

“Displacing the Devil: Anselm, the Patristic Heritage, and Political Theology”

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Among the philosophers who have decisively influenced the emergent subdiscipline of political theology, Giorgio Agamben is surely a leading figure. His path breaking investigations of the structure of political sovereignty—and of the “bare life” that is its necessary correlate—have been an indispensable reference point for those seeking to fill out the implications of Carl Schmitt’s dictum that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”

In his recent book *Il Regno e la Gloria*—or, *The Kingdom and the Glory*—Agamben expands on his political theory while simultaneously deepening his engagement with the Christian theological tradition, tracing the roots of modern parliamentary democracy to an unexpected source: the concept of divine providence as developed in the patristic and medieval periods.¹ Basing his investigation in the notion of the “economy of salvation,” Agamben argues that the theological tradition served as a kind of incubator for a notion of governance based in flexible management rather than sovereign decree—a form of government that is intimately familiar to all of us as the technocratic effort to constitute a realm of “incentives” that will gently “nudge” self-seeking human agents to serve the greater good. The infamous “invisible hand” then turns out to be nothing but the state itself, modeling itself after the providential working of God, who respects free will but nonetheless ensures that “all things work together for our good.”

Crucial to Agamben’s investigation is the field of theology that has become a byword for the excesses of scholasticism: angelology. Agamben traces the ways in which angels become God’s middle managers, and in one of the most satisfying passages of his analysis, he notes that

in Christian theology, the “economy of salvation”—the realm of God’s providential “management” of creation—is only bearable insofar as it comes to an end in the Last Judgment and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. The only aspect of creation that remains subject to the “management” of angels after the eschaton is precisely hell, where the demons act as God’s subcontractors who torture sinners for all eternity. Hence the church fathers and scholastic theologians would recognize the modern state’s indefinite “management” of the “economy” as nothing less than a situation of absolute hopelessness, that is, as *hellish*.

The fact that Agamben has so compellingly analyzed the experience of hell makes it all the more curious that he does not address the role of the most famous angel of all: namely, Satan. After all, if God ever had a middle manager under him, it is surely the devil. Able to tempt the Messiah himself with the promise of all earthly pleasures and rule, the devil was, at least in the patristic era of theology and certainly in the popular consciousness of the medieval period, the “god of this world.”

In this paper, I will attempt to supplement Agamben’s analysis of angelology by investigating the role of this fallen angel—and more specifically, the consequences of the gradual attempt by theology to push him *out* of the role assigned to him by the patristic tradition. My guiding text will be one whose argument is hopefully familiar to everyone raised in a Christian ambience, and certainly to medieval scholars. Indeed, the argument in Anselm of Canterbury’s *Why God Became Human*ⁱⁱ is one of the best-known in the history of Christian theology. The account of humanity’s insurmountable debt to God, incurred through sin and payable only through the voluntary death of a sinless God-man, has exercised a huge religious and cultural influence, due in large part to its logical elegance. Anselm himself summarizes his

argument as follows, showing clearly how it integrates the two natures of Christ and the problem of sin as conceived in the West:

This debt [of sin] was so large that, although no one but man owed it, only God was capable of repaying it, assuming that there should be a man identical with God... the life of this man is so sublime and precious that it can suffice to repay the debt owed for the sins of the whole world, and infinitely more besides. (2.18)

It is ultimately this argument that stands behind that most famous of contemporary Christian slogans: “Jesus died for our sins.”

Now, throughout the modern period, Anselm’s argument has been viewed as a decisive break with the patristic understanding of the salvific nature of Christ’s death—a view crystallized in Gustav Aulén’s classic typology of atonement theories, *Christus Victor*—and at first glance, the contrast seems clear enough. Nevertheless, I believe Aulén and other interpreters go too far in presenting Anselm as a complete break with the patristic understanding. Instead, I propose that one needs to read Anselm’s theory as a particular development *within* the conceptual scheme put forward by the patristic writers. In order to do that, however, I must first take the detour of briefly laying out the patristic understanding of salvation, widely known as the “ransom theory.”

