As well as having a broad, rather loosely defined sense, which is more or less equivalent to religious belief, the notion of religious faith has also been assigned a range of more specific senses, especially in the context of Christian theological reflection. Let’s begin with this more restricted, Christian understanding of ‘faith’, before considering how that conception has been extended and challenged in the philosophy of religion literature in recent years. I am going to take as my starting point Thomas Aquinas’s account of the nature of faith. Thomas provides a useful reference point both because he summarises and systematises earlier Christian traditions and because his approach so often serves as the backdrop for later discussions of the nature of faith.

**Thomas Aquinas on the nature of faith**

In the first article of the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks about ‘the need’ for Christian theology, by putting to himself this question: ‘is another teaching required apart from philosophical studies?’ Thomas intends to include within the domain of ‘philosophical studies’ any rationally ordered enquiry which proceeds independently of appeal to scripture or ‘revelation’. So here he is asking about whether a purely secular kind of enquiry might be sufficient for an understanding of human life. This is his reply to his question, given in the opening lines of the *Responsio*:

> It should be urged that human well-being called for schooling in what God has revealed, in addition to the philosophical researches pursued by human reasoning. Above all because God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason; according to Isaiah, Eye hath not seen, O God, without thee what thou hast prepared for them that love thee. [Is 64. 4] Now we have to recognize an end before we can stretch out and exert ourselves for it. Hence the necessity for our welfare that divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation.

*Aquinas* (1265–74/1964–74: 1a. 1. 1)

From this text, set down at the very beginning of Aquinas’s treatise, we can see why the notion of ‘faith’ is going to be central to any broadly orthodox account of the nature of the Christian life. This life understands itself to be a response to a disclosure of God’s purposes for human beings – and
the nature of these purposes cannot be established on the basis of the ‘philosophical sciences’ alone. Indeed, human beings may never have come to entertain this conception of the divine purposes, let alone to affirm it, but for revelation (John Paul II 1998). So, the believer assents to these thoughts about God’s purposes not because they are provable by reason, but on the grounds that they have been revealed by God. And this is the assent of ‘faith’.

On this view, the assent of faith is both ‘cognitive’ (insofar as it involves beliefs) and action-orienting (since it serves a practical goal, and requires an associated mode of life here and now). Although Aquinas does not say so in this passage, he clearly believes that reason itself can show that these matters lie beyond its jurisdiction: it can show that, if there is an end of human life of the kind that is proposed in Christian teaching, we will depend for our understanding of that end upon a reason-transcendent source; these are matters which, in the nature of the case, lie beyond the reach of ‘philosophical studies’. (See his suggestion that faith needs to be ‘infused’ – a matter to which I shall return shortly.)

At the same time, Aquinas is quick to affirm that Christian theology does not exist in some hermetically sealed intellectual sphere. On the contrary, in terms of its general structure, theological enquiry is readily compared to other kinds of investigation. He broaches this issue in the terms of his time by asking, in the second article of the first question of the Summa Theologiae (ST), ‘is Christian theology a science?’ He answers:

Christian theology should be pronounced to be a science. Yet bear in mind that sciences are of two kinds: some work from premises recognized in the innate light of intelligence, for instance arithmetic, geometry, and sciences of the same sort; while others work from premises recognized in the light of a higher science, for instance optics starts out from principles marked out by geometry and harmony from principles indicated by arithmetic. In this second manner is Christian theology a science, for it flows from founts recognized in the light of a higher science, namely God’s very own which he shared with the blessed. Hence as harmony credits its principles which are taken from arithmetic, so Christian theology takes on faith its principles revealed by God.

Although Aquinas’s Latin text does not use the term ‘faith’ (as the translator does here, in the final sentence), it is clear that he is indeed affirming that a Christian accepts the first principles of theology on ‘faith’, insofar as they are foundational for her reasoning, rather than being the product of ratiocination. But reason retains a role on this account insofar as it has a proper part to play in guiding our exploration of the meaning and implications of these principles. It will also have a part to play insofar as the assent of faith depends for its reasonability on the capacity of the believer (or the faith community collectively) to turn aside objections to these first principles. This ‘faith seeking understanding’ conception of theological enquiry continues to command wide support: on this view, the role of the theologian is not to ground the fundamental claims of the faith, but to unfold their meaning, to meet objections to them, and to use them as a basis for understanding all other fundamental questions of life (Helm 2000).

