Christian Epistemology.
How Faith can shape and promote Rationality

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Abstract

Can epistemology be shaped by the Christian faith? Is there anything specific to this faith that can give rise to an equally specific epistemology without compromising the autonomy that the latter requires from faith? In the footsteps of Aquinas's religious epistemology, I first focus on the fact that Christian faith seems to characterize intellectual activity in a way that appears to be irreconcilable with epistemological perspectives that are not shaped by faith. Secondly, I argue that it is possible to do justice to the irreconcilability in question by making reference to what radically distinguishes the Christian faith from the epistemological reflection. Finally, I focus on two ways in which the specific nature of Christian faith can shape and promote rationality, and give rise to a Christian epistemology.

Keywords: Faith, charity, autonomy of reason from faith, promotion of rationality, Aquinas, intellectual virtues.

1 Why deal with Christian epistemology?

Can epistemology be shaped by the Christian faith? Is there anything specific to this faith that can give rise to an equally specific epistemology without compromising the autonomy that the latter requires from faith? Almost forty years ago, in his well-known article titled *Advice to Christian philosophers*,[1] Alvin Plantinga suggested that Christians who propose to be

[1] Alvin Plantinga, 'Advice to Christian Philosophers,' *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), pp. 253-271. A recent and convincing defense of his Christian religious epistemology is offered in Tyler D. McNabb, *Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

philosophers should not limit themselves to being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians. In contrast, they should develop a *Christian philosophy*. Decades before Plantinga, a number of scholars had already focused on the concept of 'Christian philosophy' during the so-called French *querelle*.[2] However, that debate, as Xavier Tilliette pointed out, seemed to be devoted only to understanding what philosophy, from within itself, could accept from faith.[3] The debate in question only focused on faith from a merely rational viewpoint, and faith was seen as mere propositional belief, belief-that, whose truth can be established on the basis of merely epistemic factors. This means that it was from the point of view of the *commonalities* between faith and reason that the French *querelle* was developed. Consequently, philosophers had a hard time trying to justify how exactly philosophical reflections conducted by Christian believers could be shaped by the Christian faith. If nothing specific to faith is taken into account and faith is seen as a mere intellectual assent given to divine revelation, then no difference can be detected between Christian philosophy and the way philosophy is usually conducted. This means that there is only one way of philosophizing, no matter whether religious beliefs are involved. It is true that thinkers like Jacques Maritain proposed significant and insightful distinctions aimed at showing that there may be a sense in which a Christian philosophy can be developed.[4] Nevertheless, as I will show later in this essay, these distinctions do not show how exactly the specificity of faith – that which distinguishes faith from reason – shapes philosophy and promotes rationality in a way that is equally specific to Christian believers. Unsurprisingly, in a 2019 book devoted to

[2] See Gregory B. Sadler (ed.), *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation. The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). The *querelle* in question was devoted to discussing Étienne Gilson's proposal that a Christian philosophy had been emerged throughout history, especially in Middle Ages. For more on this, see Étienne Gilson, *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure* (Paris: Vrin, 1924). For more on Gilson's further development of his proposal, see his book, posthumously translated into English by Armand Maurer, *Christian Philosophy: An Introduction*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993).

[3] See Xavier Tilliette, *Le Christ de la Philosophie* (Paris: Cerf 1990), p. 21.

[4] See below, notes 42ff.

the concept of Christian philosophy,[5] it is said that 'exactly how' philosophy 'is distinct from Christian theology is often difficult to tell',[6] and John Schellenberg argues that the Christian philosophy is not really a philosophy.[7]

However, a venerable theological tradition, not to mention the teachings of the Christian Churches and the experience of many believers, tells us that the Christian faith can shape every aspect of the faithful's life. This emerges from Jesus' words: 'Apart from me you can do nothing'[8] as well as from Augustine's famous dictum: 'Love and do what you will…for from that root nothing but good can spring'.[9] In everything they do, believers should be inspired by their love for God and communion with him, love and communion which are expected to play a crucial role in every activity the faithful take. In this connection, Blaise Pascal claims that 'without Jesus Christ we do not know what our life, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves really are … In the same way without the Scriptures, which have Jesus Christ as their sole object, we know nothing'.[10] As a consequence, communion with God and the theological virtue of charity – love for God and the neighbour which God himself grants to believers – should play a role in everything believers do, including intellectual activity.

It appears to be plausible, therefore, to take seriously Plantinga's *Advice* and his suggestion that one should focus on what is *specific* to faith, that is, what *distinguishes* it from any rational activity, and see what the specific nature of faith requires in order to relate to philosophy and more specifically to epistemology. My view is that Plantinga's suggestions

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[5] See Aaron Simmons (ed.), *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[6] Aaron Simmons, Introduction to *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*, p. 12.

[7] John Schellenberg, 'Is Plantinga-style Christian Philosophy really philosophy?', in Aaron Simmons (ed.), *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*, pp. 229-243.

[8] John 15:5 (NRSV).

[9] Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 7.8, in *Augustine of Hyppo. Selected Writings*, tr. by Mary T. Clark (Mahvah, NJ: Paulist Press 1984).

[10] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. by H. Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), § 36.

coincide with something that has been more systematically shown and developed by numerous classical Christian thinkers of the past. Among them, especially Thomas Aquinas seems to have offered important considerations that show how exactly the rational enterprise can be substantially shaped and improved by the Christian faith without being deprived of its autonomy from external authorities.

