

# BEYOND THE PALE

Reading Theology from the Margins

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## Anselm of Canterbury

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Deemed the first Western scholastic philosopher, who is well-known for his ontological argument on the existence of God, Anselm of Canterbury, England (hereafter referred to simply as Anselm), was born in 1033 in the Italian cathedral city of Aosta, in Piedmont, in the mountains that divide Italy from western Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Anselm's philosophical, theological, and spiritual writings are still employed by many philosophers and theologians; they wrestle with his arguments, not for their antiquarian interest, but for the contribution of his ideas to the development of Catholic systematic theology. Anselm, who was a Benedictine monk, is a saint and a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss and to critique individually two theological treatises of Anselm's, as they continue to be detrimental to people and communities of color. I begin with a brief introductory section, presenting Anselm's social location, followed by an analysis of two of his major theological works, namely, *Why God Became Man* and *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*. From the perspective of two liberation theologies (Black theology and womanist theology) and Christology, I will show how Anselm's thinking in these theological works has contributed to and been used to justify Eurocentric attitudes of superiority.

## ANSELM AND THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

A medieval theologian and archbishop, Anselm lived during a time when the Roman Catholic papacy was in great need of reform, as the papacy was affected by the entrenched worldview of feudalism. In general, feudalism is a system consisting of a strict pecking order ranging from top to bottom: the pope, the king, nobles, knights, archbishop, freemen, yeomen, servants, peasants, villeins, bondsmen, slaves. It is important to note that "there was, of course, an enormous gap between the legal status of the villein or serf and his actual condition in a feudalism society. By custom and economic circumstance the serf was in fact bound to the soil. . . . No doubt serfs have generally escaped the worst pressures and insecurities of slavery."<sup>2</sup>

At the top of this system was the king, who was expected to follow the rule according to the principles of justice. The power of the pope came into being if a king became unjust. The pope had the power to pronounce judgment against the king, depose a king, forfeit his kingdom and replace him with another king if need be.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the king remained higher on the pyramid of power than the archbishop, which would have ethical ramifications for Anselm as he rose to become the archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>4</sup>

Anselm remained cognizant of how much the feudal system would affect his life and ministry as he became in 1078 the abbot of the abbey of LaBec in Normandy and in 1093 the archbishop of Canterbury. Of note here is the circumstance by which Anselm was elevated to the position of archbishop, which caused him considerable anguish and consternation: the king became ill, and in fear of hell was persuaded that he must fill the vacant archbishopric whose revenues he had been enjoying for longer than the customary year. He chose Anselm.<sup>5</sup> Archbishop Anselm struggled, for example, with the effects of investiture with the Catholic Church. He asked, "Was the investing of bishops with ring and crosier, the insignia of office, to be done by lay princes or by the Pope?"<sup>6</sup> Because Anselm was a firm master of the spiritual life, he was concerned about having to engage in the battle between feudal authority and spiritual rule. In other words,

he had responsibilities for the temporalities of his see such as supplying soldiers and paying others such dues as feudal obligations required. Perhaps, in part, because of these unusual circumstances, Anselm's style of governance as archbishop was personal; he was not always able, for practical reasons, to work in collegial association with his fellow-bishops in England. Sometimes they sided with the king for their own advantages and Anselm was left isolated.<sup>7</sup>

The archbishop was still a Benedictine monk. This monastic orientation included a single-minded focus on God,<sup>8</sup> along with strong feelings about his place in the hierarchy of the church, which was inseparably linked to his conception of obedience to superiors under God. Given that Anselm lived during the medieval period, he was no doubt captured by the worldview that historian

John Dwyer describes: "medieval life, if not profoundly religious, was at least permeated by religion at every level, . . . and as intellectual life developed, those who were committed to this life would try to understand the mysteries of their faith."<sup>9</sup> Anselm embodied this notion of medieval life and is world renowned for the motto "Faith seeking understanding."

