

Responses to Evidentialism in Contemporary Religious Epistemology:

Plantinga and Swinburne in Conversation with Aquinas

Edmond Eh

Abstract---In contemporary debates in religious epistemology, theistic philosophers provide differing responses to the evidentialist argument against religious beliefs. Plantinga's strategy is to argue that evidence is not needed to justify religious beliefs while Swinburne's strategy is to argue that religious beliefs can be justified by evidence. However, in Aquinas' account of religious epistemology, he seems to employ both strategies. In his account of religious knowledge by faith, he argues that evidence is unnecessary for religious beliefs. But in his account of religious knowledge by science, he argues that there is evidence for religious beliefs. In this paper, I argue that there is no real dichotomy between Plantinga's and Swinburne's responses to the evidentialist argument. From a Thomistic perspective, Reformed Epistemology and Natural Theology are different but compatible responses to Evidentialism.

Keywords---Evidentialism; Reformed Epistemology; Natural Theology; Aquinas; faith; science

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary religious epistemology can be characterised as a series of responses to the evidentialist argument against religious beliefs. The argument can be stated briefly. Religious beliefs are justified provided there is sufficient evidence for them. Since there is no sufficient evidence for them, they are not justified. Christian philosophers employ two main strategies against this evidentialist argument. The first strategy is to argue that evidence is not really necessary for the justification of religious beliefs. An important philosopher who employs this strategy is Alvin Plantinga [1]. The second strategy is to argue that there is indeed sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. An important philosopher who employs this strategy is Richard Swinburne [2].

This paper is a presentation of the thought of Thomas Aquinas in light of this contemporary debate in religious epistemology. His position is an interesting and relevant contribution to the debate because he can be interpreted as employing both strategies in his *Summa Theologiae*. In Thomas' account of religious knowledge by *faith*, he employs the first strategy. For him, faith does give human beings a form of knowledge [3], but faith is the assent of the mind determined by the will and not by reason [4]. Thus he seems to hold that evidence is not strictly necessary for the justification of religious beliefs. In Thomas' account of religious knowledge by *science*, he employs the second strategy. He famously provides the five ways of proving the existence of God at the beginning of his work [5]. So he also seems to argue that there is sufficient evidence for some

religious beliefs. As a result, it will be argued that Thomas' religious epistemology shows that Reformed Epistemology and Natural Theology are actually compatible with each other, even though they are different responses to Evidentialism.

II. EVIDENTIALISM, REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

This second section contains the background for the subsequent discussion of Thomistic religious epistemology and it is in three main parts. The first part is a brief introduction to Evidentialism and one of the main debates in contemporary epistemology of religion. The second part is a short study of Alvin Plantinga's position of Reformed Epistemology while the third part is a short study of Richard Swinburne's position of Natural Theology.

A. Evidentialism

Evidentialism is based on a particular theory of procedure in epistemology. According to this theory, there is an analogy between the legal sphere and the religious sphere. In a legal system, the guilt of a defendant is considered to be false until it is proven to be true. The prosecution should prove that someone is guilty of a crime by providing evidence. Similarly, in the religious sphere, the existence of God is considered to be false until it is proven to be true. Religious believers should prove that the existence of God is true by providing evidence [6]. An example of a philosopher who argued for this version of Evidentialism was Anthony Flew [7]. On this account, religious beliefs would be considered false until they are shown to be true based on evidence. As a result, knowledge of religious beliefs is possible but it is dependent on philosophical argument [8].

B. Contemporary religious epistemology

A major debate in contemporary religious epistemology involves the question of whether evidentialism should be applied to knowledge claims about religious beliefs, or whether different epistemic standards apply to knowledge claims about religious beliefs.

The evidentialist argument against religious beliefs can be expressed as such:

- Religious beliefs are justified only if there is sufficient evidence for them.
- There is no sufficient evidence for religious beliefs.
- Therefore, religious beliefs are not justified [9].

Theistic philosophers employ two main strategies against the evidentialist position. One strategy is to attack the first premise. This strategy is to argue that evidence is not really necessary for the justification of religious beliefs. An example of this position is Reformed Epistemology and an important philosopher who argues for this position is Alvin Plantinga. Another strategy is to attack the second premise. This strategy is to argue that there is indeed sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. An example of this position is Natural Theology and an important philosopher who argues for this position is Richard Swinburne [10].

