

Feudal Imagery or Christian Tradition? A Defense of the Rationale for Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

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Anselm of Canterbury's Cur Deus Homo (CDH) is one of the most important theological approaches to the issues of Incarnation and Atonement which may be found in the history of Christianity. Anselm's ingenuity and rigor in his examination of the rationale for the central doctrine of the Christian faith established the Cur Deus Homo as mandatory reading for a medieval understanding of Christology. However, the Cur Deus Homo has been received with varying degrees of suspicion due to that very medieval context in which Anselm wrote. In his defense of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word of God, Anselm framed his reasoning within the feudal context in which he lived and he tended to derive analogies and imagery from the legal peculiarities of that society. Unfortunately, the influence of feudalism has caused some scholars to harshly criticize or dismiss outright the entire Cur Deus Homo. In this paper, I would like to address those criticisms and counter those who maintain that Anselm's argument lacks viability because of its feudal context. It is my hope that, by showing possible patristic sources for some of Anselm's key imagery, the weight of some criticisms leveled against the argument may be mitigated.

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A great deal of the discussion surrounding the weakness of the *Cur Deus Homo* is inevitably tied to Gustav Aulén's thesis (contained in his book *Christus Victor*) that CDH represented a drastic and unfortunate change in the theology of the Atonement from a classical,

patristic view to a Latin, Medieval Western view. Aulén termed the *Cur Deus Homo* as the first “fully developed” example of the “Latin theory of the Atonement.”¹ By this, Aulén intended to set off Anselm from the “classic” approach found in the church fathers. In his summary of Anselm as representative of Latin Atonement theories, he concludes that “the Latin doctrine of the Atonement is closely related to the legalism characteristic of the mediaeval outlook.”²

It is just such a dichotomy between patristic and medieval doctrines of the Atonement which seems to have influenced the placement of Anselm’s in Aulén’s less-appreciated category. While there is not necessarily a direct influence, it seems that Jasper Hopkins had something similar in mind in his assessment of the *Cur Deus Homo* argument in his book *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*. Hopkins asserts that Anselm’s argument does not carry the force it claims, nor does it rule out other possibilities. He maintains that Anselm is too much influenced by a feudal analogy of honor and obedience. He goes into great detail to show that the rationale of why the one who made satisfaction for humanity had to be both God and man was irreconcilably based on such a feudal analogy. He concludes that “Anselm’s attempt to make the doctrines of the incarnation and atonement plausible does not escape the marks of feudal imagery. His theory may, it is true, be restated independently of this imagery; but this reformulation could not then even preserve the semblance of escaping the non sequitur in the fundamental argument of the *Cur Deus Homo*.”³ With this statement, Hopkins not only aligned himself with previous interpreters such as Harnack, but he also laid the foundation for all those who wished to dismiss the *Cur Deus Homo* argument as floundering under the weight of its feudal imagery.

Richard Campbell has pointed out that Hopkins’ perspective has been manifested in recent literature on the subject of Soteriology in which Anselm’s view is largely attributed to his feudal society.⁴ Campbell attacks such “sociological and juridical readings” which he finds to be “not only superficial but also impediments in the way of understanding how [Anselm’s] thinking worked.”⁵ While I would not go so far as Campbell does in saying that “such analyses are shallow and lacking in scholarly penetration,”⁶ it is reasonable to say, along with Campbell, that “Anselm’s use of terms such as *justitia*, *honor* and *debitum* would have had resonances with the legal and social structures of his day, and thereby would have seemed readily understandable and relevant to his contemporary audience.”⁷ But the extent to which those “resonances”

¹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor; an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert, American ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 84.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 197-198.

⁴ Richard Campbell, “The Conceptual Roots of Anselm’s Soteriology,” in *Anselm, Aosta, Bec and Canterbury: Papers in Commemoration of the Nine-Hundredth Anniversary of Anselm’s Enthronement as Archbishop, 25 September 1093*, ed. D. E. Luscombe and G. R. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 256-258.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

provide not only understandability but also force to Anselm's argument is precisely the subject of debate.