In 1097, theologian Archbishop Anselm departed in voluntary exile to pray and think about how to redress the personal effects of the conflict between the spiritual life and the feudal system. Anselm used an innovative theological method to respond to theological problems: he would not solve them on the basis of the authority of Scripture or of the ancients, but through the use of reason.<sup>10</sup> Anselm was a devout believer, for whom love of God was the soul of daily life and love of God was at the center of theology.<sup>11</sup> Anselm wrote theological treatises on the question of God, such as<sup>12</sup> *Why God Became Man*, as well as *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin* and *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit* to address theological problems. With the difficulties he had experienced with the lay authorities now resolved, Anselm returned to his see and completed three final theological works before his death in 1109: *On the Agreement of Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Free Will*.

## ANSELM'S HIERARCHY OF REDEMPTION

Stamped with an imprimatur of its time, *Why God Became Man* (also known as *Cur Deus Homo*) is recognized as Anselm's greatest theological work; it holds a special place in Catholic systematic theology. "In great tribulation of heart did [he] begin *Cur Deus Homo*, during the troubles with a king. In the peace of exile at Schaiavi it was finished."<sup>13</sup>

Anselm postulates in *Why God Became Man* that God became human or Jesus Christ to illustrate how the redemption of the human race is possible. For him, redemption was necessary because of original sin, resulting from the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Setting out to prove his premise through deduction reasoning, without relying on biblical revelation or theological authority, Anselm draws on the notion of honor, from the perspective of the feudal legal system. He argues that God had been dishonored by human sin. Understanding that God is All-powerful and All-knowing—Almighty, Omnipresent, and Omnipotent—Anselm cannot let this dishonor persist without offering a reasoned response. Furthermore, he does not want to be inauthentic in his role as a theologian and archbishop, as one who is called to demonstrate and (re)establish right order. He cannot allow God's original plan for creation to be thwarted; indeed, sin must be forgiven to God's satisfaction.

Mindful of the superior and almighty power of God, Anselm maintains that God should not have intervened in establishing right order because of the fall of Adam and Eve. Anselm believed that neither God nor the angels were debtors for sin. In Anselm's view, God gives human beings free will and the intellect to

make choices regarding good and evil. Angels act as intercessories for humanity, intervening for humans with God. Given that angels are not debtors for sin, Anselm muses that they too do not have to respond to the debt created by the fall of Adam and Eve. Rather, they can dismiss it. When questioning the role of human beings in resolving this problem, Anselm notes that there lies the ethical dilemma. First of all, he holds human beings as subordinates in respect to a superior, God. Second, he believes that all human beings are debtors, as they are shamed by the original human sin of Adam and Eve. Under the domination of the devil, human beings are unable to do what is required to establish right order to God's satisfaction. But the incarnate Jesus Christ, who Christians believe is both human and divine, should intervene. In his human and divine nature, Jesus Christ is the only one who both owes the debt and is able to pay the debt. Thus, with the incarnation of Jesus Christ the theological problem is resolved, which, in turn, preserves God's honor and restores right order to the world. In essence, this is why "God became man," which is also a cursory description of the doctrine of atonement.

Concerning *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*,<sup>14</sup> it is important to note that the virginal conception pertains to contemporary official teaching and universal belief of the Catholic Church that Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary." In other words, Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin without the insertion of the male sperm or the intervention of a human father.<sup>15</sup> As mentioned in discussion of *Why God Became Man*, we find that the fall of Adam and Eve was the reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ. For Anselm, the Virgin's son had original justice rather than original sin.<sup>16</sup> Because of the fall, human nature was corrupted.<sup>17</sup>

Anselm argues that human nature alone does not have the power to make satisfaction for original sin or to recover it from original injustice. Because Adam and Eve abandoned their original justice, their descendants would have original sin too. But it was Adam, not Eve, who propagated original sin "in that Adam along with his rib, even though a woman was created from it, can be called Adam. . . . if Eve alone and not Adam had sinned, it would not have been the fate of the whole human race to die, but Eve's alone. For God could have fulfilled his purpose by making another woman from Adam."<sup>18</sup>

Hence one can make the case that Anselm views Adam as the propagator of original sin/original injustice and Jesus Christ, the new Adam, as the propagator of original justice.