I intend to develop my thesis in three steps, which correspond to Sections 2-4 of this essay. In the footsteps of Aquinas's religious epistemology, I will first focus on the fact that the Christian faith seems to characterize intellectual activity in a way that appears to be irreconcilable with epistemological perspectives that do not consider the specificity of faith mentioned above. Secondly, I will argue that it is possible to do justice to the irreconcilability in question by making reference to what radically distinguishes the Christian faith from epistemological reflection as it is usually taken, that is, without reference to that which is specific to faith. Finally, I will focus on two ways in which the specific nature of Christian faith can promote rationality and give rise to a Christian epistemology. This will also lead me to provide a view of Christian philosophy and its distinction from Christian theology.

2 Christian and non-Christian epistemological perspectives before the 'more evidence principle' (MEP)

In this section, I intend to show in what circumstances Christians as such are required to conduct intellectual investigations in a way that appears to be irreconcilable with epistemological perspectives that do not include reference to the specificity of Christian faith. (I am not simply referring to perspectives adopted by non-Christians. A Christian believer, too, in fact, may accept these perspectives, although they are not shaped by Christian faith.)

It is widely held that one should always prefer propositions supported by more evidence to propositions supported by less evidence. Call it the 'more evidence principle' (MEP), which

affirmed itself especially in Modernity as a consequence within empirical science of Comtean Positivism. MEP may at first sight appear to coincide with evidentialism, which Conee and Feldman say 'is the view that epistemic justification is a product of evidence'.[11] As a matter of fact, MEP and evidentialism share the emphasis placed on the importance of evidence. However, MEP is also accepted by those who adopt epistemological views other than evidentialism such as reliabilism, contextualism, virtue epistemology, and the like. The same cannot be said of a Christian believer to the extent that, at least in some cases, she may be required to adopt a strategy opposite to MEP, a strategy which consists in preferring propositions supported by less evidence to propositions supported by more evidence. There are cases, in fact, in which the believer should tenaciously stick to her religious beliefs, no matter whether there is more evidence in support of their negation. Clearly enough, this is simply irreconcilable with MEP. (Note that this by no means imply that I am advocating an anti-rational approach aimed at supporting the faith perspective. On the contrary, as I intend to show in this essay, the tenacity mentioned above and the related confidence that objections to one's faith will be answered is not necessarily unreasonable.)

Let me take into consideration a famous passage of Aquinas's *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, in which Aquinas focuses on what believers should do if a contradiction emerges between religious beliefs and rational arguments. According to him,

> if … anything is found in the teachings of the philosophers contrary to faith, this error does not properly belong to philosophy, but is due to an abuse of philosophy owing to the insufficiency of reason. Therefore also it is possible from the

[11] E. Conee – R. Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), p. 83.

> principles of philosophy to refute an error of this kind, either by showing it to be altogether impossible, or not to be necessary.[12]

Aquinas openly argues that only reason can be mistaken, and not faith. Faced with a contradiction between rational arguments and religious beliefs, believers should remain convinced that their religious convictions cannot be false. (A *caveat* needs registering. The believer sometimes mistakes her own conjectures for the Christian faith, as Aquinas says in a passage which is often neglected by his scholars.[13] To put it otherwise, not everything the faithful *as faithful* believe is to be considered *truth of faith*, which Aquinas teaches is revealed by God and is believed mainly because of his grace.[14] There are beliefs that the faithful should be ready to revise or even abandon if more evidence emerged in support of their negation. From this follows that the passage here under consideration should regard only those propositions, presumably a few, which believers are expected to consider revealed by God and then undeniably true. 'God exists' or 'Jesus is the Lord' may be numbered among them, as shown by the fact that a believer would no longer be a believer if she abandoned such beliefs. Even if more evidence seemed to support their negation, the believer should continue holding them.) At the same time, Aquinas shows firm trust in human reason. In the passage here at stake, he says that 'it is possible from the principles of philosophy (*ex*

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[12] Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3, tr. by Rose E. Brennan (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1946). Note that, in the passage here under consideration, 'insufficiency of reason' does not seem to translate 'ex defectu rationis' satisfactorily. Aquinas does not believe that reason in itself is defective (at the very beginning of *Summa theologiae*, he says that 'the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated', I, q. 1, a. 8) but that reason is mistaken when one does not use it well. My references to *Summa theologiae* (hereafter abbreviated as ST) are from the English translation provided by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition (London: Oates and Washbourne, 1920).

[13] 'It is possible for a believer to have a false opinion through a *human conjecture* (*ex coniectura humana*), but it is quite impossible for a false opinion to be *the outcome of faith*' (ST, II-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3, my emphasis). After all, articles of faith stand apart from the reasoning ability of the human.

[14] See Aquinas's reflection on the causes of faith, which is contained in ST, II-II, q. 6, a. 1 (see below, note 28). Also, see his definition of faith contained in ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 9 (see below, note 21).

principiis philosophiae) to refute an error of this kind'. Mistakes can only occur when reason has been mistakenly employed. This means that if one avoids abusing reason, then no errors can be made. This preemptively rejects the objection according to which Aquinas seems to fall into contradiction because, on the one hand, he solidly claims that, unlike faith, reason can be mistaken and, on the other, he firmly believes that human reason is reliable. In reality, these two claims are both advanced by way of faith and are consistent with each other. In fact, it is because of his commitment to God that Aquinas, on the one hand, shows respect toward everything God has created, including our cognitive faculties, and, on the other, claims that created things, if not employed in accordance with the nature that the creator has given to them, i.e., their good, will never function properly.

