SECTION 3

PRAYER DURING THE NINTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES
CHAPTER TEN

THE PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS OF ST. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY

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The traditional material for meditation in Christianity has always been rooted in the scriptures and especially in the Jewish prayer book, the book of the psalms.¹ For centuries, it remained the basis of prayer, private as well as liturgical, the words being used to express the emotions of love and repentance which lead to compunction of heart and desire for God. In the eleventh century, there was a change, not in the fundamental way in which prayer arose out of compunction, nor in the scriptural basis of meditation, but in an expansion of the kind of material used to express such prayer. This change must be attributed to Anselm of Canterbury; it was so profound that it has been called “the Anselmian transformation.”² Anselm provided new words for meditation out of his own prayers and a new method of using these words emerged, leading into a new age of meditation.

Anselm himself wrote only 18 prayers and 3 meditations, but these were so popular that they were widely copied and were eventually lost among the multitude of imitations. The basis for modern study of Anselm’s prayers was the definition of the canon of his genuine works at the beginning of the twentieth century. The confusion between Anselm’s prayers and those of his imitators had been perpetuated by the Maurist edition of Dom Gabriel Gerberon in 1675, and by Migne in his use of Gerberon’s text for Patrologia Latina in 1883. It was only in 1923 that this state of confusion was either observed or dealt with. Then, Dom Andre Wilmart began his systematic work of distinguishing the genuine prayers from the spurious additions, and he presented his conclusions in a series of articles between 1923 and 1932. These studies

¹ For further discussion of the use of the psalms in meditation before Anselm, see Benedicta Ward “Bede and the Psalter” Jarrow Lecture 1998.