C. *Reformed Epistemology*

In his account of Reformed Epistemology, Plantinga argues that evidence is not really necessary for the justification of religious beliefs. According to him, human beings form beliefs by means of their cognitive faculties. For example, human beings use their faculties to perform acts of perception, introspection and memory. Thus human beings use their cognitive faculties to form beliefs about the universe, moral issues, other persons and also about God. On this account, God created human beings with a sort of sense of the divine. It is a cognitive faculty to form beliefs about God and this faculty is analogous to sense perception. Human beings use this cognitive faculty to form beliefs about God's existence and attributes [11]. In addition, this belief-forming process is largely involuntary. Plantinga writes:

These faculties work in such a way that under the appropriate circumstances we form the appropriate belief. More exactly, the appropriate belief is *formed in us*. In the typical case we do not *decide* to hold or form the belief in question, but simply find ourselves with it [12].

Plantinga next provides an account of how beliefs about God are formed in human beings. It is a Christian account since it presents the concept of God as Trinity and the concept of divine revelation as found in the Bible. It is a process which involves three steps. First, God arranged for divine revelation in the form of a collection of written books called the Bible. The main topic of the Bible is to reveal God's plan of salvation for all human beings. Second, an individual gets to know about God's plan of salvation by hearing about it from someone else or by reading the Bible. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, one comes to see that God's plan of salvation is a real offer for oneself. Third, if one accepts God's plan of salvation then the Holy Spirit produces faith in oneself. This faith consists of a conviction that Christian teachings are really true [13]. This is how Plantinga describes the cognitive state of faith:

The resulting belief can be of maximal firmness; it can also be much more tentative and fragile. What is central to the process is this work of the Holy Spirit in producing faith, whereby Christians come to grasp and believe, endorse and rejoice in the main lines of the Christian gospel [14].

Plantinga stresses that faith is not a cognitive state which is different from knowledge as a cognitive state. Instead, faith is a type of knowledge as a cognitive state. He writes:

Faith is not to be contrasted with knowledge; rather, if things go properly, it just *is* a certain kind of knowledge, and knowledge of truths of the greatest importance [15].

Plantinga then provides a theory of knowledge. According to him, knowledge can be defined as warranted true belief and warrant is understood in terms of the proper functioning of cognitive faculties [16]. There are three main conditions for a belief to be considered warranted. First, a belief is warranted if the belief is formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties. Second, a belief is warranted if the belief is formed in an environment appropriate to the cognitive faculties. Third, a belief is warranted if the belief is formed by cognitive faculties which are successfully designed to produce true beliefs [17]. The following then is Plantinga's definition of warrant:

The way to put it, then, is that a belief *B* has warrant for a person *S* if and only if *B* is produced by properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth [18].

On this account, faith refers to belief in Christian teachings. This belief is produced in an individual by the Holy Spirit by a supernatural belief-producing process. As it is a belief formed by properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth, it is a warranted belief. Moreover, if the belief is true and if the belief is held sufficiently firmly, then this belief is considered to be knowledge [19]. So this is how Plantinga argues that religious belief is justified (or warranted) without evidence.

D. *Natural Theology*

In his account of Natural Theology, Swinburne argues that there is sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. According to him, scientists observe data and propose hypotheses to explain the data. Scientists use certain criteria to determine how one hypothesis is better than another hypothesis in explaining the observed data. By using the same criteria that scientists use, one can show that the hypothesis that God exists explains everything observable [20]. For him, it is the scientific method itself which leads to the conclusion that God exists. Swinburne writes:

The very same criteria which scientists use to reach their own theories lead us to move beyond those theories to a creator God who sustains everything in existence [21].

Thus, in his account of natural theology, knowledge of God can also be said to originate from scientific knowledge and knowledge of God is consistent with scientific knowledge.

