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### *'FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING' AND GOD'S EXISTENCE*

A Review of Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*. Ian W. Robertson, trans. Pittsburgh Reprint Series No. 2 (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Pr., 1975; London: SCM Pr., 1960), 173 p. All quotations below are from this translation.

Christian theologians have pursued their discipline with different methods. Two of the most important are the apologetic approach vs. 'faith seeking understanding.' This book review looks at how Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Protestant theologian, reframed St. Anselm's (1033/4-1109) argument for the existence of God as an exercise in 'faith seeking understanding' rather than as apologetics per se. Along the way it addresses some of the reasons Christians believe in God, and how believers might communicate with atheists, agnostics, and seekers.

The apologetic theologian seeks to defend the Christian faith by responding to the doubts and critical questions of non-believers (and of some believers). In other words, she seeks to remove obstacles to Christian belief that arise from misunderstanding or the conflicts between Christian beliefs and practices with other religions or philosophies of life. Apologists often offer reasons, evidence, and arguments to persuade non-believers (or the skeptical voice within believers) to reconsider the truth-claims of the Christian message. They seek to undermine objections and show the reasonableness of Christian faith. Among popular authors, C. S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* and many of his other books in an apologetic mode. Among systematic theologians, Hans Küng's *Does God Exist?* undermines the arguments of atheists against belief in God and makes a case for why one might believe in God in conversation with modern critical thought. Apologetic theology seeks to persuade seekers that the Christian message is true, makes claims upon reality, and can be believed without a sacrifice of intellect.

In the approach of 'faith seeking understanding,' the theologian doesn't begin by privileging the doubts and questions of non-believers (or of skeptical Christians). Rather, she begins with the Christian message as expressed in Scripture, creeds, liturgy, preaching and teaching, and seeks to understand that message on its own terms. In other words, she unpacks the internal logic of faith by showing how beliefs and practices make sense of each other and of the world. Among textbooks in theology, Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* models this approach. Karl Barth once wrote that "the best apologetics is a good systematics," meaning that the best defense of the faith is found in a sound explication of Christian doctrine. In "faith seeking understanding," the theologian argues that the Christian message is internally coherent, and that its web of belief and practice can make better sense of the rich variety of human experience than some of the alternatives.

In 1931, Karl Barth published a theological monograph on Anselm's proof of the existence of God that exemplifies this second approach. In a close reading of Anselm's

texts in Latin (and one needs a good Latin theological dictionary at hand to read this book), Barth sought to save Anselm from his interpreters and critics (Gaunilo, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant) who read his works as apologetic theology, and his “proof” of God’s existence as “the ontological argument.” Rather, Barth showed just how deeply theological Anselm’s argument for God’s existence is. In fact, rather than beginning from doubt about the existence of God and seeking to find reasons and evidence for overcoming those doubts, Barth shows that Anselm’s project begins from God’s Name as revealed to Christian faith. Anselm’s wager is that if one understands what the concept of God means to faithful Christians in the context of the Bible and Christian creeds, one will understand why God must necessarily exist. And why the non-existence of God is neither meaningful nor true for theologically informed Christians.

Barth calls attention to how Anselm’s writings on God’s existence and nature, esp. his *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, are not merely *about* God. These writings are addressed *to* God in the form of an extended prayer within which the theological arguments are developed. As extended prayers, these writings take full account of the Christian claim that the reality of God is communicated in the Bible, Christian creeds, and preaching, and that God gives the gift of faith to those seeking to find God in the community we call ‘Church.’ So, revelation, faith, and Church are not bracketed to focus attention on why skeptics doubt God’s existence. Rather, the rich communicative overlap between God’s disclosure, faith’s response, and the community of believers frames the quest to understand whether God (as confessed by Christians) exists. The whole project of asking about God’s existence is only made possible by asking for and receiving God’s grace at each step of this theological journey.