As mentioned, Anselm is known for employing deductive reasoning and logic in his theological treatises. The medieval political and patriarchal system, from which he originated, heavily influenced his deductive and logical thinking, which connoted right order and structure. One can make the case that his thinking is intertwined in hierarchical thought as noted above in the explanation of the pyramid of power.

As previously stated in *Why God Became Man*, Anselm posits that the role of Jesus Christ, the God-man, was to be able both to pay the debt and to satisfy the

debt owed to God. Given that this thinking promotes Eurocentric superiority and continues to influence Christian theology today, one might ask, for example, what Anselm's treatises have to say about certain human beings with dark skin who have been labeled and categorized as sinful, slaves, property, cursed, despised, and outcasts in perpetuity. How did an entrenched worldview manage to develop that created Black/African Americans as inferior, unable to be saved and relegated to second-class citizenship and/or enslaved for all eternity? Furthermore, in *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*, Anselm argues that Eve subsists in the flesh of Adam. Thus, it is Adam, not Eve, who is the propagator of original injustice/original sin. How have women in general and Black women in particular been used and abused as invisible, vulnerable people and scapegoats in the perpetuation of Anselm's thinking that views Adam as the propagator of original injustice/original sin and overlooks Eve?

### JESUS AS THE LIBERATOR OF THE OPPRESSED

Anselm's theological treatises neglect a Christology from below, which challenges Eurocentric superior thinking and envisions Jesus as a liberator for the oppressed. A low Christology, or a Christology from below, begins with the Jesus of history and tends to emphasize his humanity. In contrast, a high Christology, such as that proposed by Anselm, begins with the Word of God (Logos) in heaven and tends to focus on the divinity of Christ.

The Christology question is important because it reflects how we might respond to questions of oppression and the moral issue of sin. In his praise of the feudal system, Anselm overlooked those who occupied its bottom rungs: those who were regarded as slaves, property, cursed, despised, and outcasts in perpetuity. I am arguing instead for a low Christology that offers a more complete reflection of the God-man who was virginally conceived and is both human and divine. A low Christology, informed by both Black theology and womanist theology, refers to inductive reasoning and the historical Jesus, while also addressing the moral issue of sin.

Rooted historically in slavery, briefly, Black theology is "a prophetic theology of liberation that examines the relation between the black experience and faith in God as the liberator of that experience."<sup>19</sup> Under construction since the mid-1980s, womanist theology, also a theology of liberation, is "the study of the experiences of black women from the perspective of God in the lives of black women."<sup>20</sup> Both of these liberation theologies consider the plight of those in the African diaspora, those who are poor, marginalized, outcasts, and/or oppressed, including those who were slaves under a system that was a descendant of England's feudal system. Both theological approaches agree that the incarnation of the God-man, Jesus Christ, offers a solid response to what it means to be on the side of the marginalized. He is the one who can regain and uphold their human dignity.

As previously stated, in Anselm's *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*,

Eve subsists in Adam's flesh and is thus allegorically absent from the propagation of original sin. It is Adam and not Eve who is the propagator of original sin/original injustice. One aspect of womanist theology is reflection upon those areas of Black women's lives that have been overlooked, subjugated, or dismissed, and/or have treated women as scapegoats. Indeed, womanist theology would have something to say about envisioning Eve as absent from the fall and thus projecting on her as a woman many stereotypes, curiosities, and speculations. Against the backdrop that no human being is perfect and that all humans fall short of the message of love and justice of sacred Scripture, Eve is still a woman created in the image and likeness of God. This God is all-loving, all-peaceful, and all-compassionate, and is the Great Forgiver of Sins.<sup>21</sup>

In essence, Black theology and womanist theology hold that Jesus is the Christ, that is, the God-man incarnate, both human and divine. In contrast to Anselm's high and feudally based Christology, this Jesus exudes forgiveness, justice, and love to all humankind, welcoming all to take part in the promotion of right relationships with all of God's creation.