Swinburne next draws a distinction between two main types of explanations. On this view, an explanation is an account of how objects cause events. The first is inanimate

explanation. This refers to an account of how events are caused by objects in terms of powers and liabilities, that is, impersonal causation. The second is personal explanation. This refers to an account of how events are caused by objects in terms of beliefs and purposes, that is, intentional causation. Different events are caused by different objects. Some events are not intentionally caused by inanimate objects, while other events are intentionally caused by persons. The various sciences work by giving different types of explanations of events. Physics, chemistry and biology work by giving inanimate explanations while history, psychology and sociology work by giving personal explanations [22]. But inanimate causation and personal causation do interact with each other, as inanimate causes affect personal causes and personal causes affect inanimate causes [23].

Further, there are four different levels of explanations: partial, full, complete and ultimate. First, a partial explanation is an account of how an event is *probably* caused by inanimate objects in terms of their powers and liabilities or by personal objects in terms of their beliefs and purposes. Second, a full explanation is an account of how an event is *necessarily* caused by inanimate objects in terms of their powers and liabilities or by personal objects in terms of their beliefs and purposes. Third, a complete explanation is a *full* explanation of an event in terms of its causes by referring to their most basic powers and liabilities or their most basic beliefs and purposes [24]. Fourth, an ultimate explanation is a *complete* explanation of an event in terms of its causes which do not allow for further explanations, that is, either partial explanations or full explanations. Philosophy involves the quest for an ultimate explanation of everything observable. It is the search for something which is the explanation for the existence and properties of everything else [25].

For Swinburne, there are also three possibilities for an ultimate explanation: materialism, theism and humanism. Materialism is the worldview that all the causes involved in personal explanation have a complete inanimate explanation. An ultimate materialistic explanation would involve either a material state or a state without a beginning which is the explanation for everything else. Theism is the worldview that all the causes involved in inanimate explanation have a complete personal explanation. An ultimate theistic explanation would involve a person who is the explanation for everything else. Humanism is the worldview that involves both inanimate explanation and personal explanation. An ultimate humanistic explanation is a mixed theory which rejects both materialism and theism: all the causes involved in personal explanation do not have a complete inanimate explanation and all the causes involved in inanimate explanation do not have a complete personal explanation [26].

Moreover, the ultimate explanation of everything observable which is most likely to be true must fulfil three main conditions. First, it must be simple. Second, it must be able to explain the existence of everything observable accurately. Third, it must be better than other possible

explanations. Swinburne claims that theism is the best ultimate explanation because it is better than materialism and humanism. He argues that materialism is an explanation less simple than theism and that materialism cannot explain many observable phenomena. He also argues that humanism is an explanation even less simple than materialism [27]. On this account, materialism is a very complex explanation because it postulates a great number of material objects as causes to explain the existence and properties of everything observable. On the other hand, theism is a very simple explanation because it postulates only one person as a cause to explain the existence and properties of everything observable [28].

An ultimate explanation must provide an account of the existence and properties of everything observable. The universe contains a great number of objects which share the same powers and liabilities. For instance, the laws of nature apply throughout the known universe. A materialist ultimate explanation can only account for an object's particular powers and liabilities in terms of its general powers and liabilities. But it cannot explain an object's most general powers and liabilities. For example, the behaviour of atoms and electrons can be explained in terms of the law of gravity. But a materialist ultimate explanation cannot account for the fact that all atoms and electrons obey the law of gravity. Therefore, a materialist ultimate explanation cannot account for the fact that every object in the universe shares the same powers and liabilities [29].

Additionally, the universe contains material objects of the same kind which share the same powers and liabilities. A materialist ultimate explanation can only explain material objects of the same kind which share the same powers and liabilities in terms of other material objects of the same kind which share the same powers and liabilities. For example, every electron behaves just like every other electron, and electrons are explained in terms of neutrons. Therefore, a materialist ultimate explanation would be in terms of objects of the same kind which share the same powers and liabilities, like matter or energy [30].

