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**NO-FAULT UNBELIEF**

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**Abstract**

**‘No-fault unbelief’ can be named the view that there are those who do not believe in God through no moral or intellectual fault of their own. This view opposes a more traditional one, which can be named ‘flawed unbelief’ view, according to which religious unbelief signals a cognitive or moral flaw in the non-believer. Since this charge of mental or moral flaw causes a certain uneasiness, I oppose the former view, i.e., ‘no-fault unbelief’, with a strategy that has nothing to do with the latter. I assume that ‘no-fault unbelief’ is correct and show what consequences follow for both unbelievers and believers. I conclude that the assumption in question is superficially beneficial but deeply detrimental to unbelievers; and by contrast, it is superficially detrimental and deeply beneficial to believers.**

**Keywords: unbelievers; believers; flawed-unbelief view; cognitive or moral flaw.**

**Introduction**

‘No-fault unbelief’ (NFU) can be named the view that there are those who do not believe in God through no moral or intellectual fault of their own. This view opposes a more traditional one, which can be named ‘flawed unbelief’ view (FU), according to which religious unbelief signals a cognitive or moral flaw in the non-believer.

This charge of mental or moral flaw causes a certain uneasiness.<sup>1</sup> It is true that it does not necessarily imply an intolerant or morally improper attitude. However, accusing of being intellectually or morally deficient people who claim that they have done their best to believe and nonetheless found no good rationale to do so<sup>2</sup> appears to be at best disrespectful, if not offensive. To oppose NFU, therefore, I propose a new approach. It consists in assuming that NFU is true and see what consequences follow for both unbelievers and believers.

After depicting FU, I argue that, if one assumes that NFU is correct, then the unbeliever is entitled to charge the believer with some moral or intellectual defect. Consequently, just as the believer who supports FU, the unbeliever is also perceived as disrespectful or offensive. Furthermore, I show that, being satisfied with his or her unbelief, the non-believer is not expected to suffer from lack of faith in God. The believers, on the contrary, may suffer a longing for more faith. This, however, turns out to be beneficial to them since it provides an opportunity to increase their faith, which as believers they are expected to consider the greatest possible good for them. Even more importantly, this leads believers to focus on their own spiritual growth, which is more consistent with their religious belief—at least in terms of Christianity—than the attempt to find an explanation for unbelief, not to mention the act of charging the unbeliever with moral or intellectual defect.

Before proceeding, let me register a *caveat*. John Greco has already argued that the traditional way to explain unbelief, which constitutes FU, ‘looks for the explanation of non-belief only in the

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<sup>1</sup> According to John Greco, who offers probably the first treatment of the subject, ‘it is hard to deny that there is something awkward about explaining nonbelief in terms of some moral or intellectual flaw in the nonbeliever’ (J. Greco, ‘No-fault atheism’, in A. Green and E. Stump (eds), *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016), pp. 109-25, here p. 112).

<sup>2</sup> While supporting his well-known version of the ‘divine hiddenness argument’, John Schellenberg speaks of “reasonable” unbelievers, namely, people who, after due examination of any possible argument, did not find any motive for believing, and places himself among them. See J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 35f..

atheist'.<sup>3</sup> By contrast—so he maintains—the explanation at hand might also be found in the social environment and in believers themselves, that is to say, in the way their personal relationships and their communities may end up promoting non-belief instead of belief.<sup>4</sup> I do not intend to investigate any 'social turn' in religious epistemology. Like Greco, however, I will argue that believers would do well to shift their attention from unbelievers to themselves. This is why I investigate what consequences may also be drawn for them and not only for unbelievers from the assumption that NFU is true.