In the patristic view, Christ’s work solves two problems that arose as a result of human sin, subjection to death and bondage under the devil. These problems arose for different yet related reasons. By disobeying God and obeying the devil, the first humans sold themselves into bondage to the devil, and God imposed the emergency measure of death in order to restrain sinful humans’ self-destructiveness. Both of these conditions are universal in scope because of the fundamental unity of the human race, which the patristic authors put forward as a principle

without showing a great concern to specify the nature of the link among human beings. There is some attention given to childbirth, but primarily as a matter of transmitting the socio-political status of subjection to the devil—not yet transmitting something like “original sin.”

God’s intervention in Christ is persuasive or non-violent insofar as it responds both to the nature of the human race and to humanity’s present condition. In both cases, Christ must act “from within,” and that means becoming a member of the human race and living through every aspect of human life from birth to death. In his resurrection, Christ overcomes death and points forward to the final resurrection of all, which is seen to follow naturally from the resurrection of Christ *qua* singular and prototypical human being. Through his death on the cross, Christ somehow invalidates the claim of the devil to rule over humanity, with the effect again extending in principle to all human beings. Some writers will elsewhere embrace the notion of eternal damnation, but in general the patristic authors rely on an underlying logic of unity and universalism when they are focusing specifically on the work of Christ—because humanity is one, Adam can act in such a way as to render all human beings subject to death and the lordship of the devil, and similarly Christ can act to set all human beings free from both.

To put it in the most schematic terms, then, in the patristic theory of atonement, the unity of humanity leads to a universal and twofold bondage (to death and the devil), and Christ’s redemptive act mobilizes that unity in order to undo both forms of bondage at once in a way that is “persuasive” or non-violent in a broad sense.

Anselm retains this basic framework, most importantly the core principle of the unity of the human race. This principle comes to the fore at pivotal moments in *Why God Became Human*. For instance, discussing the fact that the first humans’ sin affected the whole human race, he says:

Now, the whole nature of the human race was inherent in its first parents [*humana natura tote erat in primis parentibus*]; human nature was as a result entirely defeated in them with the consequence that it became sinful—with the exception of one man alone, whom God knew how to set apart from the sin of Adam, just as he knew how to create him of a virgin without the seed of a man. In just the same way, human nature would have been entirely victorious, if they had not sinned. (1.18)

In order to make up for this fault, humanity “needs to conquer the devil through the difficulty of death, and in so doing sin in no way” (1.22), but he cannot do this since “because of the man who was conquered, the whole of humanity is rotten, and, as it were, in a ferment with sin” (1.23). By the same token, the savior must come from the same race [*genus*] founded by Adam, or else “he will not have an obligation to give recompense on behalf of this race, because he will not be from it” (2.8).

The unity of the human race is not the only thing Anselm shares with the patristic authors—he also clearly embraces the notion that death is a result of sin and that Christ’s work must not be carried out by fiat. The particular significance of these aspects of his scheme is, however, best understood in relation to the single greatest change that Anselm introduces: the displacement of the devil from his role as a “substantial” oppressor alongside death. I say “displacement” rather than “removal” for two reasons. First, Anselm does give the devil a role, albeit a significantly downgraded one of subjecting humanity to temptation or more general “harassment” [*vexatio*] (1.7). He is aware of the patristic view that “God, in order to set humankind free, was obliged to act against the devil by justice rather than mighty power,” which he characterizes as something “we are in the habit of saying” (1.7). He rejects the patristic view, but replaces it with the idea that it is more appropriate for humanity “to defeat in return the one

by whom humanity had been defeated” (2.19). Hence undercutting the devil remains a goal of Christ’s work, but a distinctly subordinate one.