On the other hand, a theistic ultimate explanation can provide a simpler account of the existence and properties of everything observable. The universe contains a great number of objects which share the same powers and liabilities because it was created by God. God can be the cause since he is understood as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good person who is the creator of the world and who maintains the world in existence. God is able to create the universe with its great order because he is all-powerful. God wanted to create the universe with human persons because he is all-good. On this account, God created the universe with its laws of nature because he wanted the universe to be suitable for human beings. Further, God wanted to create the universe with its great order because an ordered universe is a beautiful universe. Beauty is a great good in itself and God wanted to create a beautiful universe because he is all-good [31]. The following is how Swinburne summarises his argument that theism is a better hypothesis than materialism:

The hypothesis of theism is a simple hypothesis which leads us to expect these observable phenomena, when no other simple hypothesis will do so. The perfect goodness of God follows from his three simple properties of being essentially omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly free. It follows from his goodness that he is likely to produce humans, and it is necessary for our survival that we live in a universe with the sort of regularity we find. On the materialist hypothesis it is a mere coincidence that material objects have the same powers as each other, and not a simple stopping point for explanation. Because theism satisfies the criteria so well, the existence and regular behaviour of material objects provide good evidence for the existence of God [32].

So this is how Swinburne argues that there is sufficient evidence for religious belief.

III. KNOWLEDGE OF GOD BY FAITH

This third section contains a discussion of Thomistic religious epistemology with respect to faith and it is in two main parts. The first part deals with the arguments for religious knowledge by means of faith in the *Summa Theologiae*. Thomas distinguishes between the object of faith, the act of faith and the virtue of faith. The second part contains a comparison between the religious epistemologies of Thomas and Plantinga. The discussion is focussed on the similarities and differences between the two accounts.

A. *The object of faith*

According to Thomas, “faith is a mean between science and opinion [33].” On this account, faith requires intellectual assent. The intellect can be moved to assent by the object of knowledge. This happens when the object is known in itself or when the object is known through the knowledge of something else. The intellect can also be moved by choice. Thomas distinguishes opinion from faith. Opinion is the state where one chooses to give intellectual assent to something with *doubt*. Faith is the state where one chooses to give intellectual assent to something with *certainty*. On this account, opinion and faith are directed to objects of knowledge which are not seen by the intellect or the senses [34].

In his religious epistemology, Thomas distinguishes between science and faith. Science refers to knowledge with certainty of a conclusion through demonstration. Science is knowledge of objects which are seen while faith is knowledge of objects which are not seen. So an object of knowledge cannot be an object of science and an object of faith at the same time and with the same respect. However, it is possible for an object of knowledge to be an object of science for one person and the same object of knowledge to be an object of faith for another person [35].

B. *The act of faith*

Regarding the act of knowledge by faith, for Thomas, to believe is “to think with assent”. To think refers to the

intellectual activity of inquiry while the intellect has not attained the certainty of seeing the object of knowledge. To believe refers to the intellectual activity of assenting to an object of knowledge which the intellect is still inquiring about. Science is an intellectual act with firm assent to one position with understanding and it occurs in a mind with formed thought. There are other intellectual acts without firm assent and they occur in a mind with unformed thought. Doubt refers to no assent to any position. Suspicion refers to assent to one position or another because of slight motives. Opinion refers to assent to one position with fear of another position. However, belief is an intellectual act with firm assent to one position even though it occurs in a mind with unformed thought [36]. Specifically, belief is an intellectual act with firm assent to one position where the intellect is determined by the will [37].

According to Thomas, the objects of faith which are necessary for belief include even those which could be discovered by reason. He provides three reasons for this. First, belief in the objects of faith knowable by reason is necessary so that people could know the objects of faith more quickly. This is because the proofs for the existence of God require a long period of study and knowledge of many different fields of science. Second, belief in the objects of faith knowable by reason is necessary so that more people could know the objects of faith. This is because many people either lack the intelligence, the free time or the interest to study the things concerning God. Third, belief in the objects of faith knowable by reason is necessary so that people could know the objects of faith with certainty. This is because the thinkers who studied the things concerning God have made various mistakes and have contradicted each other [38].

The act of faith is “an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God” [39]. The religious believer has sufficient motives for making the act of faith. This is because the believer is moved by God’s authority to accept divine truth which is confirmed by miracles. The believer is also drawn to accept divine truth by the inner inspiration from God. Although the believer has sufficient motives for knowledge by faith, the believer does not have sufficient reasons for knowledge by science [40].