## 1 A depiction of FU

Numerous examples of how unbelievers have throughout history been blamed for their unbelief quickly come to mind. Psalm 53 famously reads: 'Fools say in their hearts, "there is no God". They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good'.<sup>5</sup> Equally famously, St. Paul reproaches

those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them ... So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, ... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. Greco, 'No-fault atheism', p. 109. Greco employs the word 'atheism', though he is well aware that not only atheists but also agnostics are involved in the discussion of the subject. However, he does not turn 'flawed atheist response' into 'flawed nonbeliever response' or 'no-fault nonbelief', because the employment of non-belief is 'not nearly as catchy' (p. 109, footnote 2). In this essay, therefore, I am using 'unbeliever' instead of 'nonbeliever'.

<sup>4</sup> See Greco, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 53,1. Hereafter, Bible quotations are from NRSV translation.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 1,18-23.

Though less pointedly, all of the debates and arguments developed by great philosophers and theologians like Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas in defence of the reasonableness of faith support the conviction that there is something morally or intellectually wrong with unbelievers. At the dawn of the modern age, Calvin manifestly accuses them of being mentally insane and morally corrupt. For him, all human beings, not only those who are able to develop sophisticated rational arguments, have been provided with a *sensus divinitatis*, which consequently renders them inexcusable if they do not believe:

To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. ... Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honour him and to consecrate their life to his will. ... Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that *there is some God*, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow.<sup>7</sup>

If all have been provided by nature with the conviction at stake, God's existence and revelation can be denied only because of mental insanity or moral culpability.

Following in the footsteps of Calvin, Alvin Plantinga has argued that sin and moral corruption can impede the correct functioning of cognitive faculties, and has proposed the concept of 'warranted Christian belief'. On the basis of this concept, it can be said that, if God exists, then it is highly probable that we all are provided with cognitive faculties able to lead us to believe in him. A

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<sup>7</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1960), book 1, chapter 3, pp. 43f.

considerable obstacle in this direction, however, is sin, which can deform the appropriate employment of our intellectual faculties:

Sin induces in us a *resistance* to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*, muted as they are by the first factor; we don't *want* to pay attention to its deliverances... The defect there is affective, not intellectual. Our affections are disordered; they no longer work as in God's original design plan for human beings. There is a failure of proper function, an affective disorder, a sort of madness of the will.<sup>8</sup>

Note that those who—like Calvin and Plantinga—support FU manifestly take for granted that God is a perfectly loving being. Accordingly, they believe that he cannot be faulted for permitting some to not believe and consequently miss the opportunity to be related to him, which is the best possible good for humans, given his existence.<sup>9</sup> More pointedly, Thomas Aquinas claims that, if God grants us some good, this is due to his mercy; if he does not grant us anything, this is due to his justice.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), pp. 205 and 208.

<sup>9</sup> Analogously, God cannot be faulted for lack of appropriate belief on the part of the faithful. In this connection, Paul Moser distinguishes “people *passively* open to belief in God and people *actively* open to belief in God. People passively open to such belief do not put any serious effort into examining whether God has intervened, for example, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such people are ‘open’ to God with striking indifference. This indifference manifests itself in failure to act in ways that take seriously the availability of evidence for God. ... People actively open to belief in God take a *morally serious* interest in the availability of evidence for God. Such an interest has potential morally transforming effects.” (P. Moser, ‘Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding’, in Howard-Snyder, D. & Moser, P. (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, pp. 142f.).

<sup>10</sup> While focusing on the help of grace, because of which we can believe the revealed truths, Aquinas openly claims that ‘to whomsoever it [the divine help] is given from above it is mercifully given; and from whom it is withheld it is justly withheld, as a punishment of a previous, or at least of original, sin’ (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 5, ad 1. Hereafter, quotations are from the version translated by the Fathers of the English

Of course, nothing prevents one from turning upside down the belief that God is perfectly good and cannot be blamed for the existence of unbelievers. One may say, in fact, that unbelievers, at least some of them, are not responsible for not believing. This constitutes NFU, of which Schellenberg is an outstanding supporter.<sup>11</sup> Is NFU a reasonably sustainable view? I have said above that nothing prevents one from adopting it, which is confirmed by the fact that mutual opposition between supporters of FU and NFU continues to receive significant consideration from contemporary philosophers of religion with at least seemingly plausible arguments on both sides of the spectrum.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, holding FU seems to be disrespectful or offensive towards NFU supporters, who claim that they did their best to believe and nonetheless failed to become people of faith. This is why I think that a strategy that has nothing to do with FU should be adopted to oppose NFU. I will develop it in the next two sections focusing on both unbelievers and believers, respectively.

