

Medieval Church History

St. Anselm and St. Aquinas

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St. Anselm

Biographical Sketch: (c. 1033-1109). Anselm was the son of a landowner from Lombardy (Northern Italy), and he was born and raised in Aosta Italy (Italian portion of the Alps). In 1056, after years of wandering away from home searching for meaning in life, he crossed the Alps to join the Benedictine monastic school at Bec in Normandy, France at twenty-six years of age. In 1060 he took monastic vows and became prior (a prior is a monastic superior below an Abbot in rank) of the cloister in 1063. He was known for his superior intellectual gifts as well as his commitment to spiritual disciplines and he became a natural leader and teacher.

Ecclesiastical Offices: In 1078 he became the Abbot of Bec (Abbot means “Father” and is the head of a monastery). He often visited England and gained the respect of William I or “William the Conqueror” (c. 1028-1087) who ruled as King of England from 1066-1087. King William nominated Anselm to be **Archbishop of Canterbury** when Lanfranc died (1089) and he was consecrated Archbishop in December 1093. Anselm spent much of his life as Archbishop in exile on the continent because he consistently sought to uphold the pope’s rights in England and argued for the independence of the English Church from the King. He died on April 21st, 1109.

Anselm’s Theology: Anselm was the greatest of the theological minds between St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. He has been described as a rare and unique character in the history of the Church because of his great intellectual mind coupled with his childlike faith that operated together in perfect harmony. “Love to God was the soul of his daily life and love to God was the burning center of his theology” (Schaff, Vol. V, pg. 600).

Anselm’s Ontological Argument: Anselm wrote in *Proslogion* that in order to believe in the existence of the God revealed in Scripture, one must begin with faith and the God of Scripture. Anselm believed that faith was a necessary foundation and support for philosophical speculation. He coined the phrase **Faith seeking understanding** (“*credo ut intelligam*” which was the original title of *Proslogion*) in this book agreeing with St. Augustine’s teaching on the proper use of reason (as Augustine had taught “Believe in order to understand”). Anselm wrote in *Proslogion* “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand: for this I also believe, that unless I believe I will not understand.” Anselm believed that “He who does not believe has not felt [the love of God], and he who has not felt, does not understand.”

Proslogion was not written to prove by evidences the existence of God to unbelievers, but was to assure Christians that their faith was reasonable. *Proslogion* is the source for

Anselm's *Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*. Anselm tried to show that God's nature is such that from the essence or being of God (from what God is) we may conclude that God exists. This is an *a priori* (deductive) argument starting with God's existence (not trying to prove it but assuming it) can be summarized in this way:

1. God is, by definition, a being greater than which nothing can be conceived (imagined).
2. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind.
3. God must exist in reality; if God did not, then God would not be that than which nothing greater can be conceived (imagined).

Historian Dr. **D. Clair Davis** at Westminster Theological Seminary commented on this argument of Anselm's and said: "This 'argument' is either theological sleight-of-hand or the pinnacle of profundity, and it is not surprising that philosophers and theologians have difficulty even in knowing whether they understand what Anselm is saying. Perhaps he should be understood as saying this: *Unless God exists then no thought or meaning is possible; so to even think of God means to think of Him as He is—that is, as existent.*" (*How Did the Church in Rome Become Roman Catholicism?*).

"Cur Deus Homo": "Why God became Man" (1090s) In the book *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm began with faith in the incarnation and cross to seek understanding in the atonement. Anselm assumed the existence of God as Trinity in his presuppositions as his theological method guided him to this conclusion. In this book a new phase of Church history began as the doctrine of the atonement is developed further. He argued scripturally in his book for the satisfaction view of the atonement or "substitutionary atonement" and taught that God had to become man to satisfy God's wrath in the place of man. Sin, Anselm taught, no matter how small, was serious because it was an act against God's will and therefore deserving of infinite punishment because it was against an infinitely holy God. In order to make restitution by satisfying God's infinite wrath because God had been infinitely offended, Jesus Christ had to be both God and man; he had to be a true man in order to represent his own and take the place of sinners; he had to be God in order to undergo the infinite wrath of the Father and offer up a sacrifice that would truly satisfy God's justice.