### Notes

1. Joseph Clayton, *Saint Anselm* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1933), 14–15.
2. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 34.
3. Walter Ulmann, "The Hierocratic Doctrine," in *Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *Readings in Medieval History*, 3rd ed., ed. Brian Tierney (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 223. It may be helpful to state here the essence of the hierocratic ideology, which emerged in its full maturity from the pontificate of Gregory VII onward (1073–85). The pope or the successor of Peter was bound to lead the community of the faithful, the church. This means that the pope issued supreme laws that claimed universal validity and concerned themselves with everything that affected the vital interests and structural fabric of the Christian community. Obviously, from his hierocratic point of view, the judge of what was in the interests of that community, what facts, circumstances, actions, or situations touched its vital concerns, was the pope. He was the "judge ordinary" and claimed to possess the specific knowledge of when legislation was required. The function of the pope was that of a true monarch, governing the community that was entrusted to him. Moreover, each member of that community had his or her carefully assigned role. Order was said to be maintained if everyone remained within his assigned function. If either a king or a bishop intervened in or, rather, interfered with, the other's functions, disorder would follow. The principle of division of labor was a vital element of this thesis. Anselm was struggling with the realization of this doctrine in his own see.
4. John R. Fortin, ed., "Keeping Order in the Real World," in *Anselm: His Origins and Influence* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2001), 3–25.
5. G. R. Evans, *Anselm* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1989), 17.
6. Clayton, *Saint Anselm*, 4. See also Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 6, *The Middle Ages, A.D. 1294–1517*; <http://www.ccel.org/org/print/schaff/hcc6/ii.xiv.iv> (downloaded May 15, 2010).
7. Evans, *Anselm*, 16.



8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. John Dwyer, *Church History: Twenty Centuries of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 179.
10. According to Justo González, "the type of problem which he usually poses is not a mere speculative question, but is rather the erroneous position of a heretic or an unbeliever who must be refuted. He then sets out from the presupposition that such a heretic or unbeliever would accept and from such presuppositions attempts to prove orthodox doctrine. At first sight, this method gives the impression that Anselm is simply an extreme rationalist. He does indeed attempt to prove rationally doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, which most later theologians would insist, were beyond the limits of human reason. But it is necessary to keep in mind that Anselm the theologian is always Anselm the believer, so that he already believes what he attempts to prove" (Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2, *From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971], 158–59).
11. G. R. Evans, *Anselm and Talking about God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
12. According to Justo González, "as far as the history of Christian thought is concerned, this century was born not in 1100 CE, but rather on that day, somewhat earlier, on which Anselm of Bec—who later became Archbishop of Canterbury—took the pen and started his vast theological production" (González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 158).
13. Clayton, *Saint Anselm*, 146.
14. The virginal conception of Jesus points to the idea that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin, Mary. Mary did not engage in sexual intercourse with a human man (i.e., Joseph the carpenter). It is important to note that the virginal conception does not refer to Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus. Belief in the virginal conception of Jesus is conveyed in the Christian Scripture or New Testament, particularly in the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.
15. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: New Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 542. The scales seem to tip in favor of the theory that the belief in the virginal conception of Jesus is a result of what is technically called a *theologoumenon* (literally, "that which is said about God"). In other words, a theologoumenon is a nondoctrinal theological interpretation that cannot be verified or refuted on the basis of historical evidence, but can be affirmed because of its close connection with some defined doctrine about God.
16. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 377.
17. *Ibid.*, 360.
18. *Ibid.*, 369.
19. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 6.
20. Stephanie Y. Mirchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 60.
21. See John 4:4–26; Luke 7:26–49; John 8:1–11.