

2. Religious Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Reason

In a well-known passage of the *Summa contra gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas asserts that our knowledge of God comprises two kinds of truths: “There are some truths about God which completely surpass the capacity of human reason, such as that God is three and one; yet there are others that natural reason can attain, such as that God exists, that God is one, and others of this kind, which even philosophers have proved about God through the light of natural reason.”¹ Some obvious questions ensue. If some claims about God are acknowledged to be beyond reason’s competence, then how can a person be confident and indeed certain that they are true? Thomists adopt the traditional view that the truths about God that are the object of faith are nonetheless held by the believer to be certainly true despite the lack of rational evidence. Yet how can a belief be certain without evidence? This leads to a second question: are these truth claims beyond natural reason’s ken inferentially related to the philosophical truth claims about God within reason’s ken? Do the latter provide any kind of prior epistemic justification for the former or do they serve some other role? To put the central issue in contemporary terms: what is the Thomist position with respect to the evidentialist challenge that religious beliefs require evidence? In terms of the problematic of this chapter: how are religious truth claims related to other knowledge claims?

In order to answer these questions, four topics need to be considered in turn. The first concerns the *praeambula fidei* (literally, “preambles to faith”), which is Aquinas’s occasional term for the set of truths regarding God and creatures that can be rationally established by demonstrative philosophical argumentation (in the Aristotelian sense of *episteme*). The role such philosophical argumentation has in justifying faith has long been a matter of debate and misunderstanding within the Thomistic tradition. It will be argued in the first section of this chapter that such philosophical argumentation does not provide probative rational evidence for an individual’s act of faith. In other words, knowledge of the *praeambula fidei* is neither necessary nor sufficient for an individual’s coming to believe in God. According to Aquinas, the motivation for belief is solely reliance under grace upon God’s self-revelation, and what pertains strictly to faith (as opposed to what can be

¹ SCG I, 3.

known either by philosophical argumentation or by faith – but not by both at the same time) is beyond rational comprehension on this side of the beatific vision. If this is the case, then another topic emerges that will be the subject of the second section: How can faith be a genuinely *intellectual* act resulting in truth and certainty when it inherently lacks rational evidence? This will lead to an exploration of the nature of faith as a theological virtue in an attempt to account for its peculiar feature vis-à-vis other kinds of intellectual acts: its reliance upon the will in assenting to truth. The third concern will be to see that while an individual act of faith does not rest on rational evidence, nevertheless philosophical evidence plays a necessary and vital role in the work of theology. The distinction between the role of philosophical evidence in an individual act of faith, on the one hand, and in theology, on the other hand, is crucial to sorting through what can appear to be inconsistent or misleading claims in Aquinas, and the failure to make this distinction helps explain why Thomists have argued among themselves for so long on this topic. While a believer need not be a philosopher, a theologian must be one because theology necessarily presupposes philosophy. The third section will accordingly explore the distinction between theology and philosophy and the role of the latter within the former. Finally, the fourth section will try to clarify the Thomistic account of the relationship between reason and faith, philosophy and theology, over against alternative contemporary views in the context of the old question of whether there is such a thing as “Christian Philosophy.”

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE *PRAEAMBULA FIDEI*: WHAT SORT OF RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION DOES FAITH REQUIRE?

In an illuminating mid-century study of the meaning of the *praeambula fidei* in Aquinas, Guy de Broglie argued conclusively that the Cartesian quest to provide rational grounds for the justification of faith had led to a massive misunderstanding among Thomists of the relationship between rational justification and faith.² Like many other historical-textual studies in the first part of this century, de Broglie’s work helped show how reading Aquinas within the context of an alien problematic could skew interpretations. In the pre-Cartesian context in which Aquinas wrote, there was no concern to provide some kind of antecedent rational justification for faith on the basis of philosophical argumentation for the existence of God and/or conclusive evidence for the reality and veracity of divine revelation. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has noted, medieval speculative arguments establishing the existence of God and other truths pertaining to the faith were an exercise in *fides quarens intellectum* leading to a deeper joy in the faith; they should not be confused with the role of such argumentation in the post-Enlightenment apologetic project of responding to the evidentialist challenge.³ Concomitantly, medieval accounts of the genesis of faith in an individual believer were not focused on the problem of establishing the need for compelling rational grounds, but rather on how God’s grace entered efficaciously into an individual’s moral striving toward the good.