Cur Deus Homo began with this question: "For what reason and on the basis of what necessity did God become a man and by His death restore life to the world (as we believe and confess), seeing that He could have accomplished this restoration either by means of some other person (whether angelic or human) or else by merely willing it?"

Before the publication of this book and scriptural articulation of the atonement, many of the most influential theologians such as **Origen** (d. 254) and **St. Gregory of Nyssa** (d. 394) had taught the **"Ransom Theory"** of the atonement that thought that the devil had rights over fallen man and Jesus Christ had to pay the ransom to Satan to redeem him back to God.

Anselm's view of the atonement was criticized by his contemporary rival **Peter Abelard** who also disagreed with the "Ransom Theory" (d. 1142), but was to formulate a view of the atonement that was more man-centered than the substitutionary atonement view. Abelard argued that the atonement did not satisfy God's wrath but that the cross showed the great extent of God's love for the world; this view has been called the "**Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement**". Abelard wrote in his *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans* (283): "Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this unique act of grace manifested to us....he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him."

For Abelard, the atonement was made efficacious as the individual responded to God's love subjectively; his view was that the atonement was God's act of love that inspired humans to acts of love. For Anselm, the atonement was a substitutionary satisfaction of God's wrath objectively for a certain people.

Anselm's Major Writings: *Monologion* (1077- In English translated *An Example of Meditation on the Grounds of Faith*) and *Proslogion* (1079- In English translated as *Discourse on the Existence of God*) were philosophical-theological works to argue for the existence of God. In *De Processione Sancti Spiritus* or *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit* Anselm argued for the dual procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son in opposition to current theology in the Eastern Orthodox Church. He also wrote *On the Virginal Conception and Original Sin*. The greatest and most influential of all of his theological works is the book *Cur Deus Homo* or "Why the God Man?" (Or, "Why God became Man").

Anselm's Legacy: Anselm's teaching of the satisfaction view of the atonement was further developed and refined in the teaching of **St. Thomas Aquinas** and **John Calvin**. His satisfaction view became foundational to medieval atonement theory and medieval worship and piety (thus the reason why the crucifixion of Jesus is depicted as central in medieval worship, art, and architecture). His *Ontological Argument for the Existence of God* can still strengthen Christians in their faith and understanding of God's existence. **Cornelius Van Til** in the Twentieth Century would develop his apologetic and defense of the faith against Evidentialism and "Classical" Apologetics using the theological method of Augustine and Anselm.

St. Thomas Aquinas “Doctor Angelicus”

Biographical Sketch: (c. 1225-1274) Thomas was a **Dominican** philosopher and the most influential philosopher and theologian of the Late Medieval Period; called the “Prince of the Schoolmen”. He was born near Aquino (a territory in Italy, northwest of Cassino) in the Kingdom of Naples. He was the youngest son of Landolfo d’ Aquino a wealthy aristocrat (known as “The Count of Roccasecca”). At the age of five Thomas was given by his family to the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino with the hopes that he would become an abbot. He later joined the **Dominican Order** in 1244 after university and he was sent to live in Paris. The Dominican Order emphasized a preaching of the gospel and rigorous academic learning, and so it was their primary mission to preach and hear confessions (they were known as the “Order of Preachers” or “OP”).

In 1252 Thomas began studies for his Master’s Degree at the University of Paris where he learned from **Albertus Magnus** who was arguably the greatest German philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages (d. 1280). In 1256, Thomas along with his friend and colleague **Bonaventura** (d. 1274) was named Doctor of Theology. After university study and training, Thomas taught theology at the university in Paris for the remainder of his life, while also preaching everyday.

While Thomas was at Paris, he began writing ***Summa contra Gentiles*** which was a manual to help Dominican missionaries in dealing apologetically with non-Christians. In 1265 Thomas began his massive theological tome ***Summa Theologica*** (*Summary of Theology*) which was originally started to assist friars (members of one of the mendicant orders) as a theological handbook if they were not able to study theology at university. In 1268 Thomas held one of the Dominican chairs of theology until 1272 and was the most productive of his life in his writings during this time. In February 1274 Thomas suffered a massive head injury and died on March 7th, 1274 at the Cistercian abbey (Cloister of the “White Monks”) in the Province of Rome where he was buried. Thomas’ *Summa* was incomplete when he died.

