

Assent to Faith, Theology and *Scientia* in Aquinas

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Abstract

This paper revisits Aquinas's understanding of theology as a science based on a participation in the divine *scientia*. Our modern presuppositions (in terms of "autonomous" reason and philosophy as a discipline utterly separate from theology) often appear to render Aquinas's claims implausible. In this contribution it is argued that (a) all sciences are fiduciary in the broad sense (with the exception of those that rely on principles *per se nota*) and (b) that first principles can only be accepted or rejected, but not refuted or demonstrated within the relevant discipline. From this, two conclusions can be drawn: first, despite its reliance on revelation theology's case is, therefore, not as peculiar as modern readers might initially assume: every discipline operates with key assumptions it simply accepts. Secondly, given the role of first principles, to characterise Aquinas's account of the assent of faith as fideist or voluntarist is beside the point, for you can only accept or reject first principles. The contribution ends by suggesting that assent to the articles of faith is not an extraneous acquiescence in assertions of divine authority either, as a reading of the first question of the *Secunda Secundae* makes clear. Indeed, the paper hints that we should not read the first question of the *Prima Pars* without engaging with the first questions of the *Secunda Secundae*.

Keywords

Aquinas, sacra doctrina, first principles, assent of faith, ST I, q. 1

Anyone who has had the privilege of introducing undergraduate students to the first question of the *Summa Theologiae* will have noticed their puzzlement when they encounter Aquinas's claim that theology is a science. Even when students realise that Aquinas's notion of *scientia* is rather different from the modern understanding of "science" (in terms of a body of knowledge based on hypotheses subject to empirical verification) theology's scientific status remains dubious

in their eyes due to the mere fact that *Sacra Doctrina* is based on revelation.¹

This scepticism is not new. Indeed, William of Ockham voiced similar concerns in his *Op. Theol.* I, 199 when he wrote: “It is absurd to claim that *I* have scientific knowledge with respect to this or that conclusion by reason of the fact that *you* know principles which I accept on faith because you tell them to me. And, in the same way, it is silly to claim that I have scientific knowledge of the conclusions of theology by reason of the fact that God knows principles which I accept on faith because he reveals them.”²

In terms of its “scientific” legitimacy it seems problematic enough that this alleged *scientia* is based on revelation (as distinct from reason) and is somehow connected with God’s own knowledge and even, to make matters worse, the knowledge the saints enjoy in heaven.³ There are, however, further problems. Aquinas’s cause is not helped, it seems, by his claim that the assent of the intellect to the articles of faith is based on the operation of the will (itself stirred by grace).⁴ One wonders whether Aquinas’s position is open to the charge of wishful thinking, if not irrationalism?

In what follows I want to revisit these well-known Thomist claims. I will suggest that Aquinas’s distinction between theology, based on revelation, and philosophy, based on reason, does not cohere seamlessly with the modern view as to how reason and philosophy, on the one hand, and faith and theology, on the other hand, relate (or fail to relate!) to one another. I am obviously not denying that theology depends on revelation; but this dependence does not undermine the

¹ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2 and a. 2: “*doctrina sacra credit principia revelata sibi a Deo.*” For the translations of Aquinas’s works I am indebted to www.dhspriority.org/thomas (unless indicated otherwise). Aquinas gives a broad meaning to the term “*Sacra Doctrina*” in the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*. In the strict sense *Sacra Doctrina* refers to the (mainly theoretical, but also practical) *scientia* of theology in which we use demonstrative reasoning on the basis of the articles of faith so as to invite students into the world of Christian teaching. *Sacra Doctrina* refers, therefore, to the academic discipline, relying on intellectual rigour and arguments, that assists students in acquiring the necessary mindset to become themselves teachers of the Christian faith. When Aquinas, however, argues in article 1 that *Sacra Doctrina* is necessary for salvation (*necessarium ad humanam salutem*) he cannot possibly mean that all people need to engage in theology as an academic discipline – a kind of salvation *Scripto solo*. Thus, *Sacra Doctrina* does not exclusively refer to the academic discipline we call Christian theology (although it certainly includes it) but it also denotes Christian teaching and learning in the broad sense (the contents of faith of the “simple” believer). In the broad sense *Sacra Doctrina* refers to the knowledge revealed by God through the Scriptures that is foundational for the faith of the ordinary Christian, as well as for academic theology.