C. *The virtue of faith*

Thomas also discusses the question of whether knowledge by faith is more certain than knowledge by science. This question can be seen in two ways: from the point of view of the *cause* of knowledge and from the point of view of the *subject* of knowledge. From the point of view of the cause, knowledge is more certain if it is caused by a more certain source. Hence, knowledge by faith is more certain because it is caused by divine truth while knowledge by science is less certain because it is caused by human reason. But from the point of view of the subject, knowledge is more certain if the object of knowledge is better grasped by the human intellect. Knowledge by faith is less certain because the object of faith is above the human intellect while knowledge by science is more certain because it is not above

the human intellect. Thus, simply speaking, knowledge by faith is more certain than knowledge by science because the cause of knowledge by faith is more certain than the cause of knowledge by science. But, relatively speaking, knowledge by faith is less certain than knowledge by science because the human intellect grasps the object of science better than the object of faith [41].

D. *Thomas and Plantinga*

In light of the above, this next part is a comparison between the religious epistemologies of Thomas and Plantinga. Thomas' account of knowledge by faith and Plantinga's account of Reformed Epistemology can be said to be in broad agreement on two important points. First, for Plantinga, faith involves beliefs about God and these beliefs are formed in human cognitive faculties. For Thomas, faith also involves beliefs about God (the propositions of faith) and these beliefs are formed in the human intellect. Second, for Plantinga, the formation of faith is a process which involves three steps. God first arranged for divine revelation in the form of a collection of written books called the Bible. An individual subsequently gets to know about God's plan of salvation by hearing about it from someone else or by reading the Bible. Then if one accepts God's plan of salvation, the Holy Spirit produces faith in oneself. Similarly, for Thomas, the formation of faith can be seen as a process which involves three steps. For the act of faith to be formed there must first be a set of divine truths which are revealed by God to be explicitly believed. Then the believer is induced to assent in an external way through witnessing a miracle or by being persuaded by someone to believe. The believer is finally induced to assent in an internal way by being moved by God's grace.

However, Thomas' account of knowledge by faith and Plantinga's account of Reformed Epistemology are different on two important points. First, for Plantinga, faith as a cognitive state is not different from knowledge as a cognitive state. Rather, faith is a type of knowledge as a cognitive state. But, for Thomas, faith is a mean between science and opinion. Although faith is a type of knowledge, science is different from faith. Science is knowledge of objects which are seen while faith is knowledge of objects which are not seen. In Plantinga's account, religious knowledge and ordinary human knowledge occur in the same epistemological state. In both cases, beliefs are formed by properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. The difference is that religious knowledge is produced by a supernatural belief-forming process while ordinary human knowledge is produced by a natural belief-forming process. In Thomas' account, religious knowledge and ordinary human knowledge do not occur in the same epistemological state. In the case of religious knowledge, the intellect assents with certainty to the propositions of faith with the movement of the will. In the case of ordinary human knowledge, the intellect assents with certainty to the propositions of knowledge without the movement of the will.

Second, for Plantinga, human beings form beliefs by means of their cognitive faculties. Human beings use their cognitive faculties to form beliefs about the universe, moral issues, other persons and also about God. God created human beings with a sense of the divine to form beliefs about God and this faculty is analogous to sense perception. Human beings use this cognitive faculty to form beliefs about God's existence and attributes. This belief-forming process is largely involuntary because the cognitive faculties work under appropriate circumstances so that appropriate beliefs are formed in human beings. In Plantinga's account, human beings do not decide to hold or to form beliefs. Instead, human beings simply find themselves with certain beliefs.

But, for Thomas, there is a clear distinction between belief and science. The faculty to form beliefs about God is not analogous to sense perception. This is because belief is directed to objects of knowledge which are not seen by the intellect or the senses. In the case of belief, the intellect assents with certainty to the object of knowledge with the movement of the will. In the case of science, the intellect assents with certainty to the object of knowledge without the movement of the will. In Thomas' account, human beings do decide to hold or to form beliefs. Human beings do not simply find themselves with certain beliefs because beliefs are formed with an act of the will.