The second reason for calling it a “displacement” has more momentous consequences for Anselm’s argument: the “slot” formerly occupied by the devil remains a part of the overall framework, to be filled by different agents at different times. Once one recognizes this, it becomes clear that Anselm follows the patristic scheme to a surprising level of detail. For instance, with the devil reduced to a supporting player at best in the drama of sin and salvation, the most obvious agent of Christ’s death becomes humanity, or at least particular human beings. This creates a possible problem, as one of the earliest steps in Anselm’s chain of reasoning is that any offense against God is of infinite magnitude, since God is infinite (1.13). Surely murdering God counts as an offence, so it would seem that humanity would only compound its debt through the very act that was supposed to satisfy it. To solve this problem, Anselm mobilizes the theme, found in Gregory of Nyssa, of Christ’s humanity as a kind of disguise, but in this case, it serves to allow Anselm to claim that humanity’s sin in killing Christ was committed in ignorance and therefore forgivable: “For no member of the human race would ever wish to kill God, at least no one would willingly wish it, and therefore those who killed him unknowingly did not fall headlong into that infinite sin with which no other sins can be compared” (2.15).

The devil’s more basic role in the patristic scheme is of course that of the tyrant who has unjustly seized humanity. For Anselm, there is a sense in which humanity itself, despite the apparent paradox, can be seen as taking on this role, but he does not develop this theme in detail. Instead, the primary agent filling the devil’s role is the only other meaningful agent available in Anselm’s scheme: God himself.

As this claim may be somewhat jarring, I should be clear. My point here is not to say that Anselm straightforwardly presents God as an oppressive ruler. Naturally the role undergoes considerable mutation when held by God rather than the devil. I also do not intend to claim that Anselm consciously cast God in a role based on the traditional role of the devil in patristic atonement theories. Instead, I would argue that the inherent logic of his subject matter leads him, once he has downgraded the devil, necessarily to place God in an analogous role. To get at why this is, it may be helpful to think about what it would have looked like if Anselm had simply *removed* the role of the devil rather than displacing the devil from it. What would have remained was humanity's bondage to death alone as the problem that the incarnation solves—and indeed, later Eastern theology has tended toward that claim. Yet it seems obvious that there is much more going wrong in the world than the fact that people die. Violence, greed, lust for domination, and even simple callousness are historical constants that can sometimes make death seem to be a welcome relief. That was precisely the role of death for Irenaeus: an act of mercy to restrain the self-destructiveness of a human race that had allied itself with a malicious power. That very alliance provided an explanation for how human sin was universal in scope, by analogy with the common practice of viewing a social or political status, such as enslavement or subjection to a particular ruler, as transmitted by birth: since the father of all humanity had subjected himself to the devil, all his descendents (i.e., all subsequent human beings) are also subjected.

Once the devil's rule has been stripped of any real explanatory weight, however, human sinfulness is no longer a matter of being subject (albeit initially voluntarily) to an evil power, but instead becomes a matter of being in the wrong before God, or in Anselm's terms, of being in debt to God. The inheritance of debt from one's parents is a familiar feature of many human

cultures, and in fact Anselm appears to misunderstand the patristic authors as claiming that humanity owed a debt to the devil that God was in some sense obligated to repay in order to set humanity free (1.7). In rejecting this view, Anselm effectively transforms humanity's indebtedness from something that is provisionally recognized as part of the actually existing situation in which God's strategy must work into something with much greater ontological weight. One must recall here that God's recognition of the devil's claim in the patristic theory was oriented toward undercutting all justification for that claim. The entire strategy proceeds from the assumption that the devil's claim has no ultimate validity—the point is to undercut the devil's claim, not to actually pay it. By contrast, once we assume that God is in the business of exacting payment for debts incurred, then that debt must ultimately and *really* be paid: the abolition of that system of debt, parallel with the abolition of the devil's rule, is no longer an option once it is a matter of the divine nature. Further complicating the picture is the fact that debt to God is not simply a debt but, by definition, a moral failing. Hence death becomes not a future-oriented corrective or purifying measure, but a punishment.

Yet a problem arises here. The Christian tradition has always maintained, virtually without exception, that moral failing can only be a matter of the individual will. The inheritance of a social or political status or even of indebtedness unwillingly or through no fault of one's own is, however regrettable, at least familiar and comprehensible. Yet how can one inherit the condition of being in the wrong before God unwillingly, the condition of being morally blameworthy through no fault of one's own?