R. W. Southern, in his masterful book *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*, explains with regard to the feudal imagery that "Anselm's thoughts about God and the universe were coloured by the social arrangements with which he was familiar"⁸ and "it has offered an easy target for indignation and ridicule."⁹ Instead of countering those who criticize the *Cur Deus Homo* for its feudal images, Southern makes an apology for Anselm's use of such a framework. He argues that "the feudal image, however unsatisfactory in some of its implications, stood for rationality prevailing against the inroads of self-will and chaos."¹⁰ He further contends that "Anselm uses feudal imagery because the feudal hierarchy provided an illustration of the order which he found in the universe."¹¹ Although Southern seems perfectly content with the feudal imagery, he freely admits that "all this is capable of expression in entirely non-feudal language."¹² Both Southern and Campbell refer to John McIntyre's book *St. Anselm and His Critics* as having successfully made the case that the *Cur Deus Homo* argument is cogent even in spite of feudal imagery.

But Southern still maintains that the "background, which sets Anselm as far apart from Patristic as from modern, or even later medieval thought, is the complex of feudal relationships."¹³ Perhaps the idea of feudal influence has been so strong in the history of Anselmian interpretation that centuries of interpreters have been blinded to the possibility of patristic influence on the *Cur Deus Homo*. Southern himself admits that the feudal imagery "is not likely at first sight to commend [Anselm's] thought to modern readers"¹⁴ so perhaps, by extension, there has been little consideration that the *Cur Deus Homo* may bear relevance to patristic theology. I would like to take the remainder of this paper to argue that a patristic approach should not be overlooked and may, in fact, provide a better understanding of the way Anselm used what has been called "feudal imagery" in the *Cur Deus Homo*.

Although it does not appear that anyone has made the argument that the *Cur Deus Homo* escapes Hopkins' "fundamental non sequitur" by making an appeal to patristic precedents for using similar imagery in Christological discussions, there have been three recent articles which made significant contributions to such a line of reasoning. The first is a paper by Giles Gasper in which he makes a comparison between the *Cur Deus Homo* and Athanasius' *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*. Gasper is well aware of the great historical distance between the two theologians and

⁸ R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm : A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 222.

⁹ Ibid., 221.

¹⁰ Ibid., 227.

¹¹ Ibid., 227.

¹² Ibid., 226.

¹³ Ibid., 225.

¹⁴ Ibid., 221.

admits that “evidence of a direct and textual relation between the two is slim.”¹⁵ Even though Gasper is not confident of any textual causality, he maintains that “similarity or dissimilarity of phraseology, expression and contextual references ought not divert all attention from resonance at other levels. Anselm and Athanasius reveal similarities of approach and attitude to theology as grounded in the Incarnation of the Word and atoning work of Christ outside of any demonstrable acquaintance with the other.”¹⁶ Gasper then goes on to show how “Anselm and Athanasius have a number of comparable interests and attitudes.”¹⁷ He points out similarities between the *Cur Deus Homo* and *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* in terms of audience, purpose and methodology.

On top of the general similarities, Gasper also delves into the rationales that both Athanasius and Anselm give for the Incarnation. He comments that the “insistence upon the order ordained by God in the universe and the function allotted to man focused upon by both Anselm and Athanasius provides the grounds for their discussion of the necessity or fittingness of the Incarnation, an area where the two accounts are remarkably similar.”¹⁸ He notes that both argue that the Incarnation could not have not happened since God’s creation could not be corrupted and it was not fitting for God’s purpose for humanity to be circumvented. However, Gasper does not compare Athanasius and Anselm on the issue of why the one who accomplishes satisfaction must be both God and man, the issue at which Hopkins aims the thrust of his criticism.

A similar tact was taken by David Bentley Hart in his paper, *A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo*. In his article, Hart presents an Eastern Orthodox perspective on the stereotypical characterizations of the “Western narrative of salvation” from both Eastern and Western vantages. He addresses Ritschl, Harnack and Aulén as representative Western misreadings of the *Cur Deus Homo* and uses Vladimir Lossky as an Eastern theologian making similar errors of interpretation. He counters the assertion by the afore-mentioned critics that Anselm breaks with a privileged, patristic theology in his argument that “there never was one ‘classic’ view of atonement, though there was certainly a shared narrative atmosphere in which patristic thought moved.”¹⁹ He goes further in his statement, “Granting that the inflection of Anselm’s language is scarcely ‘Greek,’ the closer the attention one pays Anselm’s argument, the harder it becomes to locate a point at which he actually breaks from patristic orthodoxy.”²⁰ While asserting that the *Cur Deus Homo* is not incompatible with patristic theology, Hart also pushes to make broad comparisons with Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* in a manner similar to Gasper. He notes numerous

¹⁵ Giles E. M. Gasper, “Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* and Athanasius’s *De Incarnatione*: Some Questions of Comparison,” in *Cur Deus Homo: Atti Del Congresso Anselmiano Internazionale*, ed. Paul Gilbert, Helmut Karl Kohlenberger, and Elmar Salmann, *Studia Anselmiana* (Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo, 1999), 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁹ David Bentley Hart, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*,” *Pro Ecclesia* VII, no. 3 (1998), 342.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

shared concepts expressed by Athanasius (e.g. – “In his body ... Christ exhausts the wrath of the law, and offers satisfaction for our debt.”)²¹ and concludes that “already present in Athanasius’s account is the very story whose inner shape Anselm will, in a moment of intense critical reflection, attempt to grasp as necessity.”²² In his summary, he aptly concludes: “As it is with Athanasius, so it is with Anselm.”²³

Kevin McMahon, in a paper delivered at the first of these Anselm Conferences, shows clearly that Anselm was developing a patristic theory of atonement in the *Cur Deus Homo*. In his article *The Cross and the Pearl: Anselm’s Patristic Doctrine of the Atonement*, McMahon addresses the contention that the *Cur Deus Homo* “is most valuable for its reflection of eleventh century social thought and the feudal concern for honor” and argues instead that “the central concept is that of justice, and justice in the classical sense of order.”²⁴ He, too, counters Aulén’s Classic/Latin dichotomy and points out that Anselm was concerned not only with the work of God in redemption but also with the role of humanity. Like Hart, McMahon takes the “classic” theologians whom Aulén extols for having God-centered theories of atonement and points out that not only did Anselm make similar statements in the *Cur Deus Homo*, but such patristic writers stressed human involvement in ways similar to Anselm. He brings to bear Athanasius’ contention that “it was fitting that God should restore humanity; and having so decided, necessary that it be accomplished by means of the Word, in whom all things were made, taking on human nature.”²⁵ This is exactly what Anselm described in the early part of Book II and, specifically, in II.8 in which he makes the point that God assumed human nature from the race of Adam. It is in this way that McMahon went about showing that “Anselm’s talk in the *Cur Deus Homo* of justice, of debt, and of our paying off our debt, has deep patristic roots.”²⁶ By making specific comparisons on such issues he has advanced beyond both Gasper and Hart, pointing out the similarities between Anselm and patristic salvation theory and also the import of this for the supposed distinction between classic and Latin schools of thought.

These three writers, all within the previous six years, seem to represent a shift in the interpretation of the *Cur Deus Homo*, not only from the standard lines of Aulén and Hopkins, but also from that of Southern. Gasper’s paper made the point that there are both merit and usefulness to a comparison between Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* and Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. Hart seems to have noticed this and taken the point a step further to counter the traditional reception of the *Cur Deus Homo* both in the East and the West. McMahon took on the specific issues of justice and the roles of divinity and humanity, and he showed that Anselm’s approach is compatible to the patristic approach in all those ways. These three efforts are certainly notable for their alteration (for the better, I think) of the direction in which

²¹ Ibid., 347.