² Quoted by Alfred J. Freddoso, ‘Ockham on faith and reason’ from Paul Vincent Spade (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 334.

³ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2.

⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 9.

scientific status of theology because *all* sciences, including theology, are fiduciary in nature as they rely on principles that cannot be proven within the parameters of the discipline itself: “The principles of *any* science (*principia cujuslibet scientiae*) are either in themselves self-evident, or reducible to conclusions of a higher science.”⁵ The puzzlement of modern readers is partly due to the fact that they approach Aquinas’s first question of the *Summa Theologiae* with the unspoken assumption that reason is autonomous, and philosophy is separate from theology. For Aquinas, on the other hand, all rationality is fiduciary (in the broad sense) and theology is an architectonic, universal science which draws on a philosophical discipline that is distinct but not separate or “autonomous.” These important differences of perspective need to be kept in mind when interpreting the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Similarly, in relation to the second “problematic” issue (namely the assent of faith based on an act of the will rather than on clear-cut evidence) I will show that, here too, the manner in which theology and most other sciences relate to first principles is isomorphic.⁶ More particularly, I will argue that charges of irrationalism or wishful thinking laid at Aquinas’s door are misplaced for there is a sense in which we can only affirm or reject first principles, as distinct from demonstrating or refuting them, in any science. The different topics of this paper (the first, dealing with first principles and the fiduciary nature of sciences; and the second, dealing with assent to the articles of faith) are deeply intertwined for what we could call “personalist” reasons: in the assent of faith we begin to be assimilated to, and grow in conformity with, the divine Truth. I will touch upon this topic in the final section. This assimilation will be perfected when we will (hopefully) join the ranks of the blessed in heaven. This explains why Aquinas claims that *Sacra Doctrina* shares in the knowledge of both God *and* the saints in heaven who enjoy in an exemplary manner the divine vision to which faith on earth inchoatively points.

1. First principles, the articles of faith, and *Sacra Doctrina* as *scientia*

Many years ago, John Jenkins pointed out that we need to interpret Aquinas’s notion of *scientia* in light of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* and specifically Aquinas’s own commentary on it. A key condition of *scientia* is that the principles of demonstration be better known

⁵ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2 ad 1.

⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7; *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3 ad 2.

than the conclusion.⁷ To have *scientia* of something means that we have an understanding of it in light of more profound, explanatory principles. *Scientia*, therefore, refers to a deep understanding of something in light of key principles. It is therefore impossible without a profound insight into these first principles. This insight Aquinas calls *intellectus*.⁸ In short, to have knowledge (*scientia*) of the cause or the principles refers to the epistemic ground of reasons why we hold a certain view.

The role that first principles play in philosophical sciences is, in theology, being assumed by the articles of faith, to which we give an immediate assent.⁹ Jenkins is undoubtedly correct in drawing our attention to the analogy between the role of first principles in non-theological ways of thinking and that of the articles of faith in theological ones. As Aquinas writes in *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7: “The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith as immediately known (*per se nota*) principles to a teaching based on natural reason.”

Aquinas probably came across this idea in William of Auxerre’s *Summa Aurea*. William was perhaps the first author to establish a connection between principles the intellect knows immediately as such (*per se nota*) and the articles of faith. If theology did not have these principles it would not be a *scientia*. For instance, William draws a parallel between the principle “Every whole is larger than its parts” which involves a kind of illumination, enlightening the intellect in a natural way, on the basis of which thinking occurs, on the one hand, and the principle “God rewards all things good” and other articles of faith that enlighten the intellect through grace, and form the foundation for theological discourse, on the other hand. William concludes by quoting (the Vulgate’s) Is. 7:9: “Unless you believe you will not understand.”¹⁰ In short, like Aquinas after him William characterises the articles of faith as first principles on the basis of which we engage in theological discourse. Perhaps William pushes the analogy with first principles in our natural knowledge too far when he suggests that the articles of faith themselves are

⁷ John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 15. He quotes Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* I, 4.32: “Therefore, it must be that the one having *scientia* if his apprehension is perfect, apprehends the cause of the thing of which he has *scientia*.” (p. 19)

⁸ Wisdom, in turn, combines insight (*intellectus*) into first principles with *scientia*.