A substantial objection may be raised to my view that the way Christians are in some cases expected to deal with the available evidence is irreconcilable with MEP. In the passage here at stake, Aquinas says that believers should try to find more evidence in support of their religious convictions, and trying to find more evidence – so the objection goes – is obviously in line with MEP. Furthermore, everybody may not abandon one's convictions once faced with contrary evidence since this is an appropriate epistemological strategy, which is aimed at testing the validity of those convictions. As Basil Mitchell argued while focusing on the relationship between neutrality and commitment, a scholar should not be vulnerable to the temptation 'of abandoning … his personal commitment prematurely when the philosophical going gets difficult'.[15] A sort of 'principle of tenacity' should be adopted:

> Scientists operate what has been called a 'principle of tenacity', in virtue of which they do not let go of their fundamental beliefs when things get difficult, but rather

[15] Basil Mitchell, *Neutrality and Commitment. An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 14 May 1968* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 14.

> persevere in the hope, or – shall we say? – the faith, that the problem will eventually be resolved.[16]

To adopt the tenacity in question is part of an epistemological strategy whose aim consists in finding more evidence in support of one's beliefs. Therefore, the objection here under consideration seems to be convincing. Every scholar, and not only those who are Christians, should be tenacious and persevere in her beliefs with the hope to find more evidence in their support.[17]

At least one effective reply can be offered. Mitchell appropriately refers to 'the hope, or the faith' – so he says – 'that the problem will eventually be resolved'. While engaging in research aimed at finding more evidence for one's convictions, one wishes one's research project to succeed in the end. However, this does not have anything to do with *the firm faith* that in the passage mentioned above Aquinas claims believers should keep on religious ground. After all, it is fully implausible that, if one's life has been shaped by the Christian faith, one will suddenly degrade one's firm religious convictions to the level of a mere wish. This is especially true when one considers that the faith in question is not seen as just a set of beliefs. After all, if faith were seen as a mere set of beliefs held on the basis of evidence, Aquinas's thesis that the faithful should remain convinced that, unlike reason, faith is undeniable should be considered simply unreasonable.

It is now time to take into consideration that faith is not just an intellectual act or propositional belief. My view is that in the passage mentioned above Aquinas is insightfully showing that there is something *specific* to faith – something which radically distinguishes

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[16] Basil Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 18.

[17] As an anonymous Reviewer suggests, 20th Century Philosophy of Science would argue – to degrees – that this is not so, and that the rejection of hypotheses, through falsification, the replacement of paradigm, or the altering of a research programme, can all be done when evidence contrary appears, yes, to either reject or to save the theory, but the point is that change is built into the nature of tentative science.

faith from reason and that no rational reflection can allow us to understand. I think that it is precisely this specificity that makes faith able to shape intellectual activity and to give rise to a Christian epistemology. Also, I intend to argue that this does not lead the believer to become irrational in belief despite the fact that the nature of the human is rational; on the contrary, faith can generate the optimum condition to promote rationality, however surprising this might seem at first sight.

3 In what exactly does the *specificity of faith* consist?

In this section, I concentrate upon the specificity of faith mentioned above. Again, I will fulfill this task in the footsteps of Aquinas, more precisely his doctrine of faith. This is a promising argumentative strategy. As John Hick authoritatively pointed out decades ago, Aquinas's thought on faith and its relationship with reason should be seen as 'the dominant Western tradition of thought on the subject', susceptible of being 'accepted today by many both Catholic and Protestant Christians, as well as by the agnostic and atheist critics of Christianity'.[18] Note that Hick is not a scholar of Aquinas, which is why no partisanship spoils his view.[19] Aquinas's influence may be due to the fact that his construal of faith seems to summarize the work of a venerable tradition on the subject. He offers a list of definitions of faith already given by authoritative religious thinkers – among them the author of the

[18] John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge. A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (1957) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2009), p. 12.

[19] The same can be said of other authoritative scholars according to whom Aquinas's view has exerted great influence on the way religious people and academicians reflect on faith. Among those scholars is Richard Swinburne. According to him, Aquinas's doctrine 'is by far the most widespread and natural view of the nature of religious faith' (*Faith and Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 2005), p. 138). Let me also mention Gregory Dawes, who has more recently said that 'few Christians will have read Aquinas, but since his view is widely shared by theologians they may have absorbed it "by osmosis"' (Gregory Dawes, 'The Act of Faith: Aquinas and the Moderns', in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig, vol. 6 [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015], p. 80).

Letter to the Hebrew, which is contained in the New Testament, Augustine and John of Damascus – with the aim of showing that his own definition is consistent with them.[20]

According to Aquinas, faith is 'an act of the intellect assenting (*actus assentientis*) to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God (*ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam*)'.[21] This definition includes three dimensions: (1) faith is an act of the intellect (intellectual dimension); (2) the intellect is caused to assent to divine revelation, seen as the good itself, by human will (moral dimension); (3) human will is in turn moved by divine grace that makes believers love God and trust him (religious dimension).

Clearly enough, if we want to focus on the *specificity* of faith, i.e., that which distinguishes faith from reason, we need to concentrate upon (2) and (3). According to Aquinas, (2) is necessary because, unlike knowledge, faith does not have a fully evident object; that is, its object – the propositions that believers are expected to see as revealed by God and then to accept as true – is not supported by conclusive evidence. This is the reason why Aquinas says that the object of faith is unable to cause the intellect to firmly assent. And since believers – at least the paradigmatic ones – are expected to give their assent with certainty, the certainty in question can only be achieved 'through an act of choice'.[22] In other words, the faithful believe because they *want to*, and not because their belief is sustained by appropriate evidence. Obviously, from this does not follow that one should not seek evidence in support of divine revelation. A long-standing tradition shows that many arguments should be made for Christianity. Aquinas is one of the best representatives of this tradition, given his championing various types of arguments – from the preambles of faith to the miracles and the so-called negative apologetics.[23] Rather, what I am arguing is that, on the basis of (2), at least

[20] See ST, II-II, q. 4, a. 1.
[21] ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 9.
[22] ST, II-II, q. 1, a. 4.
[23] See, for example, Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3.

the certainty that should characterize the Christian faith regarding some of its crucial tenets such as the Incarnation of Jesus and the Trinity, which are by no means supported by full evidence, is due to the believer's will.

Two objections may be raised.

First, I have just said that *certainty* characterizes the Christian faith, at least regarding some crucial tenets. However, if faith is more than an epistemological notion, then why deploy such an epistemic conception as its main characteristic? In reply, let me point out that, on Aquinas's view, the 'certainty of faith' is far different from the 'certainty of reason'. The former 'is firmness of adherence (*firmitas adhesionis*)', whereas the latter 'is the [full] evidence of that to which assent is given'.[24] Thus, only the latter is an epistemological notion. It differs radically from the certainty of faith, as shown by the fact that, as I have said above, this kind of certainty can only be achieved 'through an act of choice'.

Second, it may be objected that my argument reduces faith to mere *wishful thinking*. A convincing response, however, can be given if one takes into consideration the *results* of the believer's will to assent to revelation. According to Herbert McCabe, wishful thinking can be taken in either a bad or a good sense. As he notes, wishful thinking in the bad sense leads people to allow 'their desires to trespass in a field that belongs exclusively to reason'.[25] To put it otherwise, they may be led by these desires to reason dishonestly and to use poor arguments. And this is the sense in which wishful thinking is usually seen. But there is also a *good sense* in which, as McCabe argues, wishful thinking can be considered. I intend to show that it is this version that can be found in Aquinas's thought. It is true that, on Aquinas's view, the researcher who is guided by wishful thinking in a good sense wishes to show that

[24] Aquinas, *On Truth*, q. 14, a. 1, ad 7, tr. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery 1953).

[25] Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, ed. by Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 10.

no objections to her belief can be found, and that this also characterizes the researcher who is guided by wishful thinking in a bad sense. However, only the latter, and not the former, is led to spoil rational investigations, as confirmed by the fact that wishful thinking, as it emerges from Aquinas's view of faith, is due to God's grace and more specifically to God's charity. This leads me to take into consideration (3).

Aquinas claims that the believer's will is moved by God's grace. According to him, there are two causes of faith. One of them is constituted by numerous reasons – arguments, miracles, etc.— that believers are able to find in support of their belief. However, such reasons are unable to make the faithful firmly believe, as shown by the fact that 'of those who see the same miracle, or who hear the same sermon, some believe, and some do not.'[26] Another cause is therefore necessary to move the believer to assent to God's revelation. I am referring to what Aquinas calls 'the inward instinct (*interior instinctus*) of the divine invitation'.[27] After all, if the certainty of faith were based on evidence, 'this would belittle the sublimity of the faith'. Its truth, in fact, exceeds human minds, and this explains why God's intervention is required. He is 'the chief and proper cause of faith'.[28]

The will of the believer, therefore, is due to God's intervention.[29] But what exactly does this mean? An effective response emerges from a passage contained in the question

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[26]ST, II-II, q. 6, a. 1,

[27] ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 9, ad 3.

[28] Aquinas states that 'science begets and nourishes faith, by way of external persuasion afforded by science; but the chief and proper cause of faith (*principalis et propria causa fidei*) is that which moves man inwardly to assent' (ST, II-II, q. 6, a. 1, ad 1). Note that, in contemporary religious epistemology, this view may be seen as 'externalist', as emerges from Eleonore Stump's investigations, especially 'Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Suppl. Vol. 17 (1992), 125-158. For more on the epistemology of faith as developed by contemporary analytic Catholic thinkers, see Tyler D. McNabb, 'Analytic Catholic Epistemologies of Faith: A Survey of Developments', *Philosophy Compass*, online first, 2023.