²² Ibid., 347.

²³ Ibid., 347.

²⁴ Kevin A. McMahon, “The Cross and the Pearl: Anselm’s Patristic Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *Saint Anselm - His Origins and Influence*, ed. John R. Fortin (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 57.

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Ibid., 65.

interpretation of the *Cur Deus Homo* has been moving in recent years. However, I do not think they go far enough to rigorously show that the *Cur Deus Homo* is a reasonable and rational approach to the theology of the Incarnation, Atonement and Redemption of humanity. Hart and McMahon have shown convincingly that Aulén's categorization and criticism of the *Cur Deus Homo* are erroneous. Yet, Hopkins' charge still has not been answered. In the remainder of this paper, I propose to address Hopkins' charge by building on the foundation laid by Gasper, Hart and McMahon.

It is important first to lay the framework for what an argument against Hopkins' position should look like. He has argued that Anselm has not adequately demonstrated the necessity of divinity in the God-man. This is largely due to a failure to realize the strength of the "ought" which Anselm applies to the divine nature in the metaphysics of Christ's make-up (two natures in one person). Hopkins blames this on Anselm's dependence upon a feudal analogy of a servant who dishonored his master and either he or a member of his family must do something to restore that honor. First, then, Hopkins' objection based on the force of "ought" needs to be addressed. Second, either the analogy upon which Anselm supposedly depends must be shown to be one which is not feudal or, finally, Anselm must be shown to depend upon something other than such an analogy. Gasper, Hart and McMahon have done much to support the second point but the other issues remain open to an adequate explanation.

I will answer the first issue by making references not only to the *Cur Deus Homo*, but also to Athanasius' *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* to show that Anselm was not unique in his argumentation. The thrust of Hopkins' criticism is that he is not convinced that the God-man "ought, as man, to redress human nature's injury to God's honor."²⁷ Further, he contends that "when Anselm argues 'Only man ought to; only God can; therefore, necessarily a God-man,' he is equivocating on the meaning of 'ought.'"²⁸ Thus, an appropriate response to Hopkins will show why there is an "ought" for God as well as an "ought" for humanity. Anselm's rationale lies in his discussion of the honor which is taken from God through the disobedience of humanity. He writes: "you will not say that God ought to tolerate something which it is the greatest injustice in the universe to tolerate, namely: that a creature should not give back to God what he takes away."²⁹ Based on this premise, he argues that "it is a necessary consequence, therefore, that either the honour which has been taken away should be repaid, or punishment should follow."³⁰ Thus, there is an "ought" for God in that the honour which has been taken away by the disobedience of humanity ought to be repaid. By merely inverting the principle that the withholding of honor is the greatest injustice, Anselm argues that only the One who is the greatest justice can counteract such an offense. In terms of sin, he points out that "sins are as hateful as they are bad and...the life which you have in mind [that of the God-man] is as loveable as it is good. Hence it follows that this life is more loveable than sins are hateful."³¹

²⁷ Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, 195.

²⁸ Ibid., 195.

²⁹ CDH I.13

³⁰ CDH I.13

³¹ CDH II.14

Athanasius makes the same argument in terms of humanity as having been created in the image of God. Once the image of God had been marred by sin, he argues that only “the presence of the very image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ”³² could correct the wrong. Like Anselm, he asserts that “by men’s means it was impossible, since they are but made after an image; nor by angels either, for not even they are [God’s] images. ... None other, then, was sufficient for this need, save the image of the Father.”³³ By inserting “order,” “goodness” or “justice” for “image” into Athanasius’ argument, it seems to me to be essentially the same as Anselm’s.