⁹ See *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7 and (less explicitly) *ST* I, q. 1, a. 7: “God is in very truth the object of this science. This is clear also from the principles of this science, namely, the articles of faith, for faith is about God. The object of the principles and of the whole science must be the same, since the whole science is contained virtually in its principles.”

¹⁰ I use the edition by Jean Ribailier, Magistri Guillelmi Altissiodorensis, *Summa Aurea* (Collegium S. Bonaventurae: Grottaferrata, Rome: 1980-’85); here: *Summa Aurea* III, tr. xii, c. 1. (p. 199)

known immediately¹¹ (*principia fidei per se nota*). I am not aware that Aquinas subscribes to the view that the articles of faith are themselves *per se nota*. Indeed, such a view would be incompatible with his account of the assent of faith itself: if the articles of faith were *per se nota* the will would have no role in assenting to the articles.¹² Nonetheless, overall Aquinas seems indebted to William. He agrees with William that the articles of faith operate as first principles and form the foundation of our theological discipline. In contrast to William, Aquinas developed this idea further by adding the Aristotelian notion of theology as a subaltern *scientia* that shares in the divine knowledge itself.

Secondly, William further suggests that through faith we already enjoy a foretaste of the sweetness of eternal bliss – an insight that Aquinas, too, was to adopt. Finally, William puts forward a third idea, related to the first. He mentions, albeit in passing, that faith finds in the articles themselves the reason why it believes, namely God himself. In other words, faith's assent is intrinsic according to William. This notion is key to Aquinas's account of the assent of faith, as I hope to demonstrate later in this contribution.

An early text illustrates a number of these issues, including how the articles of faith operate as first principles, and how faith constitutes an inchoative participation or even assimilation in God, which will come to perfection in the beatific vision. In *Expos. De Trin.* q. 2 a. 2 Aquinas draws an interesting analogy between God's knowledge, and our participation through faith. He first mentions one way of knowing, namely the philosophical one, which relies on knowledge of creation to establish certain truths about God. He then goes on to describe the theological one:

The other [way] follows the mode of divine realities themselves, so that they are apprehended in themselves. We cannot perfectly possess this way of knowing in the present life, but there arises here and now in us a certain sharing in, and a likeness to, the divine knowledge (*participatio et assimilatio ad cognitionem divinam*), to the extent that through the faith implanted in us we firmly grasp the primary Truth itself for its own sake (*propter se ipsam*). And as God, by the very

¹¹ For the translation of *per se nota* as “immediately known,” rather than as “self-evident,” see T.C. O'Brien's footnote in the Blackfriars' edition of St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), vol. 31, p. 24 (with references).

¹² See *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 4 for a supporting description. Here Aquinas first outlines an assent on the basis of insight into first principles that are immediately known (*per se*), or through conclusions, in a mediated manner. Here the will has no role to play. He then outlines another way the mind assents, not through a sufficient motivation of its object but through some voluntary choice that influences the mind in favour of one alternative rather than the other. The assent of faith is of the latter kind. The implication is that the articles of faith are not first principles *per se nota*.

fact that he knows himself, knows all other things as well in his way, namely by simple intuition without any reasoning process (*simplici intuitu, non discurrendo*), so may we, from the things we accept by faith in our firm grasping of the primary Truth, come to know other things in our way, namely by drawing conclusions from principles. Thus the truths we hold on faith are, as it were, our principles in this science, and the others become, as it were, conclusions.¹³

The full meaning of this quotation will become clearer throughout the rest of this paper. Our knowledge of God through faith represents a participation in, and even assimilation into, the divine knowledge, in which we will come to share fully in the beatific vision.¹⁴ The cited text suggests that the apprehension (no matter how inadequate) of the first principles of faith somewhat mirrors the simple vision (*intuitus simplex*) that characterises divine knowledge. The reference to *intuitus simplex* hints at an isomorphic relation between divine knowledge (in which we will share) and theological knowledge based on an apprehension of the articles of faith.¹⁵ Of course, there is a difference: God's knowledge is non-discursive for God immediately grasps in an immediate insight whatever there is to know. We, on the other hand, generally acquire new knowledge through a reasoning process. The articles of faith, however, provide us with the first principles needed to engage in theological thinking: in divine science the articles of faith are like principles and not like conclusions.¹⁶