² Guy de Broglie, S.J., “La vraie notion thomiste des *praeambula fidei*,” *Gregorianum* 34 (1953): 341-389.

³ “The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38-81.

With this kind of hindsight, the Thomistic discussion of the grounds of faith in the early part of this century becomes more intelligible.⁴ Within the context of both post-Cartesian evidentialist apologetics and the challenge of modernism, Thomists tried to steer some sort of middle course between overly fideistic and overly rationalistic accounts of faith. The two key figures in the debate were Ambrose Gardeil, O.P. and Pierre Rousselot, S.J.. The very title of Gardeil's seminal work, *La crédibilité et l'apologétique* (first edition, 1907), highlights the post-Cartesian problematic. The central issue in the debate concerned the grounds for a rational judgment of credulity prior to a full-blown act of faith. How does faith come to seem rationally attractive to an individual? On what was such a judgement based? What was the force of the evidence or the level of certainty, and how did that relate to the freedom of the act of faith? At what point was divine grace necessary? All these questions were posed within a consciously apologetic context wherein the burden of proof seemed squarely on the shoulder of the theologian to defend the rationality of faith. Within this context, interest was focused less on the need for speculative arguments for the existence of God than on the need to show how belief in divine revelation was rational based on the confirmation provided by miracles and other divine signs (e.g. prophecy) of its veracity. Throughout this long-running discussion within the Roman Catholic world, all the contending parties sought to ground their solutions in appeals to Aquinas's authority. What they did not realize, however, was that they were asking him to address a problem that did not occur to him.

Although there were some points of deep disagreement between them, both Gardeil and Rousselot tried to transpose the Neoscholastic discussion of the rationality of faith through a recovery of a more authentically Thomistic account of faith as a graced response of the whole person, intellect and will, to the personal self-revelation of God. Gardeil's important contribution in this regard was to situate the individual's act of faith within the context of a person's overall moral striving; faith is more like a moral decision than a disinterested speculative judgement, and Gardeil showed how Aquinas's account of the structure of moral action illuminated the structure of the act of faith. Gardeil's stress on the role of the will in coming to faith was a needed corrective to the prevailing tendency towards overly intellectual accounts of faith and thus something of an acknowledgment of the force of Maurice Blondel's critique.⁵ Gardeil maintained that there was a rational judgment of credulity prior to faith that attained something like subjective certainty; in the second edition (1912) of *La crédibilité*, however, he recognized that such a judgment must be under the influence of grace or else it would seem as if some kind of Pelagian intellectual striving was the grounds for faith.

Rousselot was concerned to argue against a view of faith wherein some kind of prior natural rational judgment of credibility was followed by a supernaturally meritorious will act. Rousselot's rich and complex account of faith cannot be articulated here,⁶ but what is important in the present context is that he effectively put the lie to the view that faith was based on the antecedent recognition of rational

⁴ For an overview of this discussion, see Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi*.

⁵ On this point, see McCool, *Neo-Thomism*, 43-74.

⁶ See Aubert, 452-470. See also John M. McDermott's "Introduction" to Rousselot's *The Eyes of Faith*, translated by Joseph Donceel (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

evidence by the light of natural reason. Faith is not an irrational act since the believer does need to come to see it as rational on the basis of visible signs of God's revelation and/or some philosophical argumentation for the existence of God. What Rousselot argued, however, is that any rational assent to signs as coming from God or to arguments as a call from God to believe must already be under the influence of divine grace; that such a process necessarily involves the interpenetration of will and intellect; and that the rational force of the evidence is not like the scientific certitude described in Neoscholastic manuals but rather like the process described in Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. The title of Rousselot's work, *Les yeux de la foi* (*The Eyes of Faith*), highlights the central aim: to construe faith as imparting a new dimension of intelligibility opened up to the believer by the influence of grace. The believer differs from the non-believer not primarily in *what* he or she sees but rather in *how* he or she sees. The believer interprets what is seen in the light of faith as signs of divine revelation. It is rational for the believer to assent based on what is seen through the eyes of faith, but that evidence has no pure, neutral, evidentiary force. The Thomistic debate about the nature of faith (which will be explored in the next section) was destined to continue for a long time after Gardeil and Rousselot, yet there was a general consensus that whether in the case of the philosophically sophisticated or the philosophically simple, the act of faith is not grounded in rational evidentiary considerations.

