

Fides quaerens ... quid?
Toward an Orthodox Approach to
the History of Christian Doctrine

James R. Payton, Jr.

As a Western Christian who has long studied, taught, and written about Orthodoxy, I have often pointed out that Eastern Christianity asks different questions of the scriptural and patristic sources than Western Christianity does; when you ask different questions, you get different answers. That affords a way into appreciating, as a Western Christian, the rich adherence of Orthodoxy to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). That entrée opens up a magnificent panorama of Eastern Christian teaching, practice, and worship to explore.

Today, however, I want to probe more deeply than a simple recognition of different questions and answers. This paper will consider: (1) the provenance and significance of a particular Latin phrase which informs a common assumption Western Christians bring to their study of theology, laying out why and how that assumption does not fit with Eastern Christian approaches. Then (2) I will show how that assumption has also shaped Western Christian attitudes to the history of Christian doctrine. Following that, (3) I will point out how leading Orthodox scholars have differed from their Western counterparts in their approach to the history of Christian doctrine. Finally, (4) I will propose a variation of that particular Latin phrase which could serve as a viable alternative for an Orthodox approach to the study of the history of Christian doctrine.

1. *Studying Theology*

In Western Christianity, *fides quaerens intellectum* – “faith seeking understanding” – has long served as the main rationale for theological study and teaching. The phrase was first used by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) in the late eleventh century. He had intended to adopt it as the title for the work in which he laid out his ontological proof for the existence of God; however, he ended up changing the title to *Proslogion*, and the specific phrase itself, *fides quaerens intellectum*, only appeared near the end of his prefatory comments, before the future archbishop of Canterbury embarked on his ontological argument.¹

Scholars of Anselm have recognized how profoundly he was influenced by the teaching of Augustine of Hippo. While the specific phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum*, was not itself (as far as I have been able to discover) used by Augustine, the orientation the phrase lays out fits so well with the bishop of Hippo’s views that it has often been appropriated to describe his perspective. Without question, Anselm’s phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* offered a condensed version of the directive Augustine gave when he advised, in his commentary on the gospel of John, *crede, ut intelligas*: “Believe, so that you may understand,” or, more fully, “Do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe so that you may understand.”² The close reliance of Anselm on Augustine in this regard is evident in the virtual word-for-word repetition of Augustine’s statement at the end of the first chapter of the *Proslogion*: “Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam” – “So, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe

¹ Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83 (where the phrase is translated as “Faith in quest of understanding”).

² Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st Series* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004 [1888 reprint edition]), “Tractate 29,6, on John 7:14–18,” 7:184. (Hereafter, references to volumes in this edition will be given as *NPNF*¹, followed by volume and page number[s].)

in order to understand.”³ Given the overwhelming influence of Augustine of Hippo in the Western Christian tradition since antiquity, and the undoubted impact of Anselm of Canterbury as the father of scholasticism in medieval Western Christendom, the phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* has a hoary and revered resonance in Western Christianity, throughout much of history and across the contemporary theological spectrum. *Fides quaerens intellectum* serves as a one-size-fits-all garment worn by Western Christian approaches to theology.

Certainly, citing Augustine of Hippo and Anselm of Canterbury at the outset of a paper on Eastern Christian theology will seem odd. Orthodoxy has hardly warmed to Anselm. The satisfaction theory of the atonement he expounded in *Cur Deus Homo* expanded on the rudimentary legal and juridical orientations that had become dominant within Western Christendom, and Anselm squarely situated the accomplishment of salvation within the feudal legal structure that dominated Western Europe in his time. His conception of the atonement has definitively shaped Western Christian understandings of salvation down to the present day, though feudal law has long since disappeared. But that satisfaction theory, further elaborated by the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century into what is known as the penal substitutionary theory,⁴ does not square with patristic perspectives or with subsequent Orthodox views of salvation.⁵ Anselm of Canterbury has, in short, had little value for Orthodoxy, except perhaps to serve as a bad example.

Nor has Augustine had more than a mixed, often lukewarm welcome in Orthodoxy: as my students recognized in the collection of patristic readings I had prepared for an upper-level Church history course, Augustine was “doing something

³ Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 87.

⁴ This view of the atonement became, and continues to be, the dominant viewpoint among conservative Protestants.

⁵ I have elaborated on this disjunction in my *The Victory of the Cross: Salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2019), chapter 5: “The Economy of Salvation: How God Saved Humanity.”