As briefly mentioned earlier, Aquinas innovates and improves William's outline by developing the notion that sacred doctrine is a subaltern science along Aristotelian lines. The theme is well-known but is too important to remain undiscussed in this context. In *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2 we find a classic exposition of Aquinas's mature views on sacred doctrine as a subaltern science in the Aristotelian sense. In this text Aquinas first distinguishes between sciences that proceed from principles that are known in their own right by the natural light of intelligence, and sciences that borrow their foundational principles from another science. Logic, for instance, operates on the basis of a number of key principles that our intellect simply assents to as they are immediately known (e.g., principle of non-contradiction). Other sciences, such as music, proceed from principles established by other sciences (e.g., arithmetic). Aquinas then concludes: "So it is that

¹³ I am using the translation of Aquinas' Commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* [*Expos. De Trin.*] by Armand Maurer, *Thomas Aquinas. Faith, Reason and Theology* (Toronto: PIMS, 1987).

¹⁴ I will explore this in section 3 of this paper.

¹⁵ For a more thorough discussion of *intuitus simplex*, see: Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Contemplation, *Intellectus*, and *Simplex Intuitus* in Aquinas: Recovering a Neoplatonic Theme" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2017): 199-225.

¹⁶ *Expos. De Trin.* q. 2, a. 2 ad 4; see also *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 7.

sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed. (...) Sacred doctrine is established on principles revealed by God.”

It will have become clear that the apprehension of first principles is the basis for the theological discourse in the first place. Theology is a *scientia* that relies on demonstrative arguments, which means that to acquire a full understanding and explanation of something we need to refer it back (*reductio*) to fundamental principles of which we have a more intimate knowledge. As with any other science, a demonstration or explanation must come to an end in first principles. This implies, of course, that it is impossible that all things are demonstrable. If all things were demonstrable, demonstrations would either be circular, or they would proceed to infinity. An infinite regress, however, would render demonstration impossible “because the conclusion of any demonstration is made certain by reducing it (*per reductionem*) to the first principle of demonstration.”¹⁷ Theology, like other sciences, thus presupposes first principles (in this instance provided by faith) that it simply accepts but cannot verify or even thoroughly understand. Through faith we assent to first principles – without fully comprehending them – in a manner that is not entirely dissimilar to the way we simply grasp first principles in ordinary ways of knowing.¹⁸ This brings us to our second topic, the assent of faith.

2. The assent to the articles of faith and the rationality of *Sacra Doctrina*

In *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 9 Aquinas writes that the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God. As mentioned in the Introduction, the role of the will in this assent appears to make Aquinas vulnerable to the critique that accepting faith is a matter of sheer fideism and wishful thinking: Do we believe the central claims of the Christian faith simply because we want them to be true?

One way of defending Aquinas against this charge is by arguing that, for him, our will is not a blind force. All creatures desire their good in order to reach fulfilment. Desire, therefore, is not an indication of irrationality but the opposite is the case. Eleonore Stump, for instance, has tried to clear Aquinas of the charge of a naïve, delusional way of thinking by arguing, quite rightly, that Aquinas’s

¹⁷ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, IV, 4 (no. 607).

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3 ad 2.

views on the assent of faith must be read in light of his metaphysical outlook, and more specifically his insight that being and goodness are convertible.¹⁹ It is because goodness and being are intimately connected that the intellect at the instigation of the will assents to central tenets of faith.

Stump's account seems convincing to me, and it is strengthened by the fact that Aquinas in at least one place refers to the convertibility of being, goodness and truth when he discusses the topic as to why the intellect assents to the articles of faith at the urging of the will.²⁰ There is, however, a somewhat different way of approaching this.

