

**Letter from Canterbury by William Shepherd**

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done  
abominable works, there is none that doth good. [Psalms 14:1]<sup>1</sup>

Gaunilo (or Gaunilon) of Marmoutiers was an 11th-century Benedictine monk. His thesis *Liber pro Insipiente* takes its name from the fools in the *Psalms* of the *Hebrew Old Testament* who say there is no God. His work, *In Behalf of the Fool*, was a response to the argument by Anselm of Canterbury that ran thus:

God is that being than which no greater can be conceived.  
It is greater to exist in reality than merely as an idea.  
If God does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater being, id est one that does exist.  
Therefore, God must indeed exist in reality.  
Therefore, He exists.



Gaunilo, like the empiricists, thought that the human intellect is able to comprehend only information received by sensible experience.

He criticised Anselm's argument by turning its logic back on itself to 'prove' the existence of a mythical 'Lost Island', the greatest or most perfect island conceivable.

If the island we are thinking of does not exist, Gaunilo said, then it cannot be the greatest conceivable island, for, to be the greatest conceivable island, it would have to exist, as any existent island would be greater than an imaginary one.

Gaunilo's argument runs thus:

The Lost Island is that than which no greater can be conceived.  
It is greater to exist in reality than merely as an idea.  
If the Lost Island does not exist, one can conceive of an even greater island, id est one that does exist.  
Therefore, the Lost Island exists in reality.

Gaunilo argument...and Anselm's logic...therefore 'show' many things exist which certainly do not. Replacing the lost island with a unicorn makes the point clearer. Since neither the lost island (nor the unicorn) exist, there is something wrong with the logic that proves they do...and that Anselm's argument for God's existence is flawed.<sup>2</sup>

Anselm of Canterbury, the founder of Scholasticism, was born in 1033 in Aosta, Burgundy and died on 21 April 1109. He spent his life as a Benedictine monk before serving two English kings, William II and Henry I, as Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm sought to understand Christian doctrine through reason by developing intelligible truths interwoven with his Christian beliefs. Anselm believed that the necessary preliminary for this was possession of a Christian faith. Anselm held that faith precedes reason, but reason could expand upon faith.

The groundwork of Anselm's theory of knowledge is contained in the tract *De Veritate*, where he affirms the existence of an absolute truth in which all other truth participates. This absolute truth, he argued, is God, who is the ultimate ground or principle both of things and of thought. The notion of God becomes the foreground of Anselm's theory, so it was necessary first to make God clear to reason and be demonstrated to have real existence.

Anselm's world-view was broadly that of *Neoplatonism*, which he inherited from his primary influence, Augustine of Hippo, as well as from 'Pseudo-Dionysius' and Scotus. He also inherited a rationalist way of thinking from Aristotle and Boethius. According to Anselm the very existence of things is impossible without some 'one Being by whom they come to exist'.

This *Absolute Being*, this goodness, justice and greatness, is God. The term 'ontological' was applied by Immanuel Kant to the arguments of 17th- and 18-Century rationalists...and to Anselm's logic. Anselm's proof has been the

<sup>1</sup> Psalms 14:1 is repeated in Psalms 53:1 as 'Corrupt they are', and with 'works' replaced by 'iniquity' in the St. James Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Such objections are called overload objections: they do not claim to show where or how the argument goes wrong; they merely argue that, if it is unsound in one application, it is unsound in all others. Simply put, they are arguments that would overload the world with an indefinitely large number of things, like perfect islands.

subject of controversy since it was first published in the 1070s. Gaunilo's criticism is repeated by several later philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas and Kant.<sup>3</sup> Anselm wrote a number of other arguments for the existence of God, based on cosmological and teleological grounds. In other works by Anselm, he strove to state the rational grounds of the Christian doctrines of *Creation*, *Atonement*, the *Trinity*, *Original Sin* and the *Virgin Birth*.

Anselm discussed the *Trinity* by stating that human beings could not know God from himself but only from analogy. The analogy that he used was the self-consciousness of man. The peculiar double-nature of consciousness...memory and intelligence...represent the relation of the *Father* to the *Son*. The mutual love of these two (memory and intelligence), proceeding from the relation they hold to one another, symbolizes the *Holy Spirit*.