Aquinas’ Theology: Historian Philip Schaff wrote “He who understands Thomas understands the medieval theology at its best and will be in possession of the doctrinal system of the Roman Church” (Vol. V, pg. 675). Thomas’ system of thought is known as “**Thomistic**” because it was the attempt to synthesize the philosophy of Aristotle with Christian doctrine, including an emphasis on the rational evidences for the existence of God (sometimes also called “**Thomistic Aristotelianism**”). Thomas sought to make a clear distinction between philosophy and theology, and reason and revelation than had been done by other Schoolmen before him.

Thomas believed that truth is known through reason (natural revelation) as well as through faith (supernatural revelation). He accorded primacy to revelation from Scripture, but he also recognized a philosophical autonomy proper to human reason and therefore often had a different starting point in his philosophical writings than both Augustine and Anselm. **G. K. Chesterton** called Thomas’ philosophy “organized

common sense” (in the book by Chesterton *The Dumb Ox* (1933) on the life and theology of Aquinas).

Aquinas thought that *philosophical knowledge* must begin with sense perception following Aristotle’s philosophy of **empiricism**. Thomas argued that valid philosophical arguments must start with facts of the natural world. From this world we must begin and argue for the existence of God (compared to Augustine and Anselm who started with the existence of God as their presupposition in their thinking). Thomas believed that **Aristotelian logic** was basic to understanding all other disciplines; knowledge was based on ‘first principles’ that were acquired by experience or education. Thomas said that the truths that the natural mind can reach by reason and observation are the preamble or vestibule of faith.

Philosopher **Diogenes Allen** who teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary wrote in *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* said about Thomas’ methodology: “God revealed not only strictly supernatural truths but some truths which are philosophically demonstrable, such as God’s existence. Such rationally demonstrable truths are natural theology. A concord between philosophy and theology is partly achieved by the creation of *natural theology* as a domain within theology, and the claim that some revealed truths are accessible to reason or philosophy. Harmony between philosophy and theology is further enhanced by the discovery of natural analogies for supernatural truths which transcend the intellect, philosophy thus aiding our understanding of theology...Philosophy is used to order both natural and supernatural truths into a deductive system in an Aristotelian manner with knowledge of the natural world and Christianity intertwined. Philosophy thus becomes the handmaiden of theology” (pg. 110).

For Thomas, sacred doctrine was received through revelation, but this sacred doctrine included Scripture and tradition of the Church (Supernatural revelation is revealed through the prophets, Holy Scripture, and the Magisterium, the sum of which is called “tradition”). Thomas taught that distinct from philosophy was the study of sacred doctrine or theology (he made a sharp distinction between these). Though Thomas was Aristotelian in his seeking after understanding, he did affirm that revelation was important for certain truths such as the existence of God and the divine attributes of creative power and providence, which reason cannot attain unaided. He believed that without divine revelation to aid the reason there would be many theological errors made. In fact, he believed that when faith and reason conflict, then faith must correct reason.

His thought could be summarized by saying that sacred doctrine proceeds from the data of revelation and tradition, while philosophy proceeds from data that is accessible to all men. Both streams are truths from the same God and are fountains of knowledge. For instance, Thomas would have said that to study nature is to study God. He denied that there would be a contradiction between philosophy and theology (in contrast to Duns Scotus and William of Ockham), and so all men could reason that God is one, knowledge, power, goodness, and truth, but one needed special revelation to know God as Trinity (although one might find glimpses of this reality through reason). Theologian

Paul Helm wrote: “It is a mistake to think of Aquinas as a Christian philosopher if by this is meant someone who elaborates answers to philosophical questions on the basis of Christian revelation...[For example] Philosophically the universe might be eternal. But the Christian believes from revelation that creation is an act of God” (NIDCC, “Thomas Aquinas”, 60). In Thomas’ thinking, the ultimate goal of theology was to reason in order to grasp the truth of God and to experience salvation through this truth.