Something like Aquinas’s point has been made in the work of ‘reformed epistemologists’ in recent years. On this account, there is no requirement to follow the ‘classical foundationalists’ in supposing that the only proper starting points of enquiry are those beliefs which are self-evidently true or ‘evident to the senses’. On the perspective developed by Alvin Plantinga and others, Christians (and perhaps other religious believers) are entitled to take as ‘properly basic’ not only beliefs of these kinds, but also beliefs which are grounded in religious experience (Plantinga 1981). In a similar vein, Aquinas is suggesting that beliefs grounded in scripture can count as properly basic. It is implied in this perspective that every enquiry needs to start from certain
belief, which are not themselves the product of argumentation. And in support of this view, it might be urged that only so can an enquiry have a rich enough initial conception of its own subject matter to proceed to an investigation of that subject matter. In structural terms, Aquinas thinks, Christian theology is no different in this respect — it is just that its starting point includes beliefs drawn from a variety of sacred texts.

One might suppose that, even if rationally permissible, faith’s assent will remain relatively uncertain, when compared with the assent which we give to, say, the apparent deliverances of the senses. But Aquinas holds that in the relevant sense, the assent of faith is in fact more certain than other kinds of intellectual assent. The certainty which obtains here is not, he acknowledges, subjective: for instance, it is not that we see the truth of the claims of faith so clearly that we have no choice but to affirm them. This is another kind of certainty. He comments: ‘[t]here is nothing to stop a thing that is objectively more certain by its nature from being subjectively less certain to us because of the disability of our minds, which, as Aristotle notes, blink at the most evident things like bats in the sunshine. Doubt about the articles of faith which falls to the lot of some is not because the reality is at all uncertain but because the human understanding is feeble’ (ST 1a. 1. 5 ad 1). On this account, the assent of at least some believers is subjectively uncertain: these believers do not take the truth of the articles of faith to be evident beyond all reasonable doubt. But the assent of faith can be objectively certain even so — and will be objectively certain (and supremely certain in this sense) providing that God has so made the world that the assent of faith cannot fall into error.

All of these matters are addressed in the very first question of the Summa Theologiae. And they issue in a conception of faith as cognitive, practical, reason-transcendent, and, in the relevant sense, certain. It is only much later in the Summa, in the Seconda Secondeae, that Aquinas turns explicitly to a treatment of the nature of ‘faith’. Here he remarks that ‘the act of faith is belief, an act of mind fixed on one alternative by reason of the will’s command’ (ST 2a2ae. 4. 1). We have seen that the assent of faith cannot be grounded in ‘philosophical studies’; and here we learn that this assent is in fact voluntary. Aquinas expands on this point when he goes on to say:

it is clear that faith’s act is pointed as to its end towards the will’s object, i.e. the good. This good, the end of faith’s act, is the divine good, the proper object of charity. This is why charity is called the form of faith, namely, because the act of faith is completed and shaped by charity.

(ST 2a2ae. 4. 3)

So the act of faith depends fundamentally not upon the weight of the evidence, but instead upon the will being drawn towards the divine good: it is the attractiveness of God, and the prospect of life with God, which moves the believer to assent to the claims of faith. Because faith is founded in this way upon ‘charity’, or the love of God, it is, Aquinas concludes, not only free but meritorious. By contrast, the devil’s faith is the product not of love, but of the weight of the evidence. As Aquinas puts the point, their faith ‘is, so to speak, forced from them by the evidence of signs. That they believe, then, is in no way to the credit of their wills’ (ST 2a2ae. 5. 5 ad 3; compare James 2:19). So the assent of authentic Christian faith is (objectively) ‘certain’, and for many believers it is also confident, and in these respects it is like ‘knowledge’; but at the same time, faith is also like ‘opinion’, insofar as it ‘is not completed by a clear vision’ but depends instead upon ‘the will’s command’ (ST 2a2ae. 2. 1). Hence faith represents a kind of intermediate state, between knowledge and opinion.

We might well wonder how the commitment of faith is to be distinguished from mere wish-fulfilment if it is the product of the ‘will’s command’. I take it that Aquinas would respond by
appealing, once again, to the particular kind of ‘certainty’ that is proper to faith: the will is
drawn to affirm the claims of faith because it finds the truth of those claims attractive; and if
God has established a firm connection in this sphere between what the will finds attractive and
what is in fact the case, then here, if not in general, the movement of the will will in fact serve
as a reliable index of the truth. So Aquinas gives a broadly ‘externalist’ account of the rationality
of faith – according to which faith is rational insofar as it derives from some belief-forming
process which is reliably targeted at the truth. But there remains, of course, a question about
whether the believer is entitled to suppose that her tendency to affirm various claims in fact
derives from some such process. This is a matter to which I shall return below.

This externalist account of the rationality of the assent of faith fits with what Aquinas says
about the causal context of this assent. Although it is voluntary, it would be a mistake to see the
assent of faith as simply the product of human choice:

As to the assent to matters of faith, we can look to two types of cause. One is a cause
that persuades from without, e.g. a miracle witness or a human appeal urging belief.
No such cause is enough, however; one man believes and another does not, when
both have seen the same miracle, heard the same preaching. Another kind of cause
must therefore be present, an inner cause, one that influences a person inwardly to
assent to the things of faith. The Pelagians thought this cause to be free will alone …
This is a false doctrine. The reason: since in assenting to the things of faith a person is
raised above his own nature, he has this assent from a supernatural source influencing
him … the assent of faith … has as its cause God, moving us inwardly through grace.

