

## FAITH AND REASON IN HARMONY: AQUINAS' "REASONABLE FAITH"

Aquinas is well recognized for his synthesis of faith and reason. Faith is not a blind "leap in the dark". The very notion of a "reasonable faith" implies a balance between the two extremes of *fideism* and *rationalism*; rationalists reject the need for faith and fideists have no use for reason. Uncompelled by these extremes, Aquinas addresses the two questions that arise in this area, namely just what is the interplay between what we can know about God and what we believe.

In order to understand the proper roles of reason and faith, we need to clarify some terms.

- I. "Faith" as defined by St Thomas Aquinas is: "the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God"<sup>1</sup>
- II. To unpack this complicated definition, again we need to look at some fundamental terms. The human mind has two powers: the *intellect* (knowing) and the *will* (desire). These two powers naturally interact with one another. Example: I see and know a cookie (by my intellect), the cookie looks good, and therefore I want (from my will) to eat it.
- III. I can "know" things in two ways – I can know based upon my own observance of physical evidence or I can know based upon reliable testimony. Knowledge based upon my own observation of the evidence is *knowing* in the strict sense. Knowledge based upon the reliable testimony of others is *believing* or *faith* – you choose to accept what they are saying as true.
- IV. Belief can be natural or supernatural. Example: as a child you may *believe* your science teacher that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Later however you may come to *know* this truth. (Most of what we hold is by belief and not from our own examination of the evidence. Without belief, even science would be impossible.) Belief in this sense does not need Divine Grace.
- V. Divine or Supernatural Belief: we assent to a proposition based upon the authority of God, and we are only able to make that assent because God's grace moved our will to do so. The mysteries of the faith such as the Trinity are beyond the human capacity to know, they can only be believed. We hold them to be true only because God said so.
- VI. This does NOT mean faith is "blind". Grace builds upon our nature and does not destroy it; God chooses to act in accord with our reason and not against it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologica* II-II.2.9

Faith *presupposes* reason and must do so to avoid a vicious circle. One cannot verify faith by faith or establish revelation by appealing to revelation.

What makes faith reasonable? Faith is reasonable in three senses:

1. *Preambles of the Faith*: The preambles of the faith are a subset of “faith” in the broader sense. Some of what God has proposed for our belief can also be known by our natural reason – e.g. the existence of God is both an article of faith and that which can be demonstrated by reason. These sorts of truths are also known as the *preambula fidei* or “preambles of the faith”. How might the preambles aid in the rationality of faith? If some of what we are to believe is demonstrated to be true, it is rationally inferