The Priestly Raising of the Hands and other Trinitarian Images in Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogue against the Jews

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Abstract
Petrus Alfonsi’s popular Dialogue against the Jews introduces several innovations to adversus Iudaeos literature in the twelfth century. This text, written by a convert from Judaism, appeals to Scripture, philosophical reason, science, and the Talmud in order to convict Jews of error. Moreover, Alfonsi introduced several novel trinitarian images that drew not only from the text of Scripture but also from observations of contemporary Jewish ritual practice. Some of his observations of contemporary Jewish practices were incorporated by later Christian polemicists, helping perhaps to draw attention to the realia of living Jewish communities.

Keywords
Jewish-Christian Debate, medieval; Synagogue ritual, Priestly blessing; Petrus Alfonsi; Anselm of Canterbury; Peter of Blois; Talmud; Trinity, allegorical images

Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Twelfth Century
In Christian anti-Jewish polemics, the twelfth-century represents a period of dramatic innovation and expansion. It is generally acknowledged that more anti-Jewish Latin polemics were written in the twelfth century than in all the earlier Christian centuries combined. Not only did their number increase, but the tactics employed in such texts began to shift as well. Conservative Christian polemicists would continue to cite scriptural proof texts in defense of Christian doctrine, but, by the beginning of the twelfth century, philosophical polemics appeared whose goal was to convict Jews of error and defend Christian truths by an almost exclusive appeal to reason. Anselm of Canterbury remains the most well known example of a twelfth-century theologian who had turned to reason and dialectic to dis-
cover rational proof for fundamental Christian doctrines. Although Anselm attempted to guard the principle that “unless you believe you will not understand” (Isa. 7:9), nevertheless faith must seek understanding with the employment of reason and dialectic. Thus, Anselm claims in his Monologion and Proslogion that what is held by faith can be proved by necessary reasons, apart from the authority of Scripture—for example, the Trinity in the case of the Monologion and the existence of God in the Proslogion. Similarly, in Cur Deus Homo he attempts to prove for his student Boso the necessity of the Incarnation, to overthrow the criticism of unbelievers—perhaps Jews or Muslims. In his preface, Anselm remarks that in the first


3 In his Epistola de Incarnatione Verbi, 6, Anselm notes that the existence of the God of the Trinity has been demonstrated to the reader in both his Proslogion and Monologion by “necessary reasons”: “Si quis legere dignabitur duo parva mea opuscula, Monologion scilicet et Proslogion, quae ad hoc maxime facta sunt, ut quod fide tenemus de divina natura et eius personis praeet incarnationem, necessarius rationibus sine scripturae auctoritate probari possit.” Opera omnia, 2: 20. For the various senses in which the reader may understand a proof determined according to necessary reasons (which extend from the conclusions of a deductive syllogism to conclusions that are deemed fitting or suitable), see Victor W. Roberts, “The Relation of Faith and Reason in St. Anselm of Canterbury,” American Benedictine Review, 25 (1974): 494-512. On Anselm’s understanding of reason, faith, and truth in the Proslogion, see Yves Cattin, “Proslogion et De Veritate, ‘Ratio, Fides, Veritas,’” in Les mutations socio-culturelles au tournant des XIe-XIIe siècles, Actes du Colloque international du CNRS, Études Anselmiennes (IVe session) (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1984), 595-610.

4 Anselm remarks that it should suffice for one investigating the Trinity that, although in the deepest sense the how of the Trinity remains incomprehensible, it can still be proved by necessary reasons that God is trinitarian. See Monologion, 64, in Opera omnia, 1:75. On the sense implied by necessary reasons, see also Paul Vignaux, “Nécessité des raisons dans le Monologion,” Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, 64, no. 1 (1980): 3-25.