(ST 2a2ae. 6. 1)

In keeping with theological tradition, Aquinas thinks of faith not simply as an isolated act of
choice, but as a virtue, that is, as a deep-seated and enduring predisposition to assent to the articles
of faith (see 1 Cor. 13). And from this passage, it is clear that the virtue of faith is not the product
simply of human choice and an associated process of habituation. Following Aristotle, Aquinas
thinks that this sort of account will work well enough for the moral virtues (at least for the
‘acquired’ forms of the moral virtues) (ST 1a2ae. 63). But faith (and also the ‘infused’ moral
virtues) depend not simply upon action in accordance with our human nature, but on our being
lifted up ‘above our own nature’, through the operation of divinely infused grace.

Engaging with Aquinas

I have considered Thomas’s account of religious faith in some detail, not least because it provides
a useful conceptual template for reviewing the character of later accounts of the nature of faith:
following Aquinas’s scheme, we can ask what these accounts have to say about, for example, the
freedom of the assent of faith, or its certainty, or its relation to God’s agency, or its meritoriousness,
or its content (its ‘material object’, as Aquinas would say), or its relation to the exercise of
reason, or its status as ‘knowledge’ or ‘opinion’. Aquinas’s account is also of interest because it
continues to be normative for many Christians, especially for those who stand in the Catholic
tradition. Let’s consider now the relationship between Thomas’s approach and some later
accounts of the nature of Christian faith.

Famously, in the Reformation, there was a division of opinion on these questions, insofar as
Protestants maintained, while Catholics denied, that faith alone, independently of ‘works’
or good deeds, was sufficient for salvation. This difference may be in some respects more termi-
nological than substantive. As we have seen, for Thomas, faith has an ‘unformed’ as well as a
‘formed’ variety, where faith is ‘formed’ insofar as it derives not simply from ‘signs’, but from the love of God. And for Protestants just as much as Catholics, Thomistic unformed ‘faith’ can hardly be sufficient for salvation, since it is after all compatible with a hatred of God. So the claim that faith is sufficient for salvation must be restricted, if it is to have any plausibility, to the case of ‘formed’ faith. And in that sense of the term, both parties can agree that ‘faith’ is sufficient for salvation. Moreover, since it flows from the love of God, formed faith will issue in good works, when it is able to express itself in the realm of inter-human relations. But Catholics can allow that it is the disposition to perform such works, rather than their performance in fact, that is important for salvation, since the person of faith might after all be frustrated in their attempts to do good, through no fault of their own (Swinburne 2005: 146–47). Thomas’s insistence on the meritoriousness of the assent of faith means that his account cannot be simply identified with the position of Luther. But Catholics and Protestants can agree that faith in the relevant sense is sufficient for salvation, and they can unite against the ‘Pelagian’ view, insofar as both suppose that faith is not a human ‘achievement’, but depends upon the infusion of divine grace.

Many later Christian accounts of the nature of faith can be read as improvisations upon this broadly Thomistic conceptual framework. For instance, Søren Kierkegaard (2009: 168–69) maintains that faith cannot be grounded in the ‘approximation’ process, and the associated judgements of probability, that are characteristic of historical enquiry. Rather than being rooted in objective historical facts, to which we have only imperfect access, the unwavering character of the commitment of faith must instead be relative to the believer, Kierkegaard says, and their ‘passionate inwardness’ (Kierkegaard 1846/1992: 171). He puts this point by saying that, in matters of faith, ‘the objective uncertainty maintained through the appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth’. Although the tone of his account is very different from that of Aquinas, as when he speaks of the idea that ‘the eternal truth has come about in time’ as ‘the absurd’ (ibid. 177), Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Christian life shares with Aquinas’s the thought that the assent of faith cannot be the product of ratiocination, but must reflect a fundamental value commitment, and an associated movement of the will. Kierkegaard’s account invites a subjective rendering of the certainty of faith: faith’s certainty is rooted in the steadfastness of the commitment of faith which does not vary with fluctuations in the evidence in favour of religious belief (ibid. 169). By contrast, Thomas understands faith’s ‘certainty’ by reference to facts which are external to the believer’s will: such certainty rests ultimately on the trustworthiness of God. But even on this question, Thomas’s approach is not so different from Kierkegaard’s. After all, Thomas denies that faith is like ‘opinion’ which ‘decides for the one side [of a question] but with fear of the opposite’ (ST 2a2ae. 2. 1). Faith is free from such ‘fear’, Aquinas thinks, because it is grounded in the will’s confident movement. So, for Aquinas too, faith’s certainty can be understood, to this extent, in subjective terms.