A careful reading of Aquinas's doctrine of the *praeambula fidei* in their original context reveals that he did not regard the *praeambula* as providing antecedent philosophical justification for the act of faith. The doctrine belongs in the context of Aquinas's treatment of the relationship between philosophy and theology, not of the motives for individual belief. An early treatment reads:

It is impossible that what belongs to philosophy should be contrary to what belongs to faith, but rather fall short of it. Yet philosophy contains certain preambles to faith, just as nature itself is a preamble to grace. . . . [The first way in which we can use philosophy within theology is] in order to demonstrate the preambles to faith, which are necessary to the knowledge of faith, as what can be proven about God by natural reason, such as that God is one and whatever else can be proven by philosophy about God and creatures, and so is presupposed by faith.⁷

It is vital to distinguish what is rationally presupposed by theology and what is rationally presupposed by an individual believer. As we shall see in the third section, the exploration of faith by theology does depend upon and rationally presuppose philosophical conclusions about God and creatures. But the philosophical truths presupposed by theology are in no way necessary presuppositions to an individual's act of faith. It is possible, of course, that an individual believer may come to know certain philosophical truths about God and creatures prior to faith, and this knowledge may serve to dispose an unbeliever to

⁷ DT 2, 3. Parallel passages are ST I, 2, 2 ad 1; ST II-II, 1, 5 ad 3; ST II-II, 2, 10, ad 2; III Sent. d.24, q.1, a.2, (sol. 2); DV 14, 9 ad 8 and ad 9.

the action of grace.⁸ Yet such philosophical knowledge about God is neither normal nor necessary in the psychogenesis of faith. It is not normal because it is accessible only to a few people, after a long period of time, and with a great mixture of error.⁹ What can be known philosophically about God is more usually accepted on the basis of revelation. Aquinas is careful to emphasize in this context that one and the same person cannot both know and have faith in the same truth at the same time; the two states are mutually exclusive.¹⁰ There are some truths about God that can either be known philosophically or accepted by faith; there are others, however, that can only be accepted by faith (e.g. the Trinity) and are never known. Philosophical knowledge of God is not necessary because faith itself suffices to teach the believer whatever could also be known by philosophy: "Because faith, taken in itself, sufficiently inclines the believer to all things which pertain to, follow from, or are presupposed by faith."¹¹

A key text for the discussion of the rational presuppositions of faith is Aquinas's reply to an objection that if faith is understood as believing something to be true because it is pleasing to God to do so, then some prior knowledge of God is logically required. To this objection Aquinas replies:

To the ninth objection it must be said that someone can begin to believe what he had not previously believed but had rather only feebly considered. Hence it is possible that prior to believing God, one could have had a feeble notion that God exists and then come to believe in God because it is pleasing to God. And thus one can believe that God exists because it is pleasing to God, even though the existence of God is not an article of faith but rather something presupposed because it can be rationally proven.¹²

The only previous requirement for belief is some intellectual consideration of the possibility of the existence of God; a putative believer needs to at least be able to entertain the idea that there might be a God in order to come to believe in God. Yet such a weak opinion hardly could pass an evidentialist test.

Coming to faith for Aquinas is not a matter of being convinced by arguments, because no rational argument can provide evidence for what belongs strictly to faith.¹³ As we shall see in the next section, Aquinas's account of faith insists that the truths that can only be known on the basis of revelation (as opposed to the *praeambula fidei*) necessarily lack any rational evidence to the believer. Neither do miracles or signs provide some kind of quasi-inductive rational warrant for belief since, as Rousselot argued, such "evidence" can never produce objective certainty and is only persuasive on the basis of the interior movement of grace. The need for grace in order for credibility arguments to have any persuasive force is emphasized

⁸ See M.F. Sparrow, "The Proofs of Natural Theology and the Unbeliever," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1991): 129-141.

⁹ SCG I, 4.

¹⁰ ST II-II, 1, 5-6.

¹¹ III Sent., d.24, q.1, a.2, sol.2.

¹² DV 14, 9 ad 9.

¹³ "Faith is said to be beyond reason not because no act of reason is involved in faith, but rather because an act of reason within faith cannot produce insight into what belongs to faith." DV 14, 2 ad 9.



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