## 2 NFU's consequences for unbelievers

In this section, I show what consequences for non-believers can be drawn from assuming NFU. I note that this assumption is consistent with both

(1) it is obvious that there is no God

and

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Dominican Province, second and revised edition (London: Oates and Washbourne 1920)); Aquinas relies on Augustine's passages such as *De Correptione at gratia*, 7, xiv.

<sup>11</sup> See above footnote 2.

<sup>12</sup> See J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, pp. 133-39, where an impressively long bibliography of what has been published on the divine hiddenness argument is provided.

(2) it is obvious that there is a God who (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief.

Clearly enough, (1) manifestly strengthens the idea that one cannot be charged with a cognitive deficiency or moral culpability if one does not believe. The same can be said of (2). If, at least in some cases, God is responsible for religious unbelief, then there really are unbelievers who cannot be charged with either mental insanity or moral blameworthiness.

If we now consider (1) and (2) more closely, we may notice that both of them lead us to advance more remarkable insights. From (1) it follows:

(1a) unbelievers are entitled to hold that there is moral or intellectual failure in believers.

On the other hand, (2) can be developed as follows:

(2a) since God (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief, God *is evil*

or

(2b) although God (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief, God *is good*.

What is of interest for our purposes is that from (1) and (2a) it follows that unbelievers are entitled to hold that the believers, *qua* believers, suffer from a moral or intellectual flaw. Only such flaws can explain belief in and reliance on a God who is evil, not to mention a God who simply does not exist. Unsurprisingly, accusations intended to highlight the flaws in question have regularly and frequently been voiced against believers over the last centuries. To name but a few, Hume, Freud, Russell and, in our time, Harris have famously adopted this stance. Hume placed in the same boat

‘Stupidity, Christianity, and Ignorance’ and saw all three as limits into which the English nation was ‘relapsing fast’.<sup>13</sup> According to Freud, religion is a psychological disease, ‘the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity’.<sup>14</sup> For Russell, religion originated in barbaric ages and ‘has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world’. It is therefore ‘no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand’.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Harris seems to sum up all of these attacks on religion and especially to the Christian faith by saying that it is now necessary ‘to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity’.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that unbelievers put themselves in a position to ascribe both intellectual and moral flaws to believers somewhat absolves the believers who do the same in the reverse direction from the accusation of being offensive. Or, more precisely, this fact leads to the awareness that this is the way both believers and unbelievers sometimes look at each other. (I say ‘sometimes’ because I am aware that it may not apply to all cases. An unbeliever, for example, might depict religious belief not as blameworthy but as a quasi-natural disposition with some positive practical outcomes, even though this results in false beliefs. The unbeliever in question may, therefore, look at belief without lapsing into a superior judgementalism, though it cannot be excluded that also in this case a kind of intellectual failure may be ascribed to believers.)

This seems to be a negative outcome for unbelievers. The assumption of NFU has been motivated by the persuasion that accusing unbelievers of being intellectually or morally disturbed is in some respect unacceptable. If the assumption in question leads to the employment of the same attitude in

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<sup>13</sup> D. Hume, Letter 272 (April 6, 1765), in *The Letters of David Hume*, J.Y.T. Greig (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1932), vol. 1, p. 498.

<sup>14</sup> S. Freud, *Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth Press 1927), p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> B. Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*, in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, R.E. Egner and L.E. Denonn (eds) (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 595f.