Perhaps influenced by Kierkegaard, more recent writers have also regarded the steadfastness of the commitment of faith as one of its defining features. In his ‘Lectures on Religious Belief’, Wittgenstein remarks:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: ‘I believe in a Last Judgment’, and I said: ‘Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.’ You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said ‘There is a German aeroplane overhead’, and I said ‘Possibly I’m not so sure’, you’d say we were fairly near.

(1966: 53)

These remarks suggest that religious beliefs are different from empirical beliefs insofar as they do not admit of doubt or uncertainty. Hence a person who doubts whether there is a Last Judgement,
for example, places themselves firmly outside the realm of a certain kind of conventional religious
discourse. As with Kierkegaard and Aquinas, so here we might wonder about how this dis-
tinctively religious kind of certainty is to be understood. Like Aquinas, Wittgenstein supposes that
religious conviction is in some way grounded in fundamental value judgements, rather than being
the product of an inference. He develops the point in these terms:

Suppose someone is ill and he says: ‘This is punishment’, and I say: ‘If I’m ill, I don’t
think of punishment at all.’ If you say: ‘Do you believe the opposite?’—you can call it
believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call
believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to
myself. I have different pictures.

(1966: 55)

These comments could be taken to imply that religious faith consists fundamentally in having
certain attitudes towards the world, rather than its having any descriptive content of its own. And
we might suppose that we can understand the certainty of faith accordingly: if it makes no factual
claim, and if it is independent of any inference, then faith cannot be vulnerable to refutation; and
in this sense, the commitment of faith will be certain.

Aquinas would of course agree that the assent of faith, when faith is ‘formed’, has its roots in
a fundamental value commitment, rather than in the weight of evidence which can be mustered
in support of an empirical hypothesis. And he would agree that such faith consists in part in a
particular evaluation of worldly states of affairs, since it consists in part in a commitment to lead
a certain sort of life here and now. But at the same time, Thomas would surely be readier to
suppose than Wittgenstein seems to be here that religious belief does involve claims about the
realm of ‘fact’, and not simply a commitment to a certain evaluation of the facts, or to adopting
a particular practical-cum-spiritual demeanour in the face of the facts. And it is plausible to
suppose that this is, once again, because he supposes that ‘certainty’ as it applies to religious faith
is not simply a function of the human subject and the nature of their commitments. Religious
faith is ‘certain’ not fundamentally because it lacks any empirical or factual content so that it is
detached from all possibility of refutation; rather, its incapacity to fall into error is a consequence
of the fact that it is grounded in the knowledge of God, which is communicated to the believer
via a divinely-instituted, and error-proof, belief-forming process.

It seems likely that Wittgenstein was familiar with Thomas’s account of faith, even if not at
first hand. Indeed his discussion sometimes echoes Aquinas’s in his choice of expression, as
when he writes: ‘one would be reluctant to say: “These people [religious people] rigorously hold
the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement”. “Opinion” sounds queer’ (Wittgenstein
1966: 56–57). For Aquinas too, as we have seen, religious faith is not a matter of ‘opinion’.
Wittgenstein follows Aquinas again when he distinguishes faith from ‘science’ or knowledge. Of
course, by ‘science’, Wittgenstein means not Aristotelian science, as Thomas did, but science as
an empirical, hypothesis-driven form of enquiry. Take for instance these remarks:

Father O’Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science. Here we
have people who treat this evidence in a different way. They base things on evidence
which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy. They base enormous things
on this evidence. Am I to say they are unreasonable? I wouldn’t call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not reasonable, that’s obvious. … What seems to
me ludicrous about O’Hara is his making it to appear to be reasonable.

(1966: 57–58)
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So Wittgenstein and Aquinas agree that religious faith is ‘not reasonable’. But both would
 distinguish this thought from the thought that it is ‘unreasonable’: for both of them, faith does not
 rest fundamentally upon an inference, and *a fortiori* it is not the product of a shaky inference or
 ‘blunder’. Aquinas and Wittgenstein put this sort of point by saying that while faith is not
 vulnerable to refutation as opinion is, neither is it properly counted as ‘knowledge’. And in these
 matters, Wittgenstein follows Aquinas’s usage, as well as the substance of his position. (Since we
 are dealing here with the transcripts of his lectures on religious belief, delivered in Cambridge, I
 take it that the terms ‘opinion’ and ‘science’ are the very terms that Wittgenstein used, corre-
 sponding to Aquinas’s ‘opinio’ and ‘scientia’, when he remarks that faith occupies a kind of
 middle ground, between opinion and science.)