IV. KNOWLEDGE OF GOD BY SCIENCE

This fourth section contains a discussion of Thomistic religious epistemology with respect to science and it is in two main parts. The first part is a discussion of Thomas' treatment of human knowledge of material objects, the mode and order of understanding in human knowledge and human knowledge of God. The second part contains a comparison between Thomas and Swinburne. The discussion is mainly focussed on the points of agreement between Thomas' position and Swinburne's position.

A. *How the human soul understands material things*

On Thomas' view of knowledge by science, the soul knows bodies through the intellect by knowledge which is "immaterial, universal and necessary" [42]. Further, the intellect knows bodies by understanding them "through immaterial and intelligible species, which can be in the soul by their own essence" [43]. According to Thomas, knowledge is in inverse proportion to materiality:

But the more immaterially a thing receives the form of the thing known, the more perfect is its knowledge. Therefore the intellect which abstracts the species not only from matter, but also from the individuating conditions of matter, has more perfect knowledge than the senses, which receive the form of the thing known, without matter indeed, but subject to material conditions [44].

Therefore, the intellect is said to know more perfectly than the senses. The soul is in potentiality through the senses to all

sensible things and the soul is in potentiality through the intellect to all intelligible things [45]. In addition:

the Divine Essence is a perfect likeness of all, whatsoever may be found to exist in things created, being the universal principle of all [46].

Also:

the cognitive soul is in potentiality both to the images which are the principles of sensing, and to those which are the principles of understanding. For this reason Aristotle held that the intellect by which the soul understands has no innate species, but is at first in potentiality to all such species [47].

According to Thomas, the intellect is understood under two aspects: the possible intellect and the agent intellect. The possible intellect relates to the agent intellect as potency is related to act. This means that the possible intellect is reduced from potency to act by the agent intellect [48].

For Thomas, phantasms refer to sensible impressions of individual material things and phantasms are found in the human sense organs [49]. The agent intellect causes phantasms received from the senses to be actually intelligible by the process of abstraction. On this account, the senses cause intellectual knowledge through the phantasms [50]. Phantasms cannot activate the possible intellect by themselves as they need to be made intelligible by the agent intellect. In this sense, sensible knowledge can be said to be the material cause of intellectual knowledge [51]. Since phantasms are derived from material things, there are no phantasms of immaterial things. The human soul knows immaterial things by comparison with material things which have phantasms. On this account, the soul understands truth by considering a thing in which the soul sees the truth. The soul knows God as the cause of material things “by way of excess and by way of remotion” [52]. Therefore, the soul needs to consider phantasms of material things in order to understand something about immaterial things, even though immaterial things do not have phantasms [53]. Also:

our intellect's proper and proportionate object is the nature of a sensible thing. Now a perfect judgment concerning anything cannot be formed, unless all that pertains to that thing's nature be known [54].

B. *The mode of understanding*

For Thomas, there are two important epistemological principles. The first principle is that intellectual knowledge arises from sensible knowledge. This means that the object of knowledge for the senses is singular while the object of knowledge for the intellect is universal. The second principle is that the intellect proceeds from potency to act. Every power that proceeds from potency to act passes through a state of incomplete act. This means that there are two possible states of intellectual act. The first state is the complete intellectual act. This complete intellectual act produces an epistemological state where the object of knowledge is “distinctly and determinately known” [55]. The

second state is the incomplete intellectual act. This incomplete intellectual act produces an epistemological state where the object of knowledge is known “indistinctly, and as it were confusedly” [56].

According to Thomas, essence is the “first and proper object” of the intellect. In the process of human knowledge, the intellect first understands the essence of a thing. The intellect then understands the predicates and dispositions which affect the essence of a thing. The intellect then relates one thing with another by composing and dividing in the act of reasoning [57].

C. *How God is known in the human soul*

According to Thomas, the greatest happiness for the human soul is use of the intellect. The soul has a natural desire to know causes of effects and God is the first cause. Therefore, the human intellect can see God's essence [58]. The created intellect does not see God's essence through a likeness. God is the creator of intellectual power and can be seen by the intellect. The intellectual power “is called an intelligible light, as it were, derived from the first light” [59]. Some likeness in visual power is required to see God's essence. Thus the light of glory gives the intellect the power to see God [60]. God's essence cannot be seen with bodily eyes as the power of the sensitive part of the soul is an act of a bodily organ. Thomas writes:

Now act is proportional to the nature which possesses it. Hence no power of that kind can go beyond corporeal things. For God is incorporeal, as was shown above. Hence He cannot be seen by the sense or the imagination, but only by the intellect [61].

