

TITLE:

Compare and contrast the teaching of Anselm and Abélard on the work of Christ.

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REFERENCES

1. Background to the writings

Neither Anselm nor Abélard could have written as they did on the work of Christ in an earlier age. Both depend on a fully developed Christology that was not finally settled before the Third Council of Constantinople in 681. But by then Western Christianity was entering a period when such theological concerns had a low priority, and this lasted until the late eleventh century. By then Europe was emerging from a time of stagnation, a change exemplified in the secular sphere by vigorous political developments, in the spiritual by the revival centred on Cluny, and in the intellectual by a renewed interest in philosophy in the monasteries and, increasingly, the Cathedral Schools¹.

Anselm's work, *Cur Deus Homo*, has the style of an apologetic, which reflects the renewed challenge to Christian orthodoxy raised by exposure to Moslem culture, and by the Aristotelian philosophy which it transmitted. That such new influences had also sharpened the doubts of western intellectuals is shown by the popularity of Pierre Abélard's controversial lectures². For the first time in centuries there was a constituency of informed scepticism about received theological opinion.

2. Purpose of writing

This background is helpful in understanding why the two authors take the approaches they do. Anselm, the earlier, says that his book answers

the objections of unbelievers who reject the Christian faith
because they think it contrary to reason;³

and

proves by necessary reasoning that...it is impossible for
any man to be saved without [Christ].⁴

The foremost of these objections (consistent with the criticisms of both Muslims and Jews) is that it is absurd that

God was made man, and by his death...restored life to the world. For he could have done this by means of some other person, or by his will alone.⁵

So Anselm's specific intention is to use reason (rather than authority) to demonstrate the consistency of the Son's Incarnation and sufferings with God's dignity, and their absolute necessity for salvation.

It is striking that the criticisms Anselm sets out to answer are the very same that Abélard poses on his own behalf in his *Commentary on Romans* 3.19-26:

So what compulsion, or reason, or need was there – seeing that by its very appearing alone the divine pity could deliver man from Satan – ...that the Son of God, for our redemption, should take upon him our flesh and endure ...finally that most bitter and disgraceful death upon the cross, enduring even the cross of punishment with the wicked?⁶

Abélard seeks to raise questions, as much as answer them. Part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that he is writing a commentary, not an apologetic. A greater part lies in his chosen approach to theology. In contradistinction to Anselm, who following Augustine said, '*I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand*'⁷, Abélard believed that '*by doubting we come to enquire, and by enquiring we reach truth*'.⁸ It may not be coincidental that these opposite approaches appear to lead to quite different accounts of truth.

3. *Anselm's Theory of Satisfaction*

It has been observed that the *Cur Deus Homo* depends quite heavily on Athanasius' fourth century treatise *On the Incarnation*. The general format, the idea of a 'divine dilemma' of how God could save sinful man and yet not overlook sin⁹, and the necessity for the death of the 'God-man' for its solution¹⁰ are all from Athanasius. But whereas the main emphases in the earlier work are on Christ as the second Adam, as a sacrificial victim, and as the Redeemer from Satan by the conquest of death, Anselm minimises these in favour of an entirely new view of Jesus' death as the only adequate satisfaction for sin.

To be sure, this is presented (as is Abélard's theory) as a denial of the then-popular idea that Christ died as a ransom to Satan. This idea is scarcely, if at all, present in Athanasius, but as it was so prevalent in Anselm's time, perhaps prompted him to go beyond Athanasius is his understanding of Christ's sufferings as a satisfaction to God.

The two major new features of his theory are an appreciation of the enormity of sin, with its logical *sequelæ*, and the concept of the atonement as the satisfaction of God's lost honour.

When God's will is contravened through sin, he is robbed of his honour as Lord of the universe. Though an individual might overlook such dishonour, a ruler cannot without compromising the rightful order of things. He has the choice of punishing, or of obtaining satisfaction from the sinner commensurate with the sin. In man's case he can offer nothing –

Repentance, a contrite heart, humility, fastings, and many kinds of bodily labours, mercy in giving and forgiving, and obedience¹¹

- because he already owes all these by virtue of God's ownership of him as Creator.