Thomas’ *Summa Theologica* (written 1265-1274 and the most important book of the Roman Catholic Church second only to the Bible) is a three-part theological work starting with God and creation, the human person as a free moral agent, and ending with Christ the Redeemer as the way of man to God (His doctrine on the Sacraments are included under the third book on the Redeemer). His book is made up of 518 divisions or theological questions and these questions are divided into 2652 articles which state the negative and positive side of each proposition that is answered.

In Thomas’ articulation of God’s grace in salvation, he affirmed the Semi-Pelagian viewpoint, and believed that God loves all men, therefore leaving it to man to respond to his grace. He believed that original sin is a mere disorder, or corrupt condition of the body; the corruption of nature was only partial, not a total deadness with ability to respond to and cooperate with God’s grace. He affirmed the Anselmic view of the atonement (“Satisfaction View”), writing that the infinitude of human guilt makes it fitting that the Son of God should make atonement. For Thomas, Christ won grace for his Church in his Incarnation, and therefore the Church is responsible to God for dispensing or imparting this grace to Christ’s people.

In order to get a better idea of the theology of Thomas’ *Summa*, and how influential it has been in the development of Roman Catholic Theology, we shall consider some of his sacramental teachings unique to Roman Catholic Theology. Thomas taught in his *Summa* that in the Sacrament of Baptism, original sin is cleansed and the person is incorporated into the Body of Christ. In the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the substance of the bread and wine undergoes change in their essences (change in essence from bread to the Body of Christ, and from wine to the Blood of Christ), while the outward dimensions of the bread and wine, or their accidents (*accidens*), or the appearance, smell, feel, taste, etc), remain the same. Penance is a sacrament that removes guilt after baptism for sins committed. Indulgences are efficacious for the dead as well as for the living and can be dispensed by the Pope as the head of Christ’s Church (whose primary ministry is dispensing grace that Christ has merited for His Church). The Treasury of Merit contain the merits accumulated by Jesus Christ in his life for the Church, but also are the merits of saints that have exceeded other Christians in their extraordinary faith and works. In his ecclesiology, Thomas taught that Rome is the mistress and mother of all churches and to obey here is to obey Christ. He wrote that the Pope’s office is to determine what is of faith and subjection is necessary to salvation (One theologian quoted in Schaff, Vol. V, pg. 674 said that Thomas was the first theologian to discuss the theory of papal infallibility as an integral part of systematic theology).

Thomas taught that ethically there are **four cardinal virtues** that all men made in God's image can practice: prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. He believed these four virtues of natural revelation were binding upon all men. He made a distinction between these four cardinal virtues and **three theological virtues**: faith, hope, and charity that were supernatural in origin. Thomas also made famous in his *Summa* the **seven deadly sins** articulated by Gregory I (c. 540-604) or "Gregory the Great" in the 7th century. These seven deadly sins based on Proverbs 6:16-19 are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger (or wrath), envy, and pride.

In his *Summa* Aquinas taught that God's existence can be established philosophically in his **Five Ways or "Five Arguments for the Existence of God"** (or in Latin *quinquae viae*). In contrast to Anselm's reasoning *a priori* (or deductively), Thomas reasons for God's existence with five *a posteriori* arguments (inductively reasoning from this world or the "effects" back to the cause). Aquinas said in opposition to Anselm's *Ontological Argument* that God is not self evident to us because we cannot grasp the divine essence. So the argument from the essence or being of God to the existence of God is impossible. Therefore Thomas started with the observable effects of God in this world back to the cause which is God. From this methodology Thomas believed the Christian theologian could establish theologically that God exists. Aquinas does not assume that all men have a knowledge of God's essence, so that we may from that knowledge show that God exists, as Anselm believed.

The following excerpt of Thomas' **"Five Ways"** from his *Summa* Question 2: The Existence of God, Article 3: Does God Exist?