The argument goes something like this. The Name of God as confessed by Christians means God is “that than which a greater cannot be conceived” (*aliquid quo nihil cogitari possit*, Latin, 73). This Name carries a prohibition within it. When we try to define what we mean by “God” via various concepts, if we can imagine something or someone greater than those concepts *per se*, we haven’t yet arrived at what or who the divine Name is referring to. To use Alvin Plantinga’s paraphrase, the reference of the word “God” has all the great-making properties: eternity, omnipresence, etc. According to Barth, the Name means that the referent “God is perfect and originally wise, mighty, righteous, etc.” (Ibid.), and God has these properties necessarily, “(that is, all statements to the opposite effect are impossible)” (Ibid.). Sometimes philosophers call this understanding of God as “perfect being.”

Anselm cites Psalm 13: “the fool has said in his heart, ‘there is no God.’ Who is the “God” doubted by the fool? This question leads Anselm into what does the “fool” mean by God. To deny that God exists, one must be working with some kind of God-concept or definition. The concept of God that the Christian message brings to this dialogue is that God is “that than which a greater cannot be conceived.”

If the fool has that concept in mind, then at least the fool understands the meaning of the word ‘God’ that exists in his mind (but not objectively in reality *per se*). Now if God is “that than which a greater cannot be conceived,” and God only exists in the mind of the

fool, then the prohibition embedded in the divine Name kicks in. We can imagine a greater God than the god that exists only in the mind of the fool. We can imagine a God who exists both in human minds and extra-mental reality. The word 'God' (as Christianly understood) always points us to that greater reality. A god who only existed in the minds of doubters is not the God of the Christian message. (Or a god who only existed in the minds of pious believers would not be the God of the Christian creed). Therefore, since maximal greatness means that God must exist not only in our minds, but also in reality, the reference of the Christian concept of God is to a reality that exceeds mere mental disbelief or belief. In fact, God's reality is instantiated before and beyond human thinking, doubting, believing, etc.

Barth discerns two forms of this argument in Anselm. The first form argues that God as "the greatest," exists in both the mind and objectively in reality. The second argues that an implication of the revealed Name and its concept is that God necessarily exists, i.e., God must exist. God, per the concept 'that than which a greater....' cannot fail to exist. If one understands the meaning of the concept of God, one will know that God's existence is unique, and not to be compared to the best possible island or some other imagined finite reality.

For many Christians who pursue theology in an apologetic mode, Barth's approach leaves much to be desired. To them, it seems as if Barth is presupposing as true all the important issues that separate believers from non-believers. And Anselm's argument (as presented by Barth) attempts to define God into existence by virtue of the concept of God stipulated by Anselm. Barth seems to follow the approach of "presuppositional apologetics" that Cornelius van Til, a conservative Calvinist theologian, taught. In this type of apologetics, the believer presupposes that the Christian message is true and that the unbeliever doubts because she is blinded to the truth of God by her unbelief and sin. Rather than presenting public reasons and evidence for believing in God, the presuppositional apologist calls the unbeliever to repentance so that they may rightly see and understand for the first time.

In Barth's book on Anselm, there are passages where he addresses the relationship of believers to unbelievers. I find these passages to be the most interesting aspect of this monograph because they remind me in some ways of how Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) in his later philosophy responds to skepticism or doubt in Descartes and other philosophers. Here are excerpts from some of those passages in Barth's book and some remarks (pp. 66-71):

First, Anselm acknowledged that "what the believer and the unbeliever are meaning and seeking in their questions is exactly the same.... <He> gives credit to the unbelievers to the extent that the *ratio* <reason> of that which they lack and for which they ask is one and the same *ratio* as the one which he himself is seeking" (66). The theologian's quest for understanding and the seeker's quest for a reason to believe are identical.

Second, "It is not the revelation <of God> itself that offends them.... they do take offence at some constituent part of the revelation unknown to them because the

context, the totality of the revelation is unknown to them and therefore this or that constituent part (not being illumined by the whole) is beyond their comprehension" (Ibid.). Thus, what unbelievers need is a more complete exposition of the faith, not an apologetic per se that begins from their disbelief.