Wittgenstein’s influence has continued to be felt in recent discussion. Here for example is
 D.Z. Phillips’s route into these same questions:

If there is an analogy between the existence of God and the existence of unicorns,
 then coming to see that there is a God would be like coming to see that an additional
 being exists. ‘I know what people are doing when they worship,’ a philosopher might
 say. ‘They praise, they confess, they thank, and they ask for things. The only differ-
 ence between myself and religious believers is that I do not believe that there is a
 being who receives their worship.’ The assumption, here, is that the meaning of
 worship is contingently related to the question whether there is a God or not. The
 assumption might be justified by saying that there need be no consequences of exis-
 tential beliefs. Just as one can say, ‘There is a planet Mars, but I couldn’t care less’, so
 one can say, ‘There is a God, but I couldn’t care less’. … But all this is foreign to the
 question whether there is a God. That is not something anyone could find out. It has
 been far too readily assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever
 is over a matter of fact.

(Phillips 1970: 16–17)

So for Phillips, ‘coming to see that there is a God’ is to be distinguished from coming to see that
 there are unicorns, insofar as the first, but not the second, of its nature involves ‘caring’.
 Moreover, the case of unicorns is different from the case of God since it concerns individual
 beings, and facts which one might in principle ‘find out’. (Compare Winch 1977.) Again, this
 stance tracks certain claims in Aquinas. On Thomas’s view, too, the assent of (formed) faith is
 essentially ‘caring’, since it is grounded in the will’s attraction to God. And for Thomas, too, faith
 is not fundamentally the product of any inference from the empirical data, and does not concern
 some empirical fact, which one might ‘find out’. Phillips’s suggestion that God is not ‘an addi-
 tional being’ can also be cast very readily in Thomistic terms if we recall Thomas’s teaching that
 God is not so much an individual existent, as existence itself, or *ipsam esse subsistens* (ST 1a. 4. 2).

However, while for Thomas the assent of faith is not fundamentally an assent to a hypothesis
 of some sort, since it is not the product of an inference, the certainty which obtains here is not
 simply relative to the believer and the nature of her commitment. It is not that the believer’s
 faith is certain because it does not admit of the possibility of refutation, since it has no empirical
 or factual content. For Aquinas, as we have seen, the certainty of faith is, rather, relative to God:
 the claims of faith are certainly true because grounded in the truthfulness of God.

On this ‘externalist’ reading of his thought, Aquinas’s account is reminiscent of another
 central current of recent discussion in the philosophy of religion – not now the Wittgensteinian
 current, but the approach of ‘reformed epistemology’ as it has been developed in Plantinga’s
 more recent work. Here is Plantinga’s summary of John Calvin’s account of religious faith:

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Like the regeneration of which it is a part, faith is a gift; it is given to anyone who is willing to accept it. Faith, says Calvin, is ‘a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (Institutes III, ii, 7). Faith therefore involves an explicitly cognitive element; it is, says Calvin, knowledge – knowledge of the availability of redemption and salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ – and it is revealed to our minds. … But … faith also involves the will: it is ‘sealed upon our hearts’. By virtue of this sealing, the believer not only knows about the scheme of salvation God has prepared … but is also heartily grateful to the Lord for it. … Sealing, furthermore, also involves the executive function of the will: believers accept the proffered gift and commit themselves to the Lord, to conforming their lives to his will. …

(Plantinga 2000: 244)

Here, as in Aquinas’s work, faith is said to depend upon the divine initiative, since it is a ‘gift’. But there is, it seems, this difference: Calvin considers faith to be a kind of ‘knowledge’, while for Aquinas, as we have seen, faith shares the certainty that is characteristic of knowledge, but at the same time resembles opinion, insofar as it ‘does not attain the perfection of clear sight’ that is characteristic of knowledge (ST 2a2ae 1). This difference is, I suggest, more terminological than substantive. Following Aristotle, Aquinas takes knowledge of a thing to be dependent upon the mind’s capacity to achieve ‘clear sight’ of the thing. And for Plantinga just as much as for Thomas, faith does not amount to knowledge in that sense. By contrast, for Plantinga, a belief will count as knowledge providing that it has sufficient ‘warrant’. And on this definition, and assuming that Calvin’s theological anthropology holds true, then the beliefs to which the Christian assents in faith will count as knowledge:

these beliefs will … have warrant for believers: they will be produced in them by a belief-producing process that is functioning properly in an appropriate cognitive environment (the one for which they were designed), according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs.

(ibid. 246)

On this understanding of the conditions for ‘knowledge’, Aquinas would agree that faith counts as knowledge; for on his view, as on Plantinga’s, the assent of faith is the product of a belief-forming process which is, in the sense spelt out here, reliably aimed at truth. As we have seen, it is for this reason that Aquinas can affirm that faith is, objectively, ‘certain’. Plantinga and Aquinas also agree that where it concerns specifically Christian doctrinal claims, regarding for example the redemptive work of Christ, this divinely guaranteed belief-forming process requires more than the unaided unfolding of the natural cognitive endowments of human beings. (To put the point in Calvin’s terms, the assent which the believer gives to these claims cannot be understood simply in terms of the operation of the sensus divinitatis (ibid. 246, n. 10).) Moreover, for Plantinga (and Calvin), as for Aquinas, the assent of (formed) faith involves not only belief, but also a commitment of the believer evaluatively and practically, since this assent is ‘sealed upon her heart’ and engages ‘the executive function of the will’.