However, those who see God's essence do not comprehend God. For Thomas, comprehension means perfect knowledge. This refers to the epistemological state of knowing something as far as it can be known. For example, knowledge by scientific demonstration is comprehension. On the other hand, knowledge by acceptance of probable opinion is not comprehension. Things can be known according to their actuality. God is infinite being and so he is infinitely knowable. The human intellect cannot know God infinitely and it knows God's essence in proportion to the degree of the light of glory received. Since the degree of the light of glory received into the intellect cannot be infinite, the human intellect cannot know God to an infinite degree. Therefore, the human intellect cannot comprehend God [62].

According to Thomas, no one in this life can see God's essence. The knowledge of every knower is according to the mode of its nature. The human soul exists in bodily matter and knows a form in matter. But God's essence cannot be known through material things. Therefore, it is impossible for a soul to see God's essence in this life [63]. However, the human soul can know God in this life by natural reason. Thomas explains in an important passage:

Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so

far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God "whether He exists," and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him [64].

In another important passage, Thomas explains the difference between faith and science as forms of knowledge:

Faith is a kind of knowledge, inasmuch as the intellect is determined by faith to some knowable object. But this determination to one object does not proceed from the vision of the believer, but from the vision of Him who is believed. Thus as far as faith falls short of vision, it falls short of the knowledge which belongs to science, for science determines the intellect to one object by the vision and understanding of first principles [65].

D. *Thomas and Swinburne*

The following is a comparison between the religious epistemologies of Thomas and Swinburne. Thomas' account of knowledge of God by science and Swinburne's account of Natural Theology are in broad agreement on their basic starting points. According to Swinburne, scientists observe data and propose hypotheses to explain the data. They use certain criteria to determine how one hypothesis is better than another hypothesis in explaining the observed data. By using the same criteria that scientists use, Swinburne shows that the hypothesis that God exists explains everything observable. For him, it is the scientific method itself which leads to the conclusion that God exists. Theism is proposed as an ultimate explanation of everything observable. This is the hypothesis which is the explanation for the existence and properties of everything else.

According to Thomas, science has to do with the cognition of the causes of things and it is produced by a demonstration. Since science is about finding the causes of things, the purpose of a demonstration is to produce the premises of the demonstrative syllogism. What is needed in order to produce a demonstration is to look for the causes of what is claimed to be the conclusion of the demonstration. Just as scientists propose hypotheses to explain observed data, the scientific method consists in looking for the causes of what is claimed to be the conclusion of the demonstration. For Swinburne, the purpose of a hypothesis in philosophy is to propose an ultimate explanation of everything observable. Similarly, for Thomas, science has as its main emphasis finding ultimate explanations for what is described in the conclusions of demonstrative syllogisms. On this account, Thomas and Swinburne are also in agreement that science has a broad range of meanings. For Swinburne, science can refer to physics, chemistry and biology or history, psychology and sociology. Similarly, for Thomas, science

can refer to subjects as varied as mathematics and metaphysics.

V. CONCLUSION

Thomas' account of religious epistemology is an intriguing and powerful position when it is situated within contemporary debates. In his account of religious knowledge by faith, one can find weak similarities with Reformed Epistemology. In his account of religious knowledge by science, one can find strong similarities with Natural Theology.

A. *The first strategy*

On the one hand, like Plantinga, Thomas provides arguments *against* the claim that Evidentialism applies to religious beliefs in the case where religious beliefs are held by faith. For him, the act of faith can be defined as an intellectual act which assents to divine truth where this act is commanded by the will which is moved by grace. In the act of faith, the will is moved by its desire for perfect goodness and the will moves the intellect to assent to perfect being. The act of faith is epistemologically justified because perfect goodness and perfect being are different concepts which refer to the same object, namely God. Thomas' account of knowledge by faith shows how a believer is justified in believing the propositions of faith, even though it does not show how one is able to justify one's belief that one is justified [66]. Thus, in this case, he argues that evidence is not strictly necessary for the justification of religious beliefs.