<sup>16</sup> S. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf 2006), p. ix.



the reverse direction, then nothing has changed, except the fact that now unbelievers, and not believers, are responsible for adopting a stance which is usually perceived to be unpleasant.

Let us now consider (2b), from which it follows that unbelievers are prevented from an opportunity to have a positive relationship with God. This positive relationship must be seen as the greatest possible good for humans, given the fact that God exists and is good. Consequently, it seems that exclusion from communion with him through no fault of their own, together with lack of understanding of the reasons why this occurs, should cause unbelievers to suffer tremendously. This, however, is simply incompatible with their unbelieving. No one can, in fact, suffer because of being (probably unfairly) excluded from what others have instead been given if one believes that the good which one has in this way been deprived of does not exist. The unbeliever, therefore, should not suffer because of his/her unbelief. Nor should s/he suffer because of being considered intellectually or morally deficient by the believers. In fact, once (1a) is assumed, s/he may even find it satisfactory that s/he is blamed by those whom s/he considers intellectually or morally deprived.

This seems to constitute a positive outcome for unbelievers. I mean that they can feel satisfied with their stance and in a position to not care about what the believer may say against them.

An objection may be raised against the idea that unbelief is incompatible with suffering for unbelieving. One may suffer from an illness whether or not one thinks that the medicine to the illness in question exists. *Mutatis mutandis*, one may suffer from one's lack of belief in God and communion with him whether or not one believes that God exists.

In response, it must be noticed that in the former case it is plausible for one to suffer from an illness whether or not one believes that the medicine to that illness exists. In the latter case, however, one can suffer from lack of religious belief *only* if one holds that religious belief is something good, and one holds that religious belief is something good *only* if one believes that God exists. (True, one may hold both that religious belief is something good and that God does not exist. In this case,

however, ‘religious belief’ would stand for certain moral or social benefits that may follow from being people of faith. And this would not have anything to do with the positive relationship with God, the exclusion from which, on the basis of the argument here under consideration, is the reason unbelievers may have for suffering.)

### 3 NFU’s consequences for believers

In this section, I intend to show that equally considerable consequences can be drawn for believers from the assumption of NFU. Needless to say, focusing on the believer’s experience will lead me to take into account religious faith and not only the theistic belief. The former, in fact, corresponds to the believer’s experience and includes the latter.<sup>17</sup> In this connection, I will mainly refer to theological reflections, whereas in the last section I employed philosophical arguments.

Let me now start this investigation by noting that, among the consequences mentioned above, the believers can only accept (2b). In fact, (1) and—at least from the viewpoint of the theistic world religions—(2a) are incompatible with religious belief. (True, (2b), too, may appear to be somewhat incompatible with religious belief, but only to the extent that, if religious faith involves human freedom, God cannot be seen as *the only* responsible for unbelief.<sup>18</sup>)

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<sup>17</sup> The faithful typically believe that God exists because—so they usually claim—God himself led them to believe. According to J. Bishop, ‘believers are to accept theological truths on divine authority, yet the truth that *there is such an authority* (historically mediated as the relevant tradition maintains) is amongst those very truths that are to be accepted on divine authority’ (J. Bishop, "Faith", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/faith/>>.) Obviously enough, a circular argument seems to emerge, but this is of no interest here.

<sup>18</sup> In support of (2b), in fact, it can be said that there may be some great good justifying God in ensuring that not all now believe. It may be a great good for one human to play a significant role in bringing another human to a saving belief. As D. Crummett points out describing the core of the so called ‘responsibility argument’, ‘many religious