I commented above that, on Aquinas’s account, the assent of faith may seem to amount to a kind of wish-fulfilment. And I noted how his externalism about religious belief gives him one line of response to that objection. However, that response raises a further question: why should we grant that the movement of the will, in the assent of faith, does in fact track the nature of
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things? In support of Aquinas on this point, we might recall his stance on the ontological argument. Thomas holds that this argument cannot function as a proof ‘for us’ (for human beings), since we do not have the requisite insight into the divine essence. But he also thinks that the cosmological argument gives us good reason to conclude that ‘the proposition “God exists” is self-evident in itself’, even if not ‘for us’ (ST 1a. 2. 1, in Davies and Leftow 2006). So on Aquinas’s view, we can see that the ontological argument would be sound for a sufficiently powerful intellect; and accordingly, we can grasp that the supreme good necessarily exists, just because it is supremely good, or just by virtue of being ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’. And if all of this is so, then we are right to suppose that when the will is drawn to affirm the reality of the supreme good, simply on account of its supreme attractiveness or supreme goodness, then the will’s movements do in fact adhere to the fundamental structure of reality.1 So here is one Thomistic kind of reason for thinking that the believer is entitled to trust the movement of the will, when it is drawn to affirm the articles of faith out of love of God.

An alternative and widely canvassed strategy would be to argue that there is a ‘natural theological’ case (a case independent of ‘revelation’) for supposing that there is a God, and for supposing that God would choose to be revealed to human beings, and to be revealed by way of certain confirmatory signs in particular (see King, R. 2008). If all of that is so, then perhaps the claim of a given tradition to be founded upon a divinely authorised ‘revelation’ can be established relatively straightforwardly, when the form and content of that ‘revelation’ conform to these rational expectations? (See Swinburne 2007.)

Given Aquinas’s position, it would be a mistake for believers to seek a comprehensive rebuttal of the wish-fulfilment charge. After all, if the believer were to have compelling evidence that God is active to produce the relevant beliefs in her, then her assent to the propositions of faith would cease to be free and meritorious. It is also clear that for Aquinas, revelation does not need to be buttressed by appeal to natural theological argument. Take for example this remark: ‘That science capable of proving God’s existence and other such matters about him is the last to be studied, many other sciences being presupposed to it. Consequently, without faith a person would come to a knowledge about God only late in life’ (ST 2a2ae. 2. 4). Here Thomas seems to propose that it is not only truths about God’s purposes that can be revealed, but also the very existence of God (compare Marshall 2005).

Another response to the question of whether the believer is entitled to assent to the propositions of faith might concentrate not so much on the volume of evidence she can assemble (by appeal to natural theological considerations, for example), but on the modest nature of the believer’s creedal claims – which may suggest that these claims do not require very much evidential support. For example, it may be said that in affirming the articles of the Nicene creed, the Christian need not be maintaining that the conjunction of those articles is more probable than not. That would be, after all, a pretty ambitious claim, given that any one of these articles, as formulated in the precise language of the creed, might turn out to be false. And for this reason among others, we may doubt whether, historically, Christians have typically taken themselves to be claiming that much when they have affirmed the creed. More plausibly, we might suppose that in assenting to, say, the Nicene creed, Christians have intended to affirm that the Christian world-view, considered in the round, is more likely than any one of its rivals. And saying that is quite compatible with supposing that the Christian world-view, as articulated in the creed, has overall a probability of less than 0.5; indeed, it is compatible with supposing that some creedal items have a probability of less than 0.5. It may be that there has been a shift in attitudes on these questions, and that the rise of agnosticism in recent centuries reflects, in part, a change in view about what a person is committed to when they affirm the claims of the Christian or some other creed (Swinburne 2005: 151–57). Perhaps we moderns are
more inclined to suppose that to affirm a creed is to maintain that the world-view which it expounds is overall more probable than not – and not simply more probable than any competing world-view?

If we do suppose that the believer is committed only to the claim that the articles of faith are more probable than those propounded by any one rival world-view, and not more probable than not, then we might conclude that the believer does not require all that much evidence if her assent to the articles of faith is to be epistemically responsible. (Certainly, she will not need as much evidence as would be required were she to maintain that her world-view is overall more probable than not.) And on this basis, the believer might argue that the assent of faith is capable of meeting the fairly limited epistemic requirements that are appropriate to it.

