GENERAL

cur deus homo why god became man by anselm

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Cur Deus Homo? – Why God Became Man by Anselm

In the annals of medieval theology, few questions resonate as profoundly as the Latin phrase “Cur Deus Homo?” – “Why did God become man?” This succinct inquiry, attributed to the 11th century philosopher theologian Anselm of Canterbury, encapsulates a mystery that has occupied believers, scholars, and skeptics alike for centuries. Anselm’s formulation invites us to confront the paradox of divine incarnation: how can an eternal, infinite God assume finite, mortal flesh? By examining Anselm’s life, his philosophical milieu, and his own theological arguments, we can gain a deeper appreciation for why the divine chose to become human, and how this decision continues to shape Christian thought today.

Anselm of Canterbury: Life and Legacy

Early Life and Education

Born in Aosta, Italy, around 1033, Anselm entered a world where the Church’s intellectual rigor was blossoming. He studied at the cathedral schools of Pavia and Milan, absorbing Latin, Greek, and the nascent scholastic methods that would later define his work. Anselm’s early exposure to the works of Augustine and Boethius laid the groundwork for his later synthesis of faith and reason.

Ecclesiastical Career

After a brief stint as a Benedictine monk, Anselm became a canon at the Cathedral of Canterbury in 1070. His tenure there was marked by a relentless pursuit of theological precision, culminating in his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093. Despite political tensions, Anselm remained steadfast in his commitment to intellectual integrity and spiritual depth.

Philosophical Contributions

Anselm’s most enduring legacy lies in his ontological argument for the existence of God, presented in the *Proslogion*. Yet, his work extends far beyond metaphysics. In the *Cur Deus Homo*, he tackles the central question of Christian soteriology, offering a theological framework that remains influential in contemporary Christology.

The Question “Cur Deus Homo?”

Literal and Thematic Meaning

“Cur Deus Homo?” is a concise yet profound query that translates directly to “Why did God become man?” It serves as a theological pivot, bridging metaphysical speculation with practical faith. The phrase encapsulates the tension between divine transcendence and human immanence, inviting believers to explore the divine motive behind the incarnation.

Theological Context: Incarnation and Soteriology

Within medieval scholasticism, the incarnation was a central theme. Anselm’s question reflects the broader soteriological discourse: if God is perfect, why would He need to become human? Anselm’s answer seeks to reconcile divine perfection with human imperfection, suggesting that the divine entered humanity out of love and

necessity for redemption.

Anselm’s Argument for the Incarnation

The Ontological Argument

While Anselm’s ontological argument primarily addresses God’s existence, its underlying logic informs his soteriological reasoning. Anselm posits that God, being the greatest conceivable being, must possess all perfections, including the capacity to love and to act in self sacrifice. This framework lays the groundwork for his explanation of why the divine would become human.

The Problem of Evil and the Need for a Savior

Anselm confronts the problem of evil by asserting that the existence of sin and suffering necessitates divine intervention. He argues that only a being who is both fully divine and fully human could bridge the gulf between a perfect God and a fallen humanity. Thus, the incarnation becomes the logical solution to the problem of evil.

Anselm’s Soteriological Thesis

In the *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm presents a clear soteriological thesis: God became man to restore humanity to its original state. He writes that the divine entered human history not as a distant observer but as an active participant in the human condition. This participation was essential for the redemption of humanity, enabling believers to participate in divine life.

Why God Became Man: Anselm’s Perspective

The Concept of Divine Love

For Anselm, love is the driving force behind the incarnation. He articulates that a loving God cannot remain detached from His creation. By becoming human, God entered the realm of human experience, thereby demonstrating that divine love transcends abstract theological concepts and becomes an active, tangible reality.

The Human Experience and Redemption

Anselm emphasizes that humanity’s fall created a rupture that could only be healed by a being who is both divine and human. The incarnation, therefore, is not a mere theological abstraction but a concrete act of redemption. Through Christ’s suffering and death, humanity is offered a path back to communion with God.

The Role of the Incarnation in Salvation History

According to Anselm, the incarnation is a pivotal event in salvation history. It marks the point at which divine grace meets human need. By becoming man, God made the divine accessible, allowing believers to experience salvation not only as an abstract promise but as a lived reality.

Scholarly Interpretations and Critiques

Medieval Reception

During the Middle Ages, Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* was both celebrated and debated. Scholars such as Thomas Aquinas expanded upon Anselm’s ideas, integrating them into the broader Thomistic framework. Others critiqued the perceived anthropocentrism in Anselm’s argument, arguing that it placed undue emphasis on human experience.

Modern Theological Analysis

Contemporary theologians often revisit Anselm's question to explore interfaith dialogue and post modern spirituality. The phrase "Cur Deus Homo?" serves as a bridge between traditional Christian theology and modern existential questions about the nature of divine presence in everyday life.

Criticisms and Counterarguments

Critics argue that Anselm's emphasis on the necessity of the incarnation can be seen as limiting, excluding other paths to salvation. Others suggest that his argument relies heavily on a particular interpretation of divine love, potentially overlooking the complexity of divine attributes.

The Legacy of "Cur Deus Homo?" in Modern Theology

Influence on Later Thinkers

- Thomas Aquinas: Integrated Anselm's ideas into the *Summa Theologiae*, emphasizing the logical necessity of the incarnation.
- John Calvin: Employed Anselm's framework to discuss predestination and the nature of Christ's atonement.
- Modern Liberation Theologians: Reinterpreted "Cur Deus Homo?" as a call for divine solidarity with the oppressed.

Contemporary Relevance

In a world grappling with social inequality and existential uncertainty, the question "Cur Deus Homo?" remains strikingly relevant. It invites believers to consider the divine presence in human suffering and the transformative power of love that transcends cultural boundaries.

Practical Implications for Faith and Spiritual Life

Personal Reflection

Engaging with Anselm's question encourages individuals to reflect on how divine love manifests in their own lives. By contemplating the incarnation, believers can find new meaning in acts of compassion, empathy, and self sacrifice.

Community and Worship

Communal worship practices often draw upon the incarnation's narrative to foster unity and shared purpose. Liturgical celebrations such as Christmas and Easter serve as reminders of the divine's willingness to enter human history for the sake of redemption.

Conclusion

The enduring question "Cur Deus Homo?" encapsulates the heart of Christian soteriology: why did the perfect God choose to become human? Anselm of Canterbury offers a compelling answer rooted in divine love, the necessity of redemption, and the transformative power of the incarnation. By exploring Anselm's theological framework, we not only gain insight into medieval scholasticism but also discover timeless lessons that resonate with contemporary seekers of truth. Whether approached as a philosophical inquiry or a spiritual meditation, "Cur Deus Homo?" invites us to witness the divine's intimate involvement in the human story and to live in the light of that profound love.

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