While assuming (2b), according to which a good God may permit at least temporary lack of faith and communion with him, the faithful are led to take into consideration a worthwhile aspect of their religious experience. It is part of their belief—especially the Christian one—that only sometimes do they find themselves satisfactorily provided with the positive relationship and the communion with God that I have mentioned in the previous section. In the Gospel according to Luke ‘the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”’,<sup>19</sup> which is a clear indication of their awareness that, however close to him they might have been, they needed to move on to a more satisfactory level of communion. Augustine consecrates himself to God by proclaiming: ‘I love Thee alone, Thee alone follow, Thee alone seek, Thee alone I am ready to serve’. Nonetheless, in the same passage, he also addresses this prayer to God: ‘Increase my faith, increase my hope, increase my charity’.<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard says to the Christian who practices the sacraments: ‘You have come here today because you feel drawn to him, but from this it does not follow that you dare to think that he has already drawn you *wholly* to himself’. Kierkegaard then concludes by quoting the passage of the Gospel I have mentioned above: ‘Lord, increase my faith’.<sup>21</sup>

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traditions [the author refers especially to Christianity] suggest that we have been tasked with helping one another come to knowledge of and relationship with God, and that helping us fulfill this task is one of the major reasons God has established religious communities’ (Dustin Crummett, “*We Are Here to Help Each Other: Religious Community, Divine Hiddenness, and the Responsibility Argument*”, *Faith and Philosophy* 32 [2015], p. 46). (I thank an anonymous referee of ‘Sophia’ for this reflection.) In other words, God may ensure our happiness and ultimate well-being in a way that is, at first sight, incomprehensible to us. While reflecting on the problem of divine hiddenness, for example, Paul Moser and Daniel Howard-Snyder argue that “the Jewish-Christian God hides at times for a range of reasons, not all of which seem clear to humans.” (D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 9).

<sup>19</sup> Luke 17:5.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *The Soliloquies* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1910), vol. 1, 1:5.

<sup>21</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, H.E.Hong and E.H.Hong (eds) (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), p. 156.

Thomas Aquinas proposes penetrating thoughts on this point while reflecting on religious devotion, which he defines ‘the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God’.<sup>22</sup>

Thomas wonders whether or not this fundamental religious act causes joy in the devotees.<sup>23</sup> In a nutshell, his answer is that ‘the spiritual joy of the mind’ is ‘the direct and principal effect of devotion’ because the act of giving oneself to God cannot produce but joy. However, devotion has also a ‘secondary and indirect effect’, which is ‘a certain sorrow’. This sorrow emerges in two circumstances, namely, when people keep sight of God’s goodness and see that they ‘do not yet enjoy God fully’, and when one considers ‘one’s own failings’. In both cases, they experience sorrow because of a lack of full communion with God.<sup>24</sup> (Note that in the first case Aquinas refers to ‘those who do not yet enjoy God fully’ (*in his qui nondum plene Deo fruuntur*), as if he, Aquinas, was not associable with them. In the other case, instead, Aquinas seems to refer to everyone, including himself, and says: ‘when one thinks over one’s own failings’ (*...recogitando proprios*

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<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II,82,1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., II-II,82,4.

<sup>24</sup> Let me cite the whole passage: ‘The direct and principal effect of devotion is the spiritual joy of the mind, though sorrow is its secondary and indirect effect. For it has been stated that devotion is caused by a twofold consideration: chiefly by the consideration of God’s goodness, because this consideration belongs to the term, as it were, of the movement of the will in surrendering itself to God, and the direct result of this consideration is joy, according to Psalm 76:4, “I remembered God, and was delighted”; but accidentally this consideration causes a certain sorrow in those who do not yet enjoy God fully, according to Psalm 41:3, "My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God, "and afterwards it is said (Psalm 41.4):"My tears have been my bread," etc. Secondly devotion is caused as stated, by the consideration of one's own failings; for this consideration regards the term from which man withdraws by the movement of his devout will, in that he trusts not in himself, but subjects himself to God. This consideration has an opposite tendency to the first: for it is of a nature to cause sorrow directly (when one thinks over one's own failings), and joy accidentally, namely, through hope of the Divine assistance. It is accordingly evident that the first and direct effect of devotion is joy, while the secondary and accidental effect is that "sorrow which is according to God" (2 Corinthians 7:10)’ (ibid., II-II,82,4).