[29] McNabb profitably compares two interpretations of Aquinas's epistemology of faith that, although emerging from contexts that are enormously distant from each other, jointly interpret Aquinas in a way that opposes my view. McNabb refers to Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), where Aquinas is seen as a 'classical foundationalist', and to Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Theological Virtues. Volume One: On Faith. A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa IaIIae, qq. 62,65,68; IIaIIae, qq. 1-16*, tr. by Thomas a Kempis Reilly (St. Louis: Herder, 1965), from

devoted to defining faith. Aquinas says that it is *charity*, which God grants to believers, that 'makes the will ready to believe'.[30] In other words, God makes believers love him, trust him, and believe whatever he has revealed.[31] Furthermore, we should consider that there are various levels of intensity at which believers experience faith and charity. This is a widespread position among Christians, as shown by numerous religious sources that can be found throughout history. Let me mention at least the Gospel of Luke, where the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith,[32] and Paul's prayer that the love of the Philippians 'may overflow more and more'.[33] Among many thinkers who have embraced this view,[34] Aquinas can be numbered. While wondering 'whether faith can be greater in one man than in another', he argues that believers love God at different levels of intensity and that this is due to their readiness to believe.[35] Since the readiness in question, as I have already shown, is due to charity, which 'makes the will ready to believe' whatever is contained in the divine

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which it seems to emerge that Aquinas was an evidentialist (see Tyler D. McNabb, 'Analytic Catholic Epistemologies of Faith: A Survey of Developments', p. 2). These views have been questioned by more recent interpretations. Eleonore Stump has opposed Plantinga's and Wolterstorff's view (see above, note 28). John Jenkins has named similar interpretations of Aquinas's thought on faith 'naturalistic' and has claimed that they deserve mention because they have been frequently put forward, and not because they can really be considered tenable (see John Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 175).

[30] ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 10, ad 2. Loving God and being made ready to believe does not impede the believer to misinterpret divine revelation. However, as I will argue later in the essay, the love in question should put her in an ideal condition to promote rationality and consequently to avoid misinterpretations.

[31] According to Aquinas, that God makes the believer love and trust him by no means implies that the latter lacks freedom. Innumerable attempts to try to explain how exactly Aquinas thinks that God's intervention and human freedom cooperate have been made. I find especially convincing Fergus Kerr's view that 'when Thomas speaks of "co-operation" between creatures and God, he almost always rules out the picture of two rival agents on a level playing field. On the contrary, he sees it as the mark of God's freedom, and ours, that God "causes" everything in such a way that the creature "causes" it too … As he quite flatly asserts, there is nothing to stop us from thinking that the same effect is produced by a lower agent and by God – by both, unmediately, of course in different ways' (Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas. Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA – Oxford, 2002), p. 143).

[32] See Luke 17:5.

[33] Philippians 1:9.

[34] See at least Augustine, *The Soliloquies* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1910), vol. 1, 1:5; Sören Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 156.

[35] See ST, II-II, q. 5, a. 4.

revelation, it can be said that the more believers love God and trust him, the more they will be ready to believe his revelation.

Note that, if the will to believe is due to charity, then no wishful thinking in a bad sense can follow. Love for God and the neighbour is simply incompatible with the attempt to manipulate arguments and use them dishonestly. As I intend to show in the next section, the fact that faith is seen as mainly due to charity leads believers to feel confident that faith can shape philosophy and even improve it.

4 Two ways for Christians to shape and improve intellectual activity

My view is that there are at least two ways for Christians as such to shape and improve intellectual activity.

The first one emerges when we consider that love for God and the neighbor should lead Christians to adopt good habits in every activity they take, including reasoning. Given the relationship between charity and faith that I have described in the previous section, it can be said that the more they firmly believe, the more should they love the neighbor and promote intellectual virtues such as patience, open-mindedness, humility, docility, which are virtues that can be taken as a subset of the corresponding moral virtues.[36] Needless to say, adoption of good habits can only increase mutual understanding among interlocutors and consequently facilitate the attainment of truth. Let us consider the virtue of docility (*docilitas*), which Aquinas claims plays a crucial role when it comes to the employment of intellectual virtues.[37] If a debater is docile, he will 'carefully, frequently and reverently apply his mind to the teachings of the learned, neither neglecting them through laziness, nor

[36]As Linda Zagzebski points out, intellectual virtues are a subset of moral virtues, as shown by her conviction that the beliefs held by those who are intellectually virtuous are expected to be due to *habituation* and *deliberate choice*. See her *Virtues of the Mind* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[37] Docility 'is useful for every intellectual virtue' (ST, II-II, q. 49, a. 3, ad 1).

despising them through pride'.[38] How could it be otherwise when one is guided by charity? Those who love the neighbor are plausibly put in a condition to value what the neighbor thinks and says. Furthermore, since charity and faith can be experienced at different levels of intensity, as I have shown above, it will be in proportion to their charity and faith that they will be docile.

Can it be said the same of those who do not share the relationship between charity, faith, and intellectual activity that I am exploring here? Note that I am not referring only to non-Christians. I am referring to all of those who adopt epistemological views that are characterized by MEP, and not by charity and faith. Thus, I am referring to non-Christians and non-believers. Also, I am referring to Christian believers who don't share the view that I have developed so far. Let me mention John Locke and his idea that assent to propositions, be they religious or not, can only be given in proportion to the available evidence.[39] In other words, there is only one criterion – the criterion of evidence – based on which we can accept any proposition. Locke inaugurated a philosophico-religious tradition that frontally opposes the relationship between charity, faith, and reason that is under consideration here. His ideas exerted a great influence on how philosophers and even non-scholars became accustomed to considering the relationship between faith and rational investigations.[40] Among them, outstanding interpreters of Aquinas such as Jacques Maritain may be included.[41] I have

[38] ST, II-II, q. 49, a. 3, ad 2.

[39] As is known, Locke argues that we should not entertain 'any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant' (John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* [London: Printed for Awhsham and John Churchil, at the Black-Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, and Samuel Manship, at the Ship in Cornhill, near the Royal Exchange, 1700], IV, xix, 1).