B. *The second strategy*

On the other hand, like Swinburne, Thomas provides arguments *for* the claim that Evidentialism applies to religious beliefs in the case where religious beliefs are held by science. For him, knowledge by science is having a perfect cognition of an object of knowledge. On this account, science is understood as the cognition of the cause of the object of knowledge. Intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses through the phantasms. Since there are no phantasms of immaterial things, the human soul knows immaterial things by comparison with material things which have phantasms. Thus human beings can know God in this life by natural reason. Natural knowledge begins from sense and can go as far as it is led by sensible things. The intellect can be led by sensible things to know whether God exists because they are His effects and depend on Him [67]. So, in this case, Thomas also argues that there is sufficient evidence for religious beliefs.

C. *Intellect and Will*

It might seem strange for Thomas to employ both strategies. It appears contradictory to argue both that evidence is not necessary for the justification of religious beliefs and that there is sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. A brief explanation is necessary. In his anthropology, the two main powers of the human soul are intellect and will. The intellect is the power of the soul to apprehend universal being and truth. The will is the power of the soul to desire

universal good. There is a sense in which the intellect can be understood to be superior to the will. But there is also a sense in which the will can be understood to be superior to the intellect. In the first sense, the will, its act and its object can be seen under the notion of being and truth. In this sense, the intellect is superior to the will and commands it. However, in the second sense, the intellect, its act and its object can also be seen under the notion of good. In this sense, the will is superior to the intellect and can move it [68]. Thomas explains:

From this we can easily understand why these powers include one another in their acts, because the intellect understands that the will wills, and the will wills the intellect to understand. In the same way good is contained in truth, inasmuch as it is an understood truth, and truth in good, inasmuch as it is a desired good [69].

In the case of religious knowledge by faith, it is the will which moves the intellect to assent to God. In the case of religious knowledge by science, it is the intellect which commands the will to desire God. In Thomas' anthropology, the powers of the intellect and the will are interrelated. This is because, in Thomas' metaphysics, universal being and truth and universal good are in reality interchangeable since they both refer to God. Therefore, it is not contradictory for him to argue both that evidence is not necessary for the justification of religious beliefs and that there is sufficient evidence for religious beliefs.

D. Key research findings

Thomas' account of religious epistemology is rich enough to employ a dual strategy in offering a response to the evidentialist objection to religious knowledge. His accounts of anthropology and metaphysics show why arguing that evidence is not necessary for the justification of religious beliefs is logically compatible with arguing that there is sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. Thus Thomistic religious epistemology proposes a fresh way of viewing the contemporary debate because there is no real dichotomy between the two different responses to the evidentialist objection to religious knowledge. Given the importance of the evidentialist challenge, this perspective serves to strengthen the positions of theistic philosophers since they are actually working *with* and not *against* each other. Thomistic religious epistemology shows that the objectives of Reformed Epistemology are actually logically compatible with the objectives of Natural Theology.

Besides showing that Reformed Epistemology is *compatible* with Natural Theology, Thomistic religious epistemology also shows that both positions are actually *necessary* in offering an adequate response to the evidentialist objection to religious knowledge. When seen in the light of Thomistic philosophy, Reformed Epistemology can be interpreted as an epistemological account of religious knowledge in the *believer*. Believers who already have faith do not require evidence for religious beliefs. On the other hand, when seen in the light of Thomistic philosophy, Natural Theology can be interpreted as an epistemological

account of religious knowledge in the *non-believer*. Non-believers who do not have faith do require evidence for religious beliefs. An important and recent example of a non-believer who required evidence for religious belief was Anthony Flew who successfully acquired sufficient evidence for belief in the existence of God [70].

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Edmond Eh is a doctoral candidate at the Philosophy and Religious Studies Programme in the University of Macau, Macau. The author studied philosophy at the National University of Singapore and worked as an Associate Tutor at the Singapore Institute of Management University. His main research now is in Comparative Philosophy, focussing on Thomism and Confucianism. Other research interests include Philosophy of Religion and Epistemology. He also works as a Visiting Professor at the University of Saint Joseph, USA, where he teaches Phenomenology of God and Philosophy of Knowledge.