That is the circle Anselm attempts to square with the doctrine of original sin. To put it briefly, Anselm follows Augustine in claiming that humans subsequent to Adam inherit a distorted will, specifically because the distortion of the male will during the sexual act introduces

a distortion into the child. However questionable this may be on the biological level, this allows Anselm to square the circle insofar as moral judgment is only possible when the will is involved—since original sin is a kind of wrongness precisely *in the will*, it can rightly be regarded as a moral issue. This scheme also allows for an “out” for Christ. Since he is born of a virgin, the distorting effects of the male will are absent in his case. Subsequently, Christ begins with a clean state.

Now since Christ begins and remains in a state of original justice, he does not owe any form of satisfaction, but rather only the basic obedience God demands of everyone. Despite the common understanding of Anselm’s argument, he does not claim that Christ is performing a vicarious satisfaction. Instead, he draws on another ecclesiastical system that is essentially common to both East and West: a baseline of obligations for the everyday believer, coupled with opportunities to exceed the requirements and gain greater merit. Anselm even explicitly uses the example of someone taking a monastic vow, albeit couched in more general terms of “a vow about holy living” (2.5).

The problem requiring the intervention of a God-man rather than a normal sinless human being was that an offense against the infinite God is necessarily infinite, meaning that no finite human being could make satisfaction for it—but by the very same principle, the merit accrued by the infinite God-man is itself infinite. Had he been an ordinary sinful human being, Christ’s death would have had no merit, but his sinless state makes his death voluntary and thus meritorious in much the same way as a monastic vow is. As a result, his death not only gives him infinite merit, but makes him the first human being *ever* to accrue any merit for himself. Anselm then stages a scene in which God the Father offers Christ his reward and then—paralleling the patristic theme of the human flesh as a disguise—discovers that Christ is already the infinite God

and can therefore receive nothing. Since someone must receive the merit, the Father allows Christ to designate humanity as the recipient. From that point forward, any human being who knows of this infinite store of merit need only call upon it to receive salvation.

It's clear that Anselm regards this as a profound relief, and indeed his praise of this elegant act of grace elicits what is perhaps the closest to an outburst of emotion that we find in Anselm's body of work: "Nevertheless, he gave his life, so precious; no, his very self; he gave his person—think of it—in all its greatness, in an act of his own, supremely great, volition" (2.18). Yet to my mind, his argument is ultimately claustrophobic and even a little terrifying. In the patristic scheme, the God of Jesus Christ was rescuing us from the devil conceived as the god of this world—an oppressive god characterized by acquisitiveness and pride. When the devil is displaced, however, does the God of Jesus Christ not become precisely the god of this world? Anselm presents us with a God who is not motivated by his love of humanity—indeed, that theme is virtually absent from Anselm's argumentation—but by God's love of honor, one might even say by God's desire to *save face* by fulfilling the original plan of the heavenly city. What's more, even after Christ's superabundant fund of merit has been established, the debt economy is not abolished—God is still fundamentally a God who exacts payment, even if his demands have been fulfilled. The result of God's payment of humanity's debt can only be an infinite compounding of that debt, the exaggerated assignment of an infinite weight to even the slightest sin—in short, God's payment of our debt of sin is not forgiveness, not even a "bailout," but a consolidation loan.

Returning to Agamben's concept of God's providential "management" of humanity, it would appear that in Anselm's scheme, one never ceases being managed, being measured, being subjected to various assessments and quality management regimes—that even salvation is, in its

own way, hellish because eternally “managed.” Those who call on Christ’s forgiveness are fortunate enough to have their debt repaid, but they can never get out of a relationship to God based on a ledger. Agamben’s failure to discuss the devil as “the god of this world” allows him to miss this decisive shift, whereby God himself becomes a devil. Indeed, it may only be our ability to name the “form of this world” or the “elemental spirits of this world” as devilish that opens up any hope of a genuinely different and new system, of what one might dare to call “liberation.”

ⁱ Giorgio Agamben, , *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell’economia e del governo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007).

ⁱⁱ English citations from treatises of Anselm will follow the translation found in Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and Gillian Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), with occasional modifications. Latin citations stem from F. S. Schmitt, ed., *Anselmi Opera Omnia*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1936-1968). In-text references follow standard textual divisions.