Our assent to the articles of faith, which act as first principles, is similar to the way first principles operate as the foundation of ordinary knowledge: "Just as we assent to first principles by the natural light of our intellect, so does a virtuous person, by the habit of virtue, judge aright of things concerning that virtue; and in this way, by the light of faith which God bestows on us, we assent to matters of faith."²¹ The analogy is revealing: key principles (of either natural reasoning or in the realm of faith) are assented to in a manner that is analogous with a connatural, non-discursive knowledge of moral issues (such as the connatural insight that adultery is to be avoided, even though not all of us might be able to provide rational-discursive reasons as to why this is the case). If theological discourse, then, is a movement founded on the acceptance of, and the assent to, these primary principles, then it seems to me that the charge of irrationality is misplaced, simply because at this primary level there is a sense in which *we can only reject or accept these principles; we cannot refute or demonstrate them at this point*. To do so would be to engage in theological or philosophical reasoning, which occurs at a subsequent moment, following assenting (or rejecting) in the first place.

I would like to draw an analogy between assenting to fundamental truth-claims of faith, and affirming truth revealed in art. The analogy with art is appropriate, I hope, if only because it further reinforces the argument that our initial assent to the contents of faith is partly based on the convertibility of goodness and truth. It will be remembered that according to Aquinas beauty is a perichoresis of goodness and truth, for a thing of beauty is that which pleases when seen or known.²²

There is a sense in which we initially affirm or reject a piece of art, just as our assent to faith is, initially, not a refutation or agreement but either an affirmation or rejection.²³ I will illustrate this by giving

¹⁹ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2005), 366ff.

²⁰ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ch. 11, lect. 1, no. 554.

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3 ad 2.

²² *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4 ad 1.

²³ In both instances (art and matters of faith) a cognitive claim is made. I assume a cognitive (as distinct from an emotional or experiential) theory of art. Art is not simply

an example from literature. Chekhov's short story, *The Lady and the Lapdog* makes a powerful impact because it discloses elements of human relations and our search for happiness in intimate relations that, at times, clash with our broader responsibilities. In the story, Gurov, a married man turned middle-aged, starts a liaison with a younger woman (also unhappily married) while holidaying in a sea resort near the Black Sea. The tedium of life, and the beauty and infinity of nature are strikingly captured by Chekhov. The eternity of the splendid natural surrounds – the sea and the mountains – offers a vivid contrast to the fragile transience of human beings, their concerns and loves. The story makes a number of implicit claims about our world. For instance, why does Gurov – for the first time in his life – genuinely come to love a woman who, by his own admission, is not all that remarkable? The answer, so the story suggests, is that the dawning awareness of his own finitude enables Gurov to love, for the first time ever, in a deep and unselfish manner.

Tolstoy disapproved of the story, labelling it “Nietzschean” because, in his view, the protagonists failed to acquire a resolute world-view with a clear distinction between good and evil.²⁴ Of course, we can raise questions about the morality of the two protagonists, and the implications of their behaviour toward their respective spouses and children. Such criticism is, however, somewhat off the mark – not because the story is “mere art” and therefore does not, allegedly, make any claims about our world but rather because at a primary level you cannot really *refute* art. You can only affirm or refuse it. Reading Chekhov's story we either consent or affirm (“Yes, that's how things are!”), or else we refuse it (“No, the world is not like that.”)²⁵ In the work of art we come to *re-cognise* something, i.e., know it again, by seeing a resemblance with our world and the human condition. Affirming its veracity, recognising that it coheres with what we know of the world, or even enabling us to see the world in a different light, occurs at a first level – the level of affirmation. In a subsequent move we can then engage in more detailed discussions about the different aspects of the work of art (including its morality, implicit philosophy, . . .).

In light of this, let us return to Aquinas's point, namely that at the level of faith the will (stirred by grace) “compels” the intellect to assent. This can be taken to mean that we subscribe to faith because

about emotions but rather discloses something about our world and the human condition, although our language will always fail to express fully the truth claims of art.

²⁴ See Maarten Tenbergen, *Klassieken van de Russische Literatuur* (Utrecht, Aula: 1991), 342.

²⁵ In the latter case, the piece of art does not “address us” as one would say in German (“Es spricht mir nicht an” means “It does not appeal to me,” or “It does not resonate with me.” Literally it means: “It does not speak to me.”)

we affirm that “this is how things are,” given our own orientation towards ultimate fulfilment and our search for meaning. Theological discourse, then, is a second-order enterprise, which presupposes the initial affirmation of faith.