*difectos*). It is plausible to hold that in both cases Aquinas includes himself among those who have not yet achieved full communion with God.)

The communion at stake would certainly allow the believers to attain incomparably valuable benefits of any sort. As Schellenberg says, ‘to be personally related to unsurpassable goodness is a great good in itself’.<sup>25</sup> Besides, this would make available *ethical* benefits, that is, ‘certain resources for dealing with the moral weakness endemic to humanity’.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the believers, and not only the unbelievers, as it may seem to be reasonable at first sight, are expected to experience the abovementioned sorrow because of a lack of appropriate communion with God.

It may be objected that this is only a peripheral problem for believers, since lack of full communion with God is expected to concern just those faithful who are equally peripherally involved in religious experience. Those who more passionately devote themselves to God, on the contrary, should not be affected by the problem in question.

In response, it must be noticed that, at least in respect to the Christian faith, the more the believers have faith and adhere to revelation, the more they are expected to ask God to increase their faith. I have already mentioned above some passages from various authors which may contribute to support this thesis. I can now refer to Aquinas’s reflection about the fact that people experience faith at different levels of intensity. As I will show, this implies the idea that faith in God and love for him are proportionate to a desire to adhere more strictly to his revelation.

According to Aquinas, the Christian faith can be lived and experienced at *various* levels of intensity. (Of course, the fact that believers experience faith at various levels of certainty is also a common persuasion among believers. As Saint Paul says, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed

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<sup>25</sup> J. Schellenberg *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006 [1993]), p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

through faith for faith'.<sup>27</sup>) While dealing with this topic, Aquinas wonders 'whether faith can be greater in one man than in another' and summarizes in an impressively effective way his view of the various levels of faith.<sup>28</sup>

He employs a famous tripartition of faith which traces back to Augustine. According to that partition, faith means 'believing in a God,' 'believing God' and 'believing in God.'<sup>29</sup>

From the viewpoint of 'believing God,' there is no diversity of faith among Christians. In fact, they all assent to that which God has revealed, without which there is just nothing to believe.

Something similar may be said of 'believing in a God,' because all Christians are required to believe the same revealed truths. However, someone can believe explicitly more things than someone else. To explain this stance, Aquinas refers to reasons that regard both the intellect ('on account of its greater certitude and firmness') and the will ('on account of his [of the believer] greater promptitude, devotion, or confidence'). The point Thomas makes is that the faithful believe

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 1: 17.

<sup>28</sup> 'The quantity of a habit may be considered from two points of view: first, on the part of the object; secondly, on the part of its participation by the subject. Now the object of faith may be considered in two ways: first, in respect of its formal aspect; secondly, in respect of the material object which is proposed to be believed. Now the formal object of faith is one and simple, namely the First Truth, as stated above. Hence in this respect there is no diversity of faith among believers, but it is specifically one in all, as stated above. But the things which are proposed as the matter of our belief are many and can be received more or less explicitly; and in this respect one man can believe explicitly more things than another, so that faith can be greater in one man on account of its being more explicit. If, on the other hand, we consider faith from the point of view of its participation by the subject, this happens in two ways, since the act of faith proceeds both from the intellect and from the will, as stated above. Consequently a man's faith may be described as being greater, in one way, on the part of his intellect, on account of its greater certitude and firmness, and, in another way, on the part of his will, on account of his greater promptitude, devotion, or confidence' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 5, 4).

