

To what extent, if at all, is the person and work of Christ as explained in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* a contribution to our understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity?

This textual analysis will consider extracts taken from *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*) written by Anselm of Canterbury (1099 CE).¹ The text claims to be written in response to questions and challenges from non-believers who do not understand how the incarnation of Christ and his willing death 'restored order to the world' (*Cur Deus Homo* 1.1).² The text takes the form of a conversation between Anselm and an interlocutor named Boso; this format can be seen to reflect the Platonic approach to constructing an argument adopted by Anselm, as Colin E. Gunton recognises.³ Gunton comments further on the rational nature of Anselm's argument, as his systematic theology builds upon the 'logic' and 'necessity' of God's actions (1.1) to arrive at his conclusions which reflect both his personal convictions and faith and his philosophical approach to absolute truth.⁴ Trevor Hart observes that Anselm has offered a 'contemporary spin' on the biblical theme of sin and redemption by applying ideas from his own feudal society, arriving at the concept of 'satisfaction' for sin in the payment of what is owed to one's Lord; reparation must be made if the payment, or the honour owed, is not received by the one to whom it is owed.⁵

In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm explores the person and work of Christ. Alister McGrath summarises this as an argument 'for both the necessity of the incarnation and the saving potential of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'.⁶ Humanity was created in a state of holiness (2.1); however, the fall of humanity into sin through disobedience to God led to condemnation and death (1.3), which was not an intended part of God's created order. The impact of this is to challenge the honour of God: although 'nothing can be added to or taken away from the honour of God' (1.15), by not respecting God's due honour – which is how Anselm defines sin (1.11) – humanity has created an obligation to God, which requires an action to restore God's created order. This satisfaction is required as, without it, God would be deemed to acknowledge 'no difference between the guilty and the not guilty' which would be 'unbecoming to God' (1.12). Humanity has caused this obligation and it is 'fitting' that a human should satisfy it (1.3); however, Anselm argues, no lesser being than God is able to restore creation, for, if one did, then humanity would worship this lesser being and not God (1.5). This leads to the logical necessity of a 'God-man' (2.6, identified as Jesus Christ in 1.8): a being of two natures, both divine and human, with both the resources and obligation to make the necessary satisfaction for sin (2.7).

¹ Biographical details of Anselm are offered by A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th edn. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p.259.

² Anselm of Canterbury 'Why God Became Man' in B. Davies and G.R. Evans (eds.) *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.265. All further chapter references within the body of the text refer to this work.

³ C.E. GUNTON 'Historical and systematic theology' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.15.

⁴ C.E. GUNTON 'Historical and systematic theology', pp.15-16.

⁵ T. HART 'Redemption and fall' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.199.

⁶ A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology*, p.259.

Hence the necessity of the incarnation of Christ: God in human form is a 'fitting' solution to the problem: 'God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement' (2.7). The incarnation of Christ is therefore a necessity in order that humanity can be redeemed by the one being capable of bridging the gap between God and humanity, a logical conclusion.

Gunton develops the necessity for a mediator, in the person of Jesus Christ, because, he argues, sin is not a moral failing but rather a problem with humanity's relationship with God which causes the created order to be unbalanced. The problem is of human origin but is so significant that it is beyond human capability to solve: 'while only man ought to do what is needed, only God can do it'.⁷ Thus, the only way for satisfaction to be effected (which Gunton refers to as 'salvation')⁸ is through a mediator: God incarnate.

The significance of Anselm's concept of 'satisfaction' was realised and developed by Thomas Aquinas, who suggests that through Christ's suffering, into which he entered willingly as an act of love and in obedience to God, God is offered 'something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offence of humanity'.⁹ Aquinas did not agree, however, that God was 'obliged to enter into the human condition' which is a logical outcome of Anselm's argument for the necessity of the incarnation but which constrains the liberty of God to act in whatever way God desires.¹⁰ This speaks to the legalistic portrayal of God in Anselm's text: God requires the law to be fulfilled, although, as Hart notes, God is not 'a cosmic sheriff or hanging judge whose interest is only in the exaction of that which an abstract justice demands'.¹¹ Indeed, God actively seeks a solution to the problem of sin which leads God to the redemptive plan of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, with Aquinas' development of Christ's 'compensation' offered to God, Anselm's ideas were later misappropriated to devise a theology of penal substitution, as Gerald O'Collins discusses.¹² Anselm argued that Christ has been willing to act as humanity's representative through his love and offered an 'honourable service', akin to the responsibility of monks to their abbot, as a means of restoring order to the chaos of humanity's sin. The concept of punishment, in respect of Christ accepting God's punishment for humanity's sin, was expressly not within Anselm's thought; indeed, Anselm states that, 'God the Father did not... put to death the innocent for the guilty' (1.8). O'Collins notes that Anselm sees a need for every sin to be 'followed by either satisfaction or punishment' (1.15) but that punishment is not God's plan, rather God desires that creation be restored (2.5).¹³ This student relates more closely to Anselm's proposition than to

⁷ C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p.169.

⁸ C.E. GUNTON *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, p.169.

⁹ T. AQUINAS *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q.48, a.2 [5.17], as cited by A.E. McGrath *Christian Theology*, p.260.

¹⁰ R. BARRON *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2022), p.26.

¹¹ T. HART 'Redemption and fall', p.201.

¹² G. O'COLLINS (2007) 'Penal Substitution Theories' in G. O'Collins (ed.) *Jesus our Redeemer: A Christian approach to salvation* [Online], pp.134-135.

¹³ G. O'COLLINS *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.203.

Aquinas' development of it, and the further development of the penal substitution concept; the latter suggests a God so determined to have retribution that he would intentionally force his innocent Son to suffer on behalf of the guilty, which does not correspond to the loving God about whom he preaches every Sunday.

Colin E. Gunton, in *Actuality of Atonement* (1989), expresses dissatisfaction with the way in which Anselm ascribes no role within the economy of salvation to the Holy Spirit; the bipartite transaction between Father and Son is central within *Cur Deus Homo*, which, for Gunton, precludes the action of the third person of the Trinity of God.¹⁴ McGrath notes that the omission of the role of the Holy Spirit appears to set the Father and Son against each other, rather than acknowledging a 'continuity of divine action' between Father and Son through the working of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ However, one allusion is made to the Holy Spirit: 'He [Christ] had agreed with the Father and the Holy Spirit that there was no other way to reveal to the world the height of his omnipotence than by his death' (1.9). A divine plan is thus suggested, formed within the Trinity of God, in which the redemptive action of Jesus Christ in satisfying the honour of God was worked out in advance; this would also seem to vindicate the earlier argument that the incarnation was necessary for satisfaction to be made: the death of Jesus Christ was the purpose of the incarnation, not a result of it. An additional oversight is noted by O'Collins: Anselm makes no reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Christian community and the implied 'divinization' of those who have been redeemed.¹⁶ This is an important, perhaps crucial, aspect of the Christian narrative: that through humbling himself to humanity, Jesus Christ elevated humanity to become worthy of God, and this is achieved not only through his death but also his resurrection and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit, and so surely a significant omission from Anselm's work.

Whilst Anselm's exploration of the necessity of the incarnation of Christ for the salvation of humanity reflects the nature of Jesus Christ as both fully divine and fully human, the purpose of the incarnation, and the need for God's honour to be restored, it does not address the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, or the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. *Cur Deus Homo* also pays little attention to the nature of the Holy Spirit's relationship within the Godhead or the Holy Spirit's activity within the salvation of humanity. This means that even though *Cur Deus Homo* implies a role for the Holy Spirit in the planning of Jesus Christ's incarnation and death, its focus is more centrally on the satisfaction made on behalf of humanity to God the Father by God the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, the contribution of *Cur Deus Homo* to our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is therefore limited.

Word count: 1,503 words (excluding footnotes).

¹⁴ C.E. GUNTON *Actuality of Atonement* (1989), cited by A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology*, pp.324-325.

¹⁵ A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology*, p.260.

¹⁶ G. O'COLLINS *Christology*, p.205.

Bibliography

Anselm of Canterbury 'Why God Became Man' in B. Davies and G.R. Evans (eds.) *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260-356.

BARRON, R. *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2022).

GUNTON, C.E. *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

GUNTON, C.E. 'Historical and systematic theology' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3-20.

HART, T. 'Redemption and fall' in C.E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 189-206.

McGRATH, A.E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th edn. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

O'COLLINS, G. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

O'COLLINS, G. (2007) 'Penal Substitution Theories' in G. O'Collins (ed.) *Jesus our Redeemer: A Christian approach to salvation* [Online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199203130.001.0001> (Accessed 14 April 2023).