In short, fundamental principles resist adjudication within the parameters of their discipline. We either accept them, or we refuse them. We cannot demonstrate the veracity of our first principles – at least not within the science of which they are the principles.²⁶ It is worth reiterating that this applies to other disciplines as well. Moral science, for instance, is based on the key principle that we should do good and avoid evil. You cannot argue for the veracity of this principle on the basis of other moral principles without being guilty of a *petitio principii*. Or again, the foundational principles of physics are derived from mathematics, and you cannot offer proof of these principles as a physicist. As one author put it: to believe in a principle is to abide by it.²⁷ We should not attempt to offer rational support for espousing our central beliefs.²⁸ Indeed, in a very real sense we can’t – at least not without transcending the discipline or science of which they are the first principles.

These remarks have important implications for the way we conceive of the nature of theological discourse and its legitimacy in general. When Aquinas is referring to other subaltern sciences in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2 he is doing more than offering an illustration to explain how theology borrows its own principles from the *scientia* of God. He is actually making an important point about the rationality of *any* scientific discipline, *including* theology. Thus, when he argues that theology simply accepts the (revealed) articles of faith but does not attempt to demonstrate them in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8 his main purpose should not be interpreted in a fideist sense, as if he is somehow immunising the theological discipline from rational argumentation or scrutiny by pointing to its (revealed) origin in the divine *scientia*. Rather, he is pointing out that theology, *like any other scientific discipline*, operates with foundational principles it simply assumes and cannot prove within the parameters of its own discourse. This is not a concession to fideism but, rather, an argument that hints at the rationality of the theological discipline that is not unlike that of

²⁶ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8: “As other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences: so this doctrine does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith . . .”

²⁷ The phrase is taken from John Whittaker, “Kierkegaard and Existence Communication” from *Faith and Philosophy* 5/2 (1988): 168-84, 175. The reference to Kierkegaard in this context is important: if my interpretation is correct, what Kierkegaard says on faith as “existence-communication” as distinct from doctrine would be recognised by Aquinas. Aquinas is as little a rationalist than Kierkegaard a fideist.

²⁸ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8 ad 2 and *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2. Insofar as theological science is concerned, this claim excludes the preambles of faith, including the five ways.

other disciplines. All disciplines operate with a fiduciary rationality, starting out with key assumptions (apart from those disciplines that operate from principles *per se nota*), and theology is no exception.

My argument that Aquinas's distinction between theology, based on revelation, and philosophical sciences, based on a consideration of created effects, does not aim at somehow separating or insulating theology from philosophy, is further confirmed by his claim that theology is architectonic. For Aquinas, unlike us (post)-moderns, theology is a universal or architectonic science, which, therefore, incorporates arguments from a philosophical discipline that remains distinct but cannot be considered "autonomous" or separate from theology. This architectonic nature of theology, grounded in the highest, divine *scientia*, safeguards it from rationalist reductionism. In *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 10 (where he raises the question whether reasons in support of what we believe lessen the merit of faith) Aquinas reiterates that we should not attempt to offer rational arguments to demonstrate the central beliefs of the Christian faith. He first draws a distinction between reasons that may precede the act of faith, and those that are subsequent to it. If human reasoning is subsequent to the believer's willing it deepens faith and is a source of merit: "when our will is ready to believe, we love the truth we believe, we think out and take to heart whatever reasons we can find in support thereof; and in this way human reason does not exclude the merit of faith but is a sign of greater merit." (In few places Aquinas has given such a beautiful description of faith seeking understanding.) Engaging in rational arguments in order to conduce us to believe, however, he unequivocally rejects: "We ought to believe matters of faith, not on account of human reason, but on account of the divine authority."²⁹

3. The intrinsicist understanding of assent and *Sacra Doctrina*

To believe "on account of the authority of God" should not be interpreted in an extraneous manner – a kind of *Magister dixit* argument that we had better begrudgingly accept. There would be no merit whatsoever in a kind of extraneous acquiescence in the mysteries of faith. Perhaps inspired by William of Auxerre, Aquinas adopts a more intrinsicist notion of assenting to God's truth.