If we suppose that the assent of faith requires, from an epistemic point of view, only the judgement that the relevant world-view is more probable than any one of its alternatives, then we might conclude that in fact many of us find ourselves in this position with respect to some world-view or other: many of us are apt to suppose that the Christian world-view, or the naturalist world-view (specified at an appropriate level of detail), or some other world-view, is more probable than any one of its alternatives. But this is not yet to say that most of us are people of ‘faith’. If we follow Aquinas, then we will say that to give an assent of ‘faith’ to a given world-view, we must also align ourselves in evaluative terms with the world-view (at least to the extent of supposing that its truth would be overall good), and at the same time we must commit ourselves practically to that view, by undertaking to lead the sort of life that would be fitting if it were true. (Compare Alston 2007.)

This account may throw some light on Aquinas’s claim that the assent of faith involves ‘belief’, while remaining voluntary. We might well wonder: how can beliefs be produced at will? (Evidently, I cannot simply choose to believe that the book in front of me now has a red rather than a blue cover.) In response we might say: the assent of faith is voluntary insofar as its evaluative and, especially, its practical components are subject to the will. This is not evidently Thomas’s own view, but it is one way of drawing out what he says on these matters so that it will fit with one modern and widely held view of the nature of belief. On this account, we can allow that beliefs are not directly answerable to the will, but still suppose that the assent of faith can be ‘commanded’, insofar as the evaluative and practical commitments of the act of faith are subject to the will.

While we may not be able to choose our beliefs at will, there is, in general, no difficulty in the idea that we might choose to investigate the truth of a given belief. Suppose that a person who is at first unable to believe the articles of the Christian faith chooses to investigate the truth of those beliefs; and suppose that she comes to believe them when her enquiries produce evidence in their support. If this person embarked on her investigation in the hope of uncovering evidence in support of the Christian faith, then we might say that her newly acquired Christian belief is in a sense voluntary, insofar as it derives from a freely initiated enquiry, and insofar as her wanting to believe partly explains the fact that she undertook that enquiry. If that is so, then we can speak of the assent of faith as voluntary not only because it has a practical and evaluative component, but also insofar as beliefs are, in these respects, indirectly subject to the will.

I have been considering some of the ways in which Aquinas’s account of faith (or in general, the traditional Christian account of faith) may be subject to various kinds of modulation and extension. Relative to what Aquinas says, we can vary our understanding by affirming a rather different, and more subjective, account of the nature of faith’s certainty, or by re-assessing the question of whether faith is sufficient for salvation, or constitutes knowledge, or is concerned with ‘facts’, or is voluntary, or is susceptible to the objection from ‘wish-fulfilment’. Some of these later accounts, I have suggested, differ from Aquinas only terminologically, rather than

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substantively, while others appear to emphasise or elaborate upon some strands of his account, while bracketing out, or in some cases actively denying, others.

**Beyond Aquinas**

I want to conclude by looking at some recent accounts of the nature of faith which, while they share something of the structure of Aquinas’s account, seem to move beyond the Thomistic scheme, above all insofar as they are no longer tied to the thought that faith consists fundamentally in an assent to the propositions of faith as these are laid down in the Christian scriptures and associated creeds. Here we are concerned with accounts which have a rather different understanding of what Aquinas would have called the ‘material object’ of the assent of faith.

Given the rise of historical criticism in biblical studies, many modern commentators have doubted whether the Christian scriptures are capable of providing even modest evidential support for fundamental Christian creedal claims, concerning for example the resurrection, or the idea of incarnation (Hick 1989/2004). Some philosophers of religion have sought to intervene in this debate, arguing that the sceptical tendencies of some modern biblical scholarship reflect not so much sound historical judgement, but either: a failure to reckon with the question of whether the books of the Bible might be taken, quite reasonably, to have been authorized as a ‘work’, or collection of works, by God, so that their sense is to be read accordingly (Wolterstorff 1995 and 2009a); or else a tendency to adopt unreflectively an atheistic metaphysic and an associated epistemology (Plantinga 2009; Swinburne 2009); or an unexamined commitment to philosophically substantive and contestable assumptions about the nature of human story-telling (Stump 2009).

But bracketing these issues, we might wonder whether the notion of ‘faith’, understood in a broadly Thomistic sense, might still have some application if we set aside the claim of the Christian scriptures, and associated creeds, to provide a proper account of the material object of faith. Famously, Immanuel Kant maintained that he was denying knowledge in order to make room for ‘faith’ (1787, preface). ‘Faith’ in this context turns out to involve the postulation of God’s existence as a condition of taking seriously the realm of moral obligation (1788). Some modern commentators have followed Kant in this endeavour of seeing the claim that there is a God as not so much provable by natural theology, as presupposed in our practical commitments, and especially in our moral relations to other human beings. Some have argued, for example, that it is only if there is a God that we can make sense of the apparently categorical character of moral obligations (Mavrodes 1986/2008; Graham 2009), while others have thought that Christian discourse, and especially the idea that God’s love is an unconditional, parental love, has had an important part to play in enabling the example of saintly love, upon which we depend for our appreciation of our ‘common humanity’ (Gaita 2000). In a similar vein, John Cottingham has argued that particular ideals of character, such as those of humility, wonder, gratitude, and hope, only really make sense given the right ‘background of significance’, and that Christian theism, or more generally monotheism of the relevant kind, is therefore presupposed if these traits are to count as virtues (Cottingham 2009a; contrast Wielenberg 2005, Russell 1903/2002, Cooper 2002).

