argument for the position which the Son occupied before the Father in the event of the cross. The theories centred on love, whether ancient or modern, whether that of Abelard or of Scott Lidgett, are themselves only partial truths; and even someone like Moberly who comes nearer to Anselm in accepting Jesus as man suffering punishment before God only takes this as vicarious penitence for humanity. This fails to meet the biblical requirements as expressed, for instance, in 2 Corinthians 5:21 ('made sin for us') and Romans 3:25 ('propitiation for our sins'). Vicarious penitence did not require death on the cross. Colin Gunton has succinctly summarised the need to retain substitution:

To ignore the fact that Jesus is shown in scripture as bearing the consequences, according to the will of God, of our breaches of universal justice... is to trivialise evil and to deny the need for an atonement... Jesus is our substitute because he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That includes undergoing the judgment of God.<sup>37</sup>

That is Anselm's position and, though it may not express the whole truth, it does state central and essential truth. His approach may be austere, forensic and argumentative, stressing obedience and obligation rather than love. He undoubtedly appealed to the reason rather than the spirit, but we need to remember that the reason has its place within the personality no less than the spirit, and, to quote another commentator:

[for Anselm] the objective significance of the death of Christ was surely a vivid personal and pastoral experience. If he did not make the thought of it the basis of permanent assurance, the ground of that underlying 'justification' that the Reformation brought to the fore, he felt it at least as a solid, direct, immediate reality in the face of sin, the supreme and final answer to the accusations of conscience.<sup>38</sup>

**ARTHUR POLLARD** is Professor Emeritus of English in the University of Hull.

36 James Denney *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* 1918 p 75

37 Colin Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement* 1988 p 165

38 A R Whately 'Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement' *The Atonement in History and Life* L W Grensted ed 1929 p 21