The first question on faith in *Secunda Secundae* will assist us in unpacking this intrinsicist notion of assenting to faith. It deals with

²⁹ Therefore, with the exception of what he says about the preambles of faith (and perhaps the commentaries on Aristotle and some minor works such as *De Ente et Essentia*), everything Aquinas wrote – including the first three books of the *Summa contra Gentiles* – is theological (on his terms) although it is possible to extrapolate a philosophy (in our understanding of the term) from his writings.

the object of faith (*De fidei objecto*). In the first article Aquinas distinguishes between the material object of faith – what we believe, namely, God’s truth and other truths related to God, i.e., the contents of faith – and the formal objective of faith, namely “that by which the material object is known” (*id per quod cognoscitur, quod est formalis ratio objecti*). The formal objective is the overriding principle or concern of a discipline. In medicine, for instance, it is health (which finds expression in patient-care in multifarious ways). In geometry, it is demonstration. For our purposes it is essential to note that the formal objective of faith is also God:

In faith, the formal aspect of the object[ive] (. . .) is nothing else than the First Truth. (. . .) If, however, we consider materially the things to which faith assents, they include not only God, but also many other things, which, nevertheless, do not come under the assent of faith, except as bearing some relation to God.³⁰

The formal objective of faith is the medium for assenting to the material object: *credere Deo* – to give credence to God – is the basis for *credere Deum*, to believe in God (and things related to God) as the material object of faith.³¹ In plain English: it is through God that we come to know God. Commenting on Paul’s passage from 2 Cor. 3:18 (“We all behold the glory of the Lord and are transformed into the same image from glory to glory as by the spirit of the Lord”) Aquinas writes:

For since all knowledge involves the knower’s being assimilated to the thing known (*per assimilationem cognoscentis ad cognitum*), it is necessary that those who see be in some way transformed into God (*transformentur in Deum*). If they see perfectly, they are perfectly reformed, as the blessed in heaven by the union of enjoyment: when he appears we shall be like him (1 John 3:2); but if we see imperfectly, then we are transformed imperfectly, as here by faith: now we see in a mirror dimly (1 Cor. 13:12).³²

We attain truth in general through an assimilation or convergence of mind and world.³³ The world, shaped or in-formed as it is by forms, is inherently intelligible. In order to know, the mind abstracts these forms and absorbs them, so to speak: in knowing the intellectual act

³⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 1 (in this instance I borrow from the Blackfriars’ edition).

³¹ See III *Sent.* d. 23, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 2 and *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2. I am inclined to translate *credere in Deum* as “to have faith in God.” This refers to the act of faith, as distinct from the object of faith. In III *Sent.* d. 23 Aquinas explains *credere Deo* in terms of giving credence to God because God has spoken “the way a man believes the testimony of a good person who sees what he himself does not see” (*sicut homo in his quae non videt, credit testimonio alicujus boni viri qui videt ea quae ipse non videt*).

³² *Commentary on the Second Epistle to Corinthians*, 2 Cor. 3:12-18 (no. 114).

³³ This is how *adaequatio intellectus et rei* should be translated rather than in terms of “correspondence.”

of the mind meets the inherent intelligibility of the world. In a similar vein, faith prepares the mind for a convergence or assimilation to the divine truth that will come to fruition in the afterlife, as the reference to the blessed suggests.³⁴

In a number of places Aquinas draws an important analogy with teaching to indicate how assenting to faith involves an assimilation that will come to fruition in the beatific vision:

Our ultimate happiness consists in a supernatural vision of God: to which vision we cannot attain unless we be taught by God (...) Now we acquire a share in this learning, not indeed all at once, but by little by little, according to the mode of our nature: and everyone who learns thus must needs believe, in order that he may acquire science in a perfect degree; thus also the Philosopher remarks (*De Soph. Elench.* I. 2) that “it behoves a learner to believe.” Hence, in order that one may arrive at the perfect vision of heavenly happiness, one must first of all believe God (*credat Deo*), as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him.³⁵

Credere Deo hints at God as the formal objective of faith, discussed earlier. In order to learn anything whatsoever we first need to acknowledge the authority of the teacher; only then can we meaningfully engage with the teachings. In *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 152.4 Aquinas puts it as follows:

When a person is being taught by a teacher, he must at the start accept the teacher’s conceptions, not as one who understands them by himself, but by way of belief, as things which are beyond his capacity; but at the end, when he has become learned, he can understand them.