1. The argument of the unmoved mover (*ex motu*) – This is very similar to Aristotle's argument for the *First Unmoved Mover argument*.
 - Some things are moved.
 - Everything that is moved is moved by a mover.
 - An infinite regress of movers is impossible.
 - Therefore, there is an unmoved mover from whom all motion proceeds.
 - This mover is what we call God.
2. The argument of the first cause (*ex causa*).
 - Some things are caused.
 - Everything that is caused is caused by something else.
 - An infinite regress of causation is impossible.
 - Therefore, there must be an uncaused cause of all caused things.
 - This causer is what we call God.
3. The argument of contingency (*ex contingentia*)- "God as Necessary Being".
 - Many things in the universe may either exist or not exist. Such things are called contingent beings.
 - It is impossible for everything in the universe to be contingent, as nothing can come of nothing, and if traced back eventually there must have been one thing from which all others have occurred.
 - Therefore, there must be a necessary being whose existence is not contingent on any other being(s).

- This being is what we call God.
- 4. The argument of degree (*ex gradu*).
 - Various perfections may be found in varying degrees throughout the universe.
 - These degrees of perfections assume the existence of the perfections themselves.
- 5. The argument of "design" (*ex fine*).
 - All natural bodies in the world act for ends.
 - These objects are in themselves unintelligent.
 - To act for ends is characteristic of intelligence.
 - Therefore, there exists an intelligent being which guides all natural bodies to their ends.
 - This being we call God.

The concern of many philosopher-theologians with Thomas' "**Five Ways**" has been that they establish perhaps the existence of *a god*, but not necessarily the existence of the *Trinitarian Biblical God*. Some theologians have said that the deity in natural theology is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is self-revealed and can only be known by revelation. For these theologians, Thomas' God is no more God than Aristotle's "First Unmoved Mover" and is the god of human reason; God must come to us through revelation.

Thomas rightly made a Creator-creature distinction in his theological writings and taught that man could only know God imperfectly through analogy and negation (that is we can compare God's attributes with similarities in man and we can explain God by saying what he is not). For instance, what is God's wisdom like? It is like Solomon's wisdom in some respects, but it is also different and greater (analogy). For example, what does it mean that God is eternal? He is not embodied; he does not exist in time (negation).

Perhaps Thomas' greatest theological contribution was his articulation that whereas all creatures have a borrowed existence, **God alone is subsistent being**, the necessary being, the necessary being who cannot not be. He emphasized the role of Christ's humanity in the Incarnation, and showed that Christ's humanity had a causal relationship to the work of redemption. As the head of redeemed humanity, Christ continues the work of redemption through the sacraments which are an extension of His humanity, mediating his fullness of grace to His members. Thomas wrote that seven sacraments were instituted by Christ for his Church and that the Eucharist was the highest of them all. He systematized the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation using Aristotelian philosophical categories of substance and accidents to communicate the real and corporeal presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent (Dec. 1545 - Dec. 1563) accepted the substance of his theological teaching in the *Summa* as an authentic expression of Catholic doctrine.

Aquinas' Major Writings: *Summa contra Gentiles* (1258-1264) and *Summa Theologica* (1265-1274)

Aquinas' Legacy: Thomas' theology made official Roman Catholic Theology at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Thomas was made a **'Doctor of the Church'** by Pius V in 1567 (only 33 doctors of the Roman Catholic Church). In 1879, Leo XIII wrote an encyclical *Aeterni Patris* praising and endorsing **Thomism** and giving it an official place in the theology and thinking of the Roman Catholic Church. Thomas continues to influence thinking in **Natural Theology** that argues that there are evidences for the existence of God found in the world based on reason and experience apart from special revelation. The Reformers, particularly John Calvin, agreed with Thomas that all men have a sense of divinity (the "*sensus divinitatis*") and according to Romans 1:19ff can see clearly God's power and attributes, however they disagreed with Thomas in saying that this revelation is useless apart from God's revelation in Jesus Christ, because man's sinfulness has tainted the reason and so sinners exchange the truth that they see plainly for a lie (Romans 1:23-26); the evidence for God in creation or nature is reasonable, but man is not, and it only makes him guilty before God for what he does know. The Reformers in the Sixteenth Century as well as today do not believe that man has a neutral ability to reason, but that the reason (as well as the will) has been tainted by sin; the evidence for God in the world only leads man to idolatry as evidenced in Paul's appeal to the rational men at the Areopagus, recorded in Acts 17. Thomas also influenced modern literary thought through Dante's (d. 1321) *The Divine Comedy* that was based on Thomas' theology.

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