Furthermore, since even the salvation of the whole creation would not warrant just a glance in disobedience to the Almighty God, then even the whole creation would be insufficient satisfaction for such a sin. So though man alone is liable for the debt, only something greater than creation – that is God himself – is able fully to satisfy it.

God is therefore under the necessity (but the voluntary necessity of his own character and will, not an external compulsion) to find the solution in the Incarnation of his Son. He, as a sinless man, is personally free from the debt, but able to suffer judicial death as a voluntary act in payment of it. As God, his death is sufficient satisfaction for the sins of men.

Since God can give nothing to his Son as a reward for his obedience which he does not already possess by right, he can give the reward to any whom Christ chooses. Scripture teaches how any one who '*draws near to him in this name*'¹² may gain access to a share in this reward.

4. Critique of Anselm's Theory

The commonest criticism of Anselm's theory is that it is grounded in a mediæval, feudal concept of honour. Reformed scholars oppose to this the satisfaction of God's *justice*. Whilst Anselm is naturally enough coloured by

his culture, this criticism is not entirely fair. God's kingly honour is a thoroughly Biblical concept (Heb. *hadar*; Gk. *τιμη*) and is closely related to his glory, the expression of his sovereign character *in toto* (*kabod*; *δοξα*). His justice (like his love and mercy) serves his glory, which he will not yield to another¹³.

A more valid objection is his explanation of the application of the atonement *via* the mediæval concept of merit, rather than through a federal headship of the elect comparable to Adam's (an idea, incidentally, particularly strong in Athanasius). However this alters the central argument very little.

A further criticism is that the book is an incomplete account of the work of Christ. This is true, but is more a question of lack of emphasis than of omission. He makes no attempt to refute the other strands present in his Athanasian source (and in the other Fathers). Indeed, he hints that they are bound up with Christ's work of satisfaction. So, regarding 'Second Adam' theology, it is necessary that a son of Adam, through whom fell the race, should restore it:

For by whomsoever it is restored to its original state, it will certainly stand by means of that person through whom it will recover that state.¹⁴

Regarding victory over Satan, Anselm denies only the payment to him to achieve it, not the fact of it¹⁵.

And Christ as revealer demonstrates the breadth of God's justice and mercy by the very magnitude of his work, so that Anselm's questioner, Boso, cries out, *'I cannot tell you with what great joy my heart bounds.'*¹⁶

5. *Abélard's theory of 'moral influence'.*

Abélard starts with the same basic problems faced by Anselm: a human race admittedly worthy of punishment, and the question of how the Incarnation and Passion of Christ can 'redeem' and 'justify' us¹⁷. Indeed, like Anselm, he refutes the prevalent 'Ransom Theory'. He does so firstly by denying that Satan had any hold on the elect even before Christ died (thereby implicitly denying any retrospective effect of the Passion). Secondly he suggests that the seduction of man, far from giving Satan a right over him, actually made himself liable to censure, even giving the seduced '*a full claim for redress over the man who had caused the harm by his act of seduction.*'¹⁸.

He then questions, as Boso did Anselm, why God should not simply forgive sins, and remit punishment, by simple grace. But in point of fact he does not answer this question. He simply assumes its affirmative in the next paragraph: '*seeing that by its very appearing alone the divine pity could deliver man from Satan*'¹⁹, as he goes on to ask what other reason could account for the necessity of Christ's sufferings.

This is surprising in the light of the *Cur Deus Homo*, which must surely have been known to him, and which marshals some weighty arguments against the possibility of such 'sheer grace'. The questions that follow are also related to issues raised by the earlier work, and yet seem to ignore its arguments. He almost seems to put them up as a straw man to demolish.

Almost caricaturing Anselm's illustration of the heinousness even of a glance against God's will, he asks what expiation, if the death of Christ is needed to atone for the eating of an apple, will atone for the murder of Christ

and his followers. He questions how the death of Christ can make us more righteous than we were before. Agreeing with Anselm that Christ's propitiation was offered to God and not Satan, he returns to the objection, so carefully answered by his predecessor²⁰, that it seems

cruel and wicked...that anyone should demand the blood
of an innocent person as the price for anything.²¹

The solution proposed in his commentary to explain how we have been justified, and redeemed, by the blood of Christ is this. The Incarnation, teaching and example of the Son, continued even unto death, are a '*unique act of grace*'²² (apparently in the Pelagian, rather than the Augustinian sense), which more fully binds him to us by love, and so evokes a reciprocal love in us, which is our saving righteousness.