Similarly, the theologian submits in faith to mysteries she does not fully understand as yet but which she will come to understand in the afterlife. This involves a gradual process of assimilation or convergence with divine truth, and not an extraneous imposition, as the analogy with teaching suggests. Teaching, for Aquinas, is never the imposition of extraneous knowledge. Rather, learning only takes place when the teacher leads her pupil to knowledge of things he does not know in the same way that she directed herself through the process of learning something she did not know. By revisiting the process of learning that she herself pursued, the teacher can instil genuine

³⁴ The beatific vision involves a profound deiform transformation of the person, whereby the intellect is strengthened by the light of glory (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 2) which renders us deiform (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 5). Faith prepares us for, and inchoatively realises, this deiform assimilation that will come to fruition in heaven. As the light of glory transforms our intellect in the afterlife, the light of faith on earth inaugurates this transformation of the intellect here and now.

³⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 2. a. 3 ad 2.

learning in the student.³⁶ When applied to the issue at hand, it illustrates that assenting to faith, like the learning process, is not something extraneous but actually hints at a participation in the knowing of the teacher.

In light of this we come to appreciate fully Aquinas's claim in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1 that we need "another schooling in what God has revealed (*doctrinam quamdam secundum revelationem divinam*), in addition to the philosophical researches (*disciplinas*) pursued by human reasoning"³⁷ *Doctrina* is derived from *docere*, meaning "to teach" or "instruct." *Sacra Doctrina* is a participation in holy learning or teaching that assists us in becoming assimilated to its truths through a growth in likeness to, and an assent to the authority of, the teacher without whom no teaching can originate.

This suggests that to make sense of what Aquinas writes on *Sacra Doctrina* as a *scientia* we should not sever the theological, philosophical and spiritual perspectives his overall vision implies. We believe in God (*credere Deum*) because we are inclined to believe him with whom we have entered into an intimate and transformative relationship (*credere Deo*). Belief in God as the formal objective contributes to, rather than reduces, the rationality of contemplating the truths of *Sacra Doctrina*.

Concluding observations

While it is tempting to understand Aquinas's apparently neat distinction between *Sacra Doctrina* (based on revelation) and philosophy (based on a merely rational consideration of created things) as somehow foreshadowing a post-Kantian (and post-Barthian) separation of faith and reason, and philosophy and theology, the opposite is the case. The fact that Christian theology borrows its principles from another *scientia* – namely the divine *scientia* on the basis of revelation – is not a legitimisation for ring-fencing theology; nor is it an indictment of its scientific status, for *all* sciences (with the exception of those that rely on self-evident principles, such as logic) borrow their principles from other sciences. Furthermore, the fact that theology borrows its principles from divine science is the foundation for its architectonic or universalist claims.

The object of faith is God – both in the material sense and as formal objective. This means that believing in God requires an assimilation to, or participation in, divine truth, which occurs through faith. This assimilation on earth foreshadows the beatific vision, which the saints

³⁶ *De Ver.* q. 11, a. 1.

³⁷ In this instance I am using Thomas Gilby's translation from the Blackfriars Edition.

in heaven enjoy, perfecting in an exemplary manner our own rather inadequate cognition of God on earth.

The act of faith involves an assent to first principles at the prompting of the will moved by grace. This does not mean that Aquinas is guilty of fideism or voluntarism. Every philosophical science (apart from those that operate with principles *per se nota*, such as logic) borrows its principles from a higher discipline, and it cannot prove or demonstrate the veracity of its principles within the confines of its own field. We can only affirm or reject them. The fact that *Sacra Doctrina* borrows its principles from God's own *scientia* does not undermine its rational status. In every discipline we abide by first principles, and we cannot prove them within the parameters of the discipline itself. In order to abide by the first principles of *Sacra Doctrina* we need faith in God as formal objective. This implies that, if we want to do justice to Aquinas's account of *sacra doctrina* as a science we need to remain sensitive to the intimate connection between his spirituality, theology, and philosophical concerns.³⁸

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