[40] As John Jenkins has insightfully noted, Locke's view 'shaped the way non-philosophers spoke about, thought about and practised debate and enquiry regarding religious matters. There were important dissenters from Locke's approach in subsequent centuries, but it became embedded in training and practice so that both philosophers and non-philosophers came to have difficulty imagining an alternative' (John Jenkins, 'Faith and Revelation', in *Philosophy of religion. A guide to the subject*, ed. by Brian Davies [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007], p. 213).

[41] Locke's view has become a sort of default position regarding how, in modern and contemporary times, philosophers of religion and even non-philosophers have reflected on the relationship between faith and reason. Consequently, the possibility that that view has influenced

already said that he was among the staunchest supporters of the possibility for believers to develop a Christian philosophy. However, in his reflection on the subject he has not considered the crucial role that, with regard to faith and reason, can be played by the will to believe, its relationship with charity and everything I have already shown can follow as to the development of rational activity. According to Maritain, one should take into account 'the classical distinction between the order of specification and the order of exercise'.[42] Specifically, he examined the distinction 'between the *nature* of philosophy, of what philosophy is in itself, and the *state* in which it is found factually, historically, in the human subject'.[43] According to Maritain, when 'considered in its pure *nature*, or essence', philosophy 'depends only on the evidence and criteria of natural reason'. However, if 'taken concretely, in the sense of being a *habitus*', philosophy 'is in a certain *state*'. This can be Christian or Jewish or Islamic or such like, and 'has a decisive influence on the way it [philosophy] exists and develops'.[44] In fact, the beliefs that emerge from the state in which philosophers find themselves should be subjected to philosophical scrutiny and then either accepted or rejected in the philosophical realm. Only if accepted, they will shape philosophical reflection and a Christian philosophy – as well as a Jewish philosophy, an Islamic philosophy, and so on – will emerge.[45]

This distinction between the nature of philosophy and the state in which philosophers find themselves seemingly offers a solution to the problem of how to harmonize faith and

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many readings of Aquinas's doctrine of faith and reason should not take us by surprise. This emerges from Jenkins's reflections contained in his 'Faith and Revelation', esp. pp. 215-223.

[42] Jacques Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 11

[43] Jacques Maritain, 'La notion de philosophie chrétienne,' *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 31 (1931), p. 59. See also Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, pp. 11f.

[44] Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938), p. 79.

[45] Maritain, however, applies this view only to theoretical philosophy. When it comes to moral philosophy, he argues that new distinctions are needed. Not only the state but also the nature of philosophy should be related to Christian faith. A 'moral philosophy adequately considered', as Maritain describes it, 'must be guided by the knowledge of our ultimate end, which, as Christians we cannot pretend not to know is supernatural' (Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, pp. 38ff.).

philosophical reflection, and nonetheless it seems to be *contradictory* and *useless*. The contradiction emerges because, on the one hand, Maritain holds that the beliefs that characterize the state in which philosophers find themselves will be either accepted or rejected by philosophy; on the other hand, when it comes to Christian beliefs, Maritain claims that these beliefs can only be accepted by philosophy. He claims that "faith guides and orientates philosophy, *veluti stella rectrix*, without thereby violating its autonomy".[46] Furthermore, Maritain's theory seems to be useless, because it does not offer any explanation of *why*, unlike any other subjective state, faith 'guides and orientates philosophy' and philosophy never rejects faith, which was precisely that which his reflection on Christian philosophy was aimed at explaining. My view is that Maritain's theory suffers from these problems because he reduced faith to a set of beliefs, i.e., the beliefs which he said emerge from the state in which the philosopher finds herself. These beliefs are accepted or rejected – this seems to emerge from his view – once they are evaluated on the basis of the criterion of evidence.[47]

In conclusion, both Locke and Maritain, however surprising such a closeness may appear to be, are among the scholars whom I am now taking into account, scholars who do not consider the relationship between faith, charity, and reason here under consideration, and ground rational investigations on epistemic criteria, especially MEP. These scholars do not take the abovementioned opportunity of improving intellectual activity by adopting good habits. It is true that some of them may cultivate the intellectual virtues I mentioned above. However, unlike the believer who shapes research with charity and good habits, they are not

[46] Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, p. 29.

[47] It is true that Maritain also mentioned the role played by 'subjective reinforcements' in the Christian philosopher's activity. They are 'rectifications and purifications from the individual, an ascesis not only of reason but of heart' (Jacques Maritain, 'La notion de philosophie chrétienne', in *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 31[1931], p. 63). And nonetheless, no reference is made to how exactly these reinforcements emerge from faith and charity, and shape rational investigations.

required to do so. They typically adopt MEP, which seems to characterize all of the beliefs they hold, including the belief that we should adopt good habits in the course of our debates. Consequently, those who take for granted MEP are expected to adopt good habits only once they have found more evidence in support of the view that one should adopt good habits than in support of its negation. This means that at least their research of the abovementioned evidence should not be shaped by good habits. As a result, since the believer whose research is shaped by charity should *always* adopt good habits, she should find herself in a condition that is epistemically preferable to that which regards MEP's supporters.

