

Anselm

Biography / Overview

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033 – 1109 CE) was a medieval philosopher, theologian, and archbishop, widely regarded as the father of Scholasticism. Born in Aosta (in present-day Italy), Anselm joined the Benedictine monastery of Bec in Normandy, where he eventually became prior and then abbot. His intellectual brilliance and spiritual discipline soon earned him renown across Europe.

In 1093, Anselm was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, a position that placed him at the heart of both ecclesiastical and political tensions between the Church and the English Crown. Despite repeated exiles and conflicts with Kings William II and Henry I, Anselm remained steadfast in defending the Church's independence from secular authority.

Philosophically, Anselm is best known for formulating the ontological argument for the existence of God and for his work *Cur Deus Homo*, which offers a rational explanation for the Incarnation and Atonement. His legacy is marked by a deep commitment to “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), a phrase that defines the Scholastic method he helped pioneer.

Sources:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Anselm-of-Canterbury>
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/>
<https://iep.utm.edu/anselm/>

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Major Works:

Monologion (1076): A rational meditation on the existence and nature of God using natural reason.

Proslogion (1077–78): Introduces the ontological argument, proposing that God's existence is self-evident to reason.

Cur Deus Homo (*Why God Became Man*, c. 1094–98): A theological treatise on the necessity of Christ's Incarnation and Atonement.

De Veritate (*On Truth*), *De Libertate Arbitrii* (*On Free Will*), *De Casu Diaboli* (*On the Fall of the Devil*): Philosophical dialogues on logic, ethics, and metaphysics.

Numerous letters, prayers, and homilies reflecting his pastoral and monastic commitments.

Manuscript Legacy:

Anselm's works were widely copied, translated, and studied throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. His influence continued through thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and was central to the Scholastic tradition.

Sources:

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Birth Date / Death Date

Born: c. 1033 CE in Aosta, Kingdom of Burgundy (modern-day Italy)

Died: April 21, 1109 CE in Canterbury, England

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<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Anselm-of-Canterbury>

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Notable / Best-Known For

Creating the ontological argument, a philosophical proof for God's existence based purely on reason.

Advancing the theological doctrine of the Atonement through logical analysis in *Cur Deus Homo*.

Establishing the principle of "faith seeking understanding" as a method for theological inquiry.

Defending the autonomy of the Church against royal interference during his tenure as Archbishop.

Influencing the development of Scholasticism, the dominant method of medieval philosophical theology.

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Famous Quotes

"I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." — *Proslogion*, Preface

"God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived." — *Proslogion*, ch. 2

"For it is not fitting that God should lose His honor, and it is not fitting that He should remit the punishment of sin without compensation." — *Cur Deus Homo*, Book I

Major Works / Textual Contents**Monologion (1076)**

A rational exploration of divine attributes such as unity, goodness, and eternity, without relying on Scripture.

Proslogion (1077–78)

Develops the ontological argument, asserting that the concept of God entails God's necessary existence.

Cur Deus Homo (c. 1094–1098)

Explains why divine justice required the Incarnation of Christ to reconcile human sin. Pioneers a satisfaction theory of atonement, foundational to later Christian theology.

Other Philosophical Dialogues

De Veritate: Defines truth as rectitude perceptible only to the mind.

De Libertate Arbitrii: Defends the compatibility of free will and divine omniscience.

De Casu Diaboli: Analyzes the metaphysical nature of angels, freedom, and moral fall.

Influences / Intellectual Context

Anselm was shaped by the Benedictine monastic tradition, especially the intellectual culture of the Abbey of Bec.

He was deeply influenced by Augustine of Hippo, especially in theology and epistemology. His method foreshadowed Scholasticism, a system that would reach maturity in thinkers like Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas.

He lived during a time of growing Church authority and doctrinal clarification, contributing to key debates on faith, reason, and ecclesiastical power.

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Legacy and Modern Significance

Anselm's ontological argument remains a central topic in philosophy of religion, debated by thinkers from Descartes to Plantinga.

His satisfaction theory of atonement significantly shaped Western Christian soteriology, especially in Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The phrase "faith seeking understanding" continues to define the approach of many theological institutions.

Recognized as a Doctor of the Church and canonized as a saint, his influence spans theology, metaphysics, and church history.

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Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

Philosophy: Anselm's arguments are regularly discussed in philosophy of religion courses and publications.

Theology: His method of logical inquiry remains a model for integrating reason with faith in seminaries and universities.

Digital Access: His works are widely available online in translation, and he is featured in various public philosophy projects.

Cultural Legacy: Referenced in debates over faith, reason, and metaphysics—especially concerning the existence and nature of God.

Suggested Reading and Resources

Secondary Literature

Southern, R.W. *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Evans, G.R. *Anselm*. Continuum, 2000.

Davies, Brian & Evans, G.R. (eds.). *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*. Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

Archival and Online Resources

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://iep.utm.edu/anselm/>

Project Gutenberg (public domain translations):

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/1374>

Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL):

<https://www.ccel.org/a/anselm/>