Hopkins concern is understandable: it is difficult to comprehend how God “ought” to do anything, since it seems to smack of some external necessity. However, this is the great accomplishment of John McIntyre’s book *St. Anselm and His Critics*. McIntyre argues that critics of the *Cur Deus Homo* fail to grasp “the supreme importance in the theology of St. Anselm of the concept of the *aseitas* of God.”³⁴ McIntyre describes *aseitas* as “a description of God’s entire nature, and just as it is often said that God is identical with His attributes – for example, that God is Love, rather than loving – so it is perhaps truer still to say that God’s nature *is aseitas*.”³⁵ Taken in the context of Hopkins’ critique, I have argued that the “ought” for the God-man which he says is missing is just that God’s honor “ought” to be maintained by creation. A full understanding of *aseitas* demands this. Anselm clearly understood this when he wrote: “Otherwise, either God will not be just to himself, or he will be without the power to enforce either of the two options; and it is an abominable sin even to consider this possibility.”³⁶ The “ought” that Hopkins could not find is just that God “ought” to be just to himself by reason of His aseity. McIntyre seems to have known and predicted further such misunderstandings when he wrote at the end of his book that “it is only by drawing out the full implications of this notion of *aseitas* that we can refute the charges that the book is an exercise in Scholastic logic at its worst, that God’s justice is overemphasised at the expense of God’s mercy, that for St. Anselm God is simply a feudal baron write large, and that forgiveness is commercialised, if not rendered impossible, by the interpretation he gives of it.”³⁷

Corresponding to his initial criticism is Hopkins’ further contention that “Anselm’s attempt to make the doctrines of incarnation and atonement plausible does not escape the marks of feudal imagery.”³⁸ By this, he refers to the analogy of a servant owing a debt of honor to a master which can only be fulfilled by that servant or by some person of his family. However, as Gasper, Hart and McMahon have made clear, the language of the *Cur Deus Homo* is not merely feudal but it is also patristic. This includes the discussion of honor and debt. In terms of the notion of sin as “debt,” there are many examples of such patristic usage. Athanasius refers to the

³² Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers, The Library of Christian Classics ; V. 3* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 67 (DIVD 13).

³³ Ibid., 67-68 (DIVD 13).

³⁴ John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics; a Re-Interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo* (Edinburgh,: Oliver and Boyd, 1954), 165.

³⁵ Ibid., 165.

³⁶ CDH I.13

³⁷ McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics; a Re-Interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo*, 204.

³⁸ Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, 197.

idea that the Word, “by offering unto death the body he himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway he put away death from all his peers by the offering of an equivalent. For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death.”³⁹ In language that is evocative of Anselm, he writes that “it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again.”⁴⁰ Even Nestorius, whom McMahon also aptly quotes on this issue, frames the soteriological story in a similar way: “Christ assumed the person of the debt-ridden nature and by its mediation paid the debt back as a son of Adam, for it was obligatory that the one who dissolved the debt come from the same race as he who had once contracted it.”⁴¹

Thus, there seems to be a firm patristic foundation for the terminology and argumentation found in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. Not only are there strong resonances between the *Cur Deus Homo* and similar patristic works such as Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, but there is a strong similarity in the premises of the argument showing the rationale of the Incarnation and Atonement. Since there does not seem to be such a robust dichotomy between patristic theories of atonement and Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, it seems reasonable to use the parallels to argue that the *Cur Deus Homo* does not suffer from a fatal, feudal flaw, but that Anselm was utilizing a heritage of Christian doctrine which had been passed down to him from the earliest centuries of Christianity. As Gasper rightly acknowledges, there is no clear basis for making an argument that Anselm was dependent on works such as Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*. However, the fact that the works agree on even the most debated soteriological issues is enough to make one suppose that Anselm was working more from such doctrinal works than from his feudal social context.

³⁹ Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 63 (DIVD 9).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74 (DIVD 20).

⁴¹ Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy, Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 126-127.