The second way in which I think that, in the footsteps of Aquinas, Christians can shape and improve intellectual activity emerges from their firm trust in cognitive faculties, from which follows their confidence that any objection to their faith will be answered.[48] If they love God and entrust themselves to him, they feel certain that what he has revealed as well as everything that can plausibly be related to his revelation is *true*. Given the above-mentioned levels of intensity at which believers experience faith, it can be said that the more they love and trust God, the more they will be ready to believe whatever he has revealed, including the view that God created both faith and cognitive faculties. Consequently, the faithful will firmly believe that no contradiction can arise between faith and reason. Given their common origin from God, faith and reason cannot contradict each other, otherwise, as Aquinas points out, God would contradict himself, which is impossible.[49] This puts paradigmatic believers in the optimum condition to conduct intellectual investigations. Once convinced that reason cannot contradict that which they are expected to mostly care about, i.e., their faith and other related beliefs, they will be ready to *follow reason wherever it leads*,

[48] In the footsteps of Aquinas, Herbert McCabe argues that this is by no means unreasonable. Believers "do believe that all objections can be answered somehow. They are not insulated from contact with evidence in the way that the lunatic is" (*Faith Within Reason*, p. 9).

[49] See Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3.

which is the mark of philosophy and sciences. By contrast, the same cannot be said of those who neither love nor trust the creator of both faith and reason. They can only rely on the correct functioning of their cognitive faculties. Like everybody else, however, they are well aware that reason is affected by fallibility, fallibility which implies that further research may disprove that which they maximally care about. And this may prevent them from following reason wherever it leads.

Note that, to appreciate the advantage that the Christian philosopher has over those who only rely on the correct functioning of their cognitive faculties, one does not need to accept *the truth* of the Christian faith. I mean that one may think that the Christian beliefs held by the Christian philosopher in question are untrue. Nevertheless, one cannot pretend not to see that even if, as one may think, the believer in question is mistaken, her conviction leads her to cultivate open-mindedness in proportion to her adhesion to divine revelation. This shows a synergy between theology and epistemology, which traces back to Augustine's view that we may promote and deepen our knowledge of the creatures on the ground that they show traces of the Trinity.[50] On the one hand, not everybody is required to believe that a trinitarian God exists. On the other hand, everybody should accept the view that philosophical activity has received stimulating suggestions from Augustine's theological reflection on Trinity.

Before moving on to discuss two substantial objections to the two ways for Christians to shape and improve intellectual activity that I have proposed in this section, let me show that the two ways in question seem to offer a plausible view of Christian philosophy and its distinction from Christian theology.

[50] See Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Books 8-15, ed. by Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Christian philosophy should combine the influence of faith over philosophy and, at the same time, the autonomy of philosophy from faith. Only in this way, this type of investigation can be both *Christian* and *philosophy*. So formulated, however, this view seems to be affected by contradiction, which justifies a number of criticisms of the notion of Christian philosophy.[51] A different formulation has emerged so far, which consists in emphasizing the distinction between *two meanings* of faith. On the one hand, faith is mere propositional belief, which, as I have shown in this section, does not exert any influence on rational debates. On the other hand, faith is the conviction due to charity that one's beliefs, at least some of them, are undeniable, and it is from this viewpoint that faith is expected to influence intellectual activity. If the believer loves and trusts God, she firmly believes and gives rise to the above-mentioned ways of shaping and improving intellectual activity. These ways *do not include any interference* of religious belief contents in the rational discourse. Just adopting good habits and following reason wherever it leads clearly show that reason is fully autonomous from faith taken as propositional belief. No religious belief contents are employed while conducting intellectual activity. It can consequently be said that, if one considers the latter meaning of faith, i.e., faith taken as conviction due to love for God, and not only the former one, then it is possible to escape the contradiction that I have mentioned above. Influence of faith over reason appears to be compatible with autonomy of reason from faith, which means that a Christian philosophy is possible.[52]

These considerations should also allow me to propose a distinction between Christian philosophy and Christian theology. One may argue that, if firm belief due to love for God and

[51] For example, see above, note 7.

[52] Someone may object that, so doing, I have argued that a Christian *epistemology*, not a Christian *philosophy* is possible, which does not take by surprise given that the topic of this essay is Christian epistemology. In reply, let me note that, once a Christian epistemology has been developed, which means that the two ways in which I have shown faith can shape and promote philosophy are developed, one can conduct research in every philosophical area, depending on the type of subject area – morality, aesthetics, and the like – that is involved.

trust in him intervene in debates, then it is theology rather than philosophy which seems to be at stake. Given what I have said so far, I think it plausible to put forward the following distinction. Unlike theologians, Christian philosophers will be ready to *discuss* their religious beliefs – God's existence, for example – following reason wherever it leads, as I have argued in this section. Theologians are instead be required to take for granted that the beliefs in question are true. In fact, such beliefs should constitute the point of departure for their reflection. (Of course, the distinction at stake only regards Christian philosophers *qua* philosophers and Christian theologians *qua* theologians. *Qua* Christians, instead, they should both be convinced that the beliefs in question are true.) Needless to say, much more may be said about the distinction in question, as a long history of debates clearly shows. My considerations were only aimed at providing a new proposal as it emerges from the two ways in which faith shapes and promotes rationality, ways that I have presented in this section.

Let me now move on to discuss two objections that may be raised to these ways. The first objection consists in saying that it is the researcher who only relies on MEP that is in the optimum condition to adopt good habits. Relying only on MEP, in fact, seems to be connected to one's readiness to abandon one's convictions and one's interests. As a matter of fact, any form of selfishness and sense of superiority over one's interlocutors seems to be rejected if one does research like Socrates in a famous passage from *Gorgias*. He says,

> I am one of those who are very willing to be refuted if I say anything which is not true, and very willing to refute anyone else who says what is not true, and quite as ready to be refuted as to refute. For I hold that this is the greater gain of the two, just as the gain is greater of being cured of a very great evil than of curing another.[53]

[53] Plato, *Gorgias*, 458 a3 – b3, tr. by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Open-mindedness seems to deeply characterize the view Plato expresses in that passage. Also, other good habits seem to emerge from the attempt to only focus on the available evidence and the search for truth. Not surprisingly, Plato believes that erroneous opinion is 'great evil'. He does not limit himself to emphasizing the *epistemic* value of the conduct that he advocates. He also emphasizes its *moral* value, whose cruciality to scientific research has on various occasions been supported through history and has been shown by Robert Pennock in a book eloquently titled *An Instinct for Truth: Curiosity and the Moral Character of Science*.[54] According to Pennock, the moral character of science emerges when the scientist does not look at the world in terms of personal interests and is ready to test a hypothesis 'without prejudice or favor regarding the outcome'.[55] The moral character in question reminds us of the 'ethics of belief', which characterizes *par excellence* the well-known dictum William K. Clifford proposed in the following terms: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.[56] Clifford offered an example that is of great interest for my purposes. It is the example of the shipowner who *wants* to believe that his ship is seaworthy and does not double-check its seaworthiness. Obviously enough, he may cause the death of many people since he failed to believe only upon appropriate evidence. Unlike Clifford, however, I think that it is not on the primacy of evidence that the author of the *Ethics of Belief* is putting an emphasis. He does not seem aware of the fact that, by proposing the example in question, he is rather emphasizing the importance of a good habit such as justice and of the consequent responsibility for the life of the ship's passengers. In other words, he unintentionally ends up supporting the view that I

[54] Robert Pennock, *An Instinct for Truth: Curiosity and the Moral Character of Science* (Cambridge, MA – London: MIT Press, 2019).

[55] Pennock, *An Instinct for Truth*, p. 90.

[56] William K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p. 186.

am advocating here: it is the adhesion to good habits that makes one look for evidence, whereas evidence in itself does not necessarily lead one to adopt good habits.

Another objection may be raised to my thesis. Following reason wherever it leads may be a synonym of 'vain curiosity' (*vana curiositas*), whose history of rejection on the part of the Christian tradition traces back at least to Augustine.[57] However, curiosity is not only vain and rejectable, as shown by the fact that many types of it have been taken into consideration in the course of Middle Ages.[58] For the sake of brevity, let me focus on the distinction proposed by Heiko Oberman between, on the one hand, *vana curiositas*, which takes away from God and his wisdom, and, on the other hand, *iusta curiositas* (just curiosity), which is expected to support faith and its spread.[59] It is undeniable that the latter type of curiosity has been largely encouraged by Christians. Especially when confronted with objections to their faith, they should be eager to show that also from a mere rational viewpoint their religious beliefs are acceptable, at least in the sense that they cannot be contradicted by our cognitive faculties. This clearly emerges from the passage of Aquinas's *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, which I have taken into consideration above. Christians' love for God and the consequent will to confirm their faith, once combined with their conviction that faith cannot be contradicted by reason, seems to lead them to use cognitive faculties without prejudice and with regard to any aspect of their experience, which can more or less easily be related to God, creator of all things. It is in this sense that they appear to be led to follow

[57] Among the numerous passages he devoted to the subject, let me limit myself to referring to Augustine, *Confessions*, x, 35,54.

[58] A synthetic and useful summary of the treatments of *curiositas* in the course of Middle Ages is offered by James Muldoon, *Travellers, Intellectuals, and the World Beyond Medieval Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge 2016) especially Chapter 1, which is titled '*Libertas Inquirendi* and the *Vitium Curiositatis* in Medieval Thought'.

[59] See Heiko Oberman, *Contra vanam curiositatem. Ein Kapitel der Theologie zwischen Seelenwinkel und Weltall* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag 1974).

reason wherever it leads, whereas vain curiosity, as claimed jointly by Augustine and Aquinas, leads one to focus only on creatures without considering the Creator.[60]

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that it is possible for Christians to shape and improve epistemology if there is interaction between rational arguments and the *specificity* of faith – its being mainly due to charity and communion with God. It is because of love for God and the neighbor that Christians are expected to develop good habits in the course of intellectual activity. Furthermore, one of these habits – open-mindedness – can also be promoted by the conviction held by Aquinas that cognitive faculties cannot in the end contradict faith. If my argument is correct, it must be concluded that it is what radically distinguishes faith from reason that seems to put believers in the optimum condition to follow reason wherever it leads, which everybody should accept can only have a positive influence on philosophy and rational activity more generally. In this connection, it can also be concluded that a plausible view of Christian philosophy and its distinction from Christian theology is provided.[61]

[60] According to Aquinas, this occurs 'when a man desires to know the truth about creatures, without referring his knowledge to its due end, namely, the knowledge of God' (ST, II-II, q. 167, a. 1). In support of his view, Aquinas summarizes Augustine's reflection contained in *On True Religion*, 29,52, and says that 'in studying creatures, we must not be moved by empty and perishable curiosity; but we should ever mount towards immortal and abiding things'.

[61] Many thanks to two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments given on a first draft of this essay.