In all of these ways, religious faith (or at least, if we follow Gaita, the thought-world of religion) can be seen as presupposed in our moral commitments. These accounts, like Aquinas’s, root faith in an evaluative commitment (and especially in a moral commitment); and accordingly, they see religious conviction as closely allied to a certain ideal of life. They differ from Aquinas above all insofar as they do not start from the Christian revelation’s account of the ultimate end of human life, working from there to a conception of what sort of life is fitting for
human beings here and now. Rather, they tend to proceed in the other direction, from a conception of the good human life here and now, to a conception of what metaphysical conditions must obtain if that ideal of life is to be genuinely an ideal, or to be motivationally plausible, or to be in some other way fully coherent. (Compare Pierre Hadot’s claim that ‘philosophical discourse’ in ancient philosophy was in the service of a certain way of life (Hadot 1995).) At the same time, this contrast should not be too sharply drawn, for on Aquinas’s own account, our assent to the Christian vision of the end of human life, in the beatific vision, is rooted in a movement of the will, and accordingly this assent does not simply ground a view of how we ought to live, but is itself dependent upon a conception of the nature of a worthwhile human life.

These attempts to ground religious faith in moral terms often proceed from the thought that religious belief and unbelief are alike unprovable (compare R.M. Hare’s representation of religious belief as a kind of ‘blick’: Flew, Hare and Mitchell 1955). If that is so, and if there are significant practical (including moral) benefits to following a religious way of life, then perhaps we have pragmatic, rather than epistemically, grounds for faith? William James’s ‘Will to Believe’ (1896) remains the classic formulation of a case of this kind, and similar views have been defended in the modern literature (Bishop 2007). For some, Jamesian religious faith is more a matter of acting ‘as if’ religious beliefs were true, rather than a case of genuine faith, since he seems to be committed to the epistemic parity of religious and non-religious construals of the world. But if the assent of faith on the traditional account need not involve the claim that the Christian world-view is overall more probable than not, then it might be argued that Jamesian faith is not after all so different from traditional faith, insofar as both fall short of affirming that the relevant world-view is overall probable.

John Hick’s pluralistic account of religious faith also proceeds from the claim that the differences between the religions cannot be settled by argument, or by appeal to some sacred text. He argues that religious faith is to be understood as a kind of ‘seeing-as’, and that all of the major faith traditions have an equal claim to provide a religiously authentic vehicle for experiencing the one fundamental reality, which Hick designates in tradition-neutral terms as ‘the Real’. This one reality is differently experienced in different traditions, insofar as it is manifest as, or ‘seen as’, a Trinity in the context of orthodox Christianity, or as a non-dual ultimate in certain forms of Hinduism, and so on. (See, for example, Hick 1989/2004.) One evident difficulty for this approach is that its avowed realism about the ultimate object of religious experience sits rather uncomfortably with its insistence that the content of religious experience derives entirely from the side of culture, rather than from the nature of ‘the Real’ (Byrne 2000).

Future discussion of the practical significance and rational point of religious faith could constructively bring together a number of the themes that we have been discussing. Following Aquinas, we may be interested to know what it is about the religious conception of life that is attractive, and that can elicit a corresponding movement of the will. And following recent ‘moral’ defences of religious faith, we may be interested to know what it is about the religious way of life here and now (and not simply what it is about the prospect of the beatific vision) that properly engages the will. And following Hick, we might suppose that specifying the attractiveness of the religious way of life will depend upon noticing the particular forms of ‘experiencing as’ which are enabled by religious concepts and practices. But contrary to Hick, and more like the Wittgensteinians in this respect, we may be more interested in the question of how the everyday material world (rather than ‘the Real’) may be differently experienced, and differently engaged in practical terms, when we commit ourselves to using distinctively religious concepts. (For an investigation of this kind, see Wynn 2009 and 2013.) In these ways, the Thomistic account of faith continues to pose some vital questions for our own time: what is the
practical import of the Christian, and other, metaphysical schemes? And in what ways are various religious ideals of life attractive, or unattractive, plausible or implausible, as renderings of human possibilities? In addressing these questions, we may hope to come to a clearer appreciation of the meaning and the rational sense, if any, of religious faith.

Note

1 I am grateful to Edward Skidelsky for drawing my attention to the relevance of the Ontological Argument here.