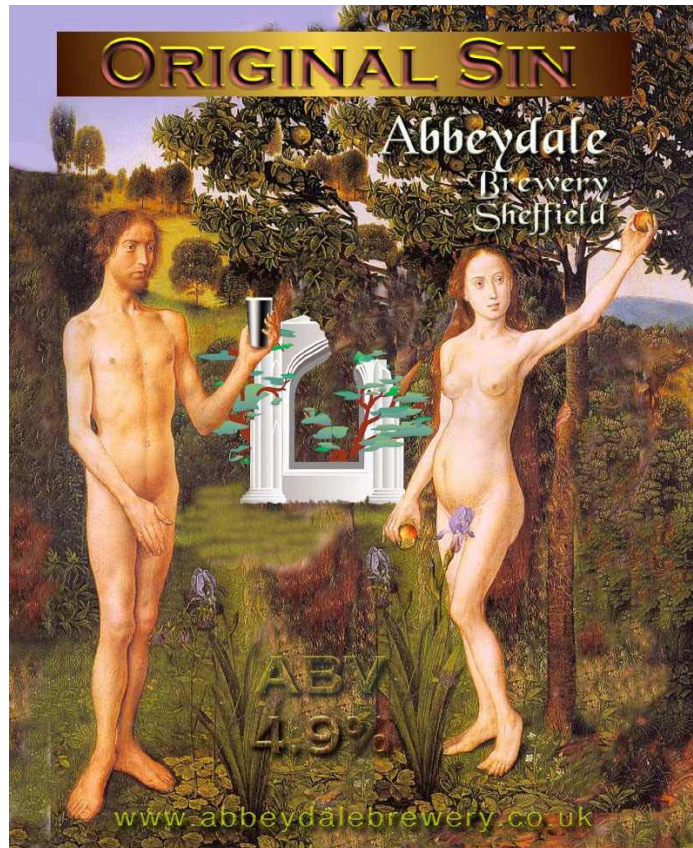
Anselm's *Satisfaction* (or Commercial) theory of the *Atonement* was formulated in his book, *Cur Deus Homo* (lit. 'Why the God-Man?'). He introduced the idea of *Satisfaction* as the chief demand of the nature of God, of *Punishment* as a possible alternative of satisfaction and equally fulfilling the requirements of justice thus opening the way to the assertion of punishment as the true satisfaction of the law. In Anselm's view, God's offended honour and dignity could only be satisfied by the sacrifice of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Anselm undertook to explain the 'rational necessity' of the Christian mystery of the atonement. His argument is that: (1) satisfaction is necessary on account of God's honour and justice; (2) such satisfaction can be given only by the personality of the God-man Jesus; (3) such satisfaction is given by his 'voluntary death'.

According to this reasoning, *Sin* incurs a debt to *Divine Justice*, a debt that must be paid somehow. No sin can be forgiven without satisfaction, but the incurred debt is far greater than a human being is capable of paying. All the service that a person can offer to God is already obligated on other debts to God.

By Anselm's time the suggestion had been made that some innocent person, or angel, might possibly pay the debt incurred by sinners. But that, it seems, would put the sinner under obligation to that deliverer and the sinner would become indebted to a 'mere creature'.

Hence the only way satisfaction could be made - that humans could be set free from their sin - was by the coming of a *Redeemer* who is both God and man...as well as sinless and owing no debt. His death is something greater than all the sins of all humanity. His death makes a superabundant satisfaction to the *Divine Justice*.



Anselm denied the belief which is now referred to as the *Immaculate Conception*, his argument laying the groundwork for the development of Christian doctrine. In *De virginali conceptu et de peccato originali*, he gave two principles which became fundamental for thinking about the *Immaculate Conception*. The first is that it was proper that Mary should be so pure that no purer being could be imagined, aside from God. The second principle, which opened the way for the *Immaculate Conception*, was grounded in his explanation of *Original Sin*.

Anselm argued that *Original Sin* is *Human Nature* without *Original Justice*, transmitted because parents cannot give original justice if they do not have it themselves; original sin is the transmission of fallen human nature. Anselm's contemporaries held that the transmission of original sin had to do with the lustful nature of the act of sexual intercourse. Anselm was the first Churchman to separate original sin from sexual intercourse. Progress of a sort.

<sup>3</sup> Two other categories of proof for God's existence are the 'teleological'...evidenced by 'intelligent design'...and the 'cosmological' that adopts a former and first cause approach. A 'modern' attempt from the analytic *University of Notre Dame* philosopher Alvin Plantinger argues that as well as 'what is', there is 'what could not possibly be'...the latter being where atheists place God. After Anselm, key developments in thinking about God have come from Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Hume, Kant and Gödel. Before Anselm and the Christian theology of Augustine, the Ancient Greeks held the ring for the Western theological tradition inherited...and passed on...by Christian scholastics. The *Old Man in the Sky* has been long out of favour.