This is a comparative, rather than qualitative, dispensation, for

The ancient Fathers, waiting in faith for this gift, were
aroused to very great love of God in the same way...²³

though

a realised gift inspires greater love than one which is
hoped for.²⁴

6. Critique of Abélard's theory

Like Anselm, Abélard is criticised for the incompleteness of his theory. But there seems more justification in his case. Whilst it cannot be doubted that the work of Christ evokes a corresponding response of love in believers ('*We love because he first loved us*'²⁵), and that this aspect is perhaps insufficiently emphasised in Anselm, Abélard seems specifically to exclude other views of redemption in its favour.

It has been said that this brief passage is not representative of his whole teaching, which retains more traditional views of redemption, but in itself the passage is '*quite explicit*'²⁶. Bearing in mind that, unlike Anselm, he was writing a commentary on a specific passage, one would have expected a more exhaustive treatment of Romans 3.25-6. This deals specifically with a propitiation through faith (not love) in Christ's blood, explained in terms of God's justice (not his love, still less ours).

It is hard to see in what sense we are *justified* by our response of love, seeing how weak, in practice, are our affections. It is even harder to see in this view of Christ's work the biblical concept of redemption (*απολυτρωσις*, a ransom), for the effect is entirely subjective with respect to our attitudes, not objective with regard to the one in whose power we are (agreed to be God by Abélard). Abélard does also call it a reconciliation, but that word is not present in his passage in Romans, and in any case reconciliation in Paul's mind was primarily the ceasing of God's enmity towards *us* through the cross, and only secondarily our reconciliation towards him.

If it is accepted that Abélard intends this theory to be the answer to the questions he has raised – in other words, if he rejects the work of Christ as an objective satisfaction to God for sins – then '*the theory fails on its own principle*'²⁷. A man who chooses to suffer and die out of love, but for no objective purpose, does not excite love, but pity or condemnation:

True love is purposive in its self-giving; it does not make random or reckless gestures.²⁸

7. Conclusion

It has been said that Anselm's and Abélard's theories should not be made mutually exclusive. In the context of twelfth century writing on the work of Christ this may be true. Anselm makes a tremendous contribution to the understanding of the atonement, but is in danger of underestimating the importance of its subjective effect in the believer. Abélard corrects this imbalance, but at the price of a misleading confusion of atonement with reconciliation. Worse than this, as Bernard seems to have correctly perceived²⁹, Abélard strays perilously close to a Pelagian concept of sin and grace, which places salvation finally in us, not God:

The ground on which God forgives our sins was to Anselm the propitiatory death of Christ; but to Abélard it was our own love, penitence and obedience which are aroused in us as we contemplate the death of Christ.³⁰

This difference is crucial.

2312 words

References

- ¹ Dowley, 1990, p.281.
- ² *Ibid.*, p.288.
- ³ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, Preface.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.III.
- ⁶ Abélard, *Expositio in Epistolo ad Romanos 3.19-26*, Question.
- ⁷ Anselm, *Proslogium*, I.I, quoted in Ferguson & Wright, 1988, p.1.
- ⁸ Abélard, *Sic et Non*, Preface, quoted in Ferguson & Wright, 1988, *loc.cit.*
- ⁹ Athanasius, 2-3.
- ¹⁰ ‘...namely that, having proved his Godhead by his works, he might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering his own temple to death in place of all, to settle man’s account with death...’ *op. cit.*, 4.
- ¹¹ *Cur Deus Homo*, 1.XX.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 2.XIX.
- ¹³ Isaiah 48.11.
- ¹⁴ *Cur Deus Homo.*, 2.VIII.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.VII.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.XIX.
- ¹⁷ *Expositio*, Question.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* This seems a rhetorical, rather than a serious, argument.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Cur Deus Homo*, 1.VIII.
- ²¹ *Expositio*, *loc. cit.*
- ²² *Expositio*, Solution.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ 1 Jn 4.19.
- ²⁶ Stott, 1986, p.218 (footnote).
- ²⁷ Berkhof, 1941, p.387.
- ²⁸ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.220.
- ²⁹ Bernard, *Letter CXC*.9.
- ³⁰ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.218-9.

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