Third, Anselm approaches unbelievers on the terms of dogmatic theology:

<He> "comes to engage in a discussion with <the unbeliever> without either accepting the unbeliever's criterion, such as universal human reason, or stipulating that the unbeliever in order to become competent to discuss must first be converted into a believer. Anselm assumes his own ground, the ground of strictly theological...impartiality, to be likewise a ground on which the 'unbeliever' could quite well discuss and would want to discuss. Thus, he summons him on his own ground; or rather he addresses him as one who by his questions has already accepted this ground and therefore he is able...to discuss with him as if he were <another believer>" (67).

Stanley Hauerwas once said or wrote that one of the flaws in liberal theology was to give up on Christian language and our theological framework, and to allow skeptics to frame the questions for discussion on their own terms. Anselm and Barth refused to do that. They assumed that even unbelievers could come to understand theological language and concepts. In sum, for Anselm "...even the working out of the <understanding> of faith, even the inward <i.e., theological> proof, is also the outward proof <for unbelievers>" (Ibid.).

"Anselm's Proof works on the assumption that there is a solidarity between the theologian and the worldling which has not come about because the theologian has become one of the crowd, or one voice in a universal debating chamber, but because he is determined to address the worldling as one with whom he has a least this in common—theology" (68).

Fourth, Barth accounts for Anselm's approach to the unbeliever on theology's own terms as an example of the "simplicity" of his theology.

"...what at first glance looks like incredible deception might in actual fact be divine simplicity which, not heeding the evil appearance, knows exactly what it wants and does not want and is surer of its goal than is realized by the all too hasty critic. ...perhaps <Anselm> was daring to assume that disbelief,...the doubt, denial and derision of the unbeliever are not really to be taken so seriously as the unbeliever himself would take them. Perhaps, while appealing to him 'with proof,' it was not in his lack of faith he was trusting but in his faith" (70).

Here lies a pattern that shows up elsewhere in Barth's theology, that the believer should not take the unbeliever's skepticism at face value, as the last word about the unbeliever's true convictions. Doubt or skepticism regarding Christian dogma (e.g., that God exists) may cloak some deeper condition within the unbeliever. It's as if unbelief is

a form of spiritual pathology that stands in need of the therapy that theology can offer. Since God's self-disclosure is occurring within human creatures and all around us in nature, history, church, and society all the time, and we repress this knowledge with the façade of our doubts and adoption of competing ideologies and philosophies of life, the task of theology ('faith seeking understanding') is to help us recollect this other knowledge (unconscious knowledge) we hide from ourselves.

Fifth, Barth recommends humor as one response to the doubts of unbelievers:

"...we must move on past the listener's tragic *non credo* to our task with a sense of humor... Perhaps Anselm did not know any other way of speaking of the Christian *Credo* except by addressing the sinner as one who had not sinned, the non-Christian as a Christian, the unbeliever as believer, on the basis of the great 'as if' which is really not an 'as if' at all, but which at all times has been the final and decisive means whereby the believer could speak to the unbeliever" (71).

This approach fits with Barth's understanding that Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised not merely for Christians and the Church, but for all humankind throughout history, regardless of religious and cultural background. Since Christ is the great address of God to all humankind, to speak with unbelievers as if they are believers is to acknowledge that God has the last word about our destiny.

In terms of Christian ministry and practical theology, one way of understanding the turn from disbelief to the conviction of faith is that somewhere someone in our lives began to speak to us and treat us as a fellow Christian, regardless of our doubts. For example, when Augustine was teaching rhetoric in Milan and went to hear Bishop Ambrose preach, Ambrose didn't preach sermons aimed at converting worldly folks like Augustine on their own terms. Rather, he interpreted the Bible in Christian terms that responded to some of Augustine's problems with the presentation of God in the Old Testament. He taught Augustine and others through his sermons how to read and think about Scripture as followers of Christ. Augustine's baptism in theology preceded his baptism in the Christian life. As Barth once wrote in a different context, unbelievers count on Christians to speak "the language of Canaan" with them rather than a watered-down apologetic language. Sometimes one learns a new language (and new ways of being in the world) by being immersed in them rather than by learning them in a classroom via textbooks removed from the daily life of people who speak the language as their mother tongue.

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