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, II-II,2,2.

with more or less certitude, firmness, promptitude, devotion, and confidence. At the heart of this diversity, there is their love for God, from which the readiness to believe follows.<sup>30</sup> All said and done, it emerges that for Aquinas it is the love for God, which God himself grants to believers, that is not possessed by faithful in equal degree. The more they love God, the more they are ready to believe what he has revealed and to argue in support of such a revelation. Obviously, one who is ready to believe and to reason is also aware of one's need to believe and reason. Therefore, readiness and need to believe are directly proportionate to one another. (This may be echoed in the Gospel according to Luke, where it reads, 'from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded'.<sup>31</sup>)

If my argument is correct, from Aquinas' reflection on the different levels of faith it follows that the abovementioned sorrow of the believers is to be considered proportionate to the intensity of their faith. (Of course, this does not imply anything paradoxical, such as the idea that the faith in question is painful and those who make progress in it are ironically subjected to experience only sorrow in proportion. As I said above in regard to Aquinas's reflection on devotion, sorrow is a 'secondary and indirect effect' of the believer's dependence on God, whereas joy is 'the direct and principal effect'.) The more one believes, therefore, the bigger is the void one feels the need to fulfill, and the more one wishes to increase one's faith.

This may be confirmed on biblical grounds. Jesus clearly says: 'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant',<sup>32</sup> and, while echoing him, Paul says to the Philippians: 'In humility regard others as better than yourselves'.<sup>33</sup> The more one loves God, the more is one

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<sup>30</sup> According to Aquinas, 'the measure of charity' (*ratio caritatis*) 'makes the will ready to believe them [the truths of faith], even if they were unseen' (ibid., II-II, 2, 10, ad2).

<sup>31</sup> Luke 12:48b.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 10:43.

<sup>33</sup> Phil 2:3.

inspired by love for others, which causes one to value them in a directly proportional way. On the other hand, those who are inspired by such a love should value themselves in an inversely proportional way, because *the more one wishes something, the more one feels to be in need of it*. If the thing one feels the need of achieving is love for others, then one finds oneself unable to love, however exaggerate this impression may seem to be to others. From this, Paul's warning may follow: 'If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, those who cultivate their belief in God need to be constantly concerned about their own insufficient level of faith.

### **Conclusion: who really benefits from the assumption of NFU?**

In this essay, I have opposed NFU by arguing that its adoption turns out to be superficially beneficial and deeply detrimental to unbelievers. The adoption in question frees them from the accusation of being mentally or morally deficient. Furthermore, unbelievers should no longer be interested in what the believer may think about their unbelief and its cause. This, however, follows from the fact that, once assumed NFU, unbelievers become entitled to address against the believer the same accusations they received in reverse direction. They do not care about what the believer may think of their unbelief simply because they are now in a position to blame those who believe and to charge them with intellectual or moral failure. As a consequence, unbelievers are now susceptible of being faulted for the same stance adopted by the believer who supports FU. In this sense, it can be said that the assumption of NFU superficially benefits and deeply damage them. Also, the assumption in question proves to be manifestly contradictory. It has been motivated by the persuasion that blaming unbelief for being due to mental insanity or moral corruption is

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1 Corinthians 10:12.



disrespectful. But it falls into a contradiction, because it itself is conducive to the same attitude, no matter if this time the blame is addressed in reverse direction.

Unlike unbelievers, the believers are superficially damaged by the adoption of NFU. In fact, NFU can lead them to emphasize the fact that they too may lack an appropriate relationship and a satisfactory level of communion with God. Becoming aware of this, however, may surprisingly constitute one of those goods that their faith should cause them to value and promote. The awareness in question and the humility it implies is, in fact, an opportunity for believers to increase their faith and improve their relationship with God. As believers, they should look at this relationship as the greatest possible benefit for them to achieve, and should consequently consider themselves the real beneficiaries of the assumption of NFU. Furthermore, the awareness of their lack of a more satisfactory communion with God, since it promotes humility and a more appropriate relationship with others, may be seen as moral improvement. Focusing on one's spiritual life and the wish to increase its level of intensity is, in fact, more valuable from a moral viewpoint than any attempt to investigate other people's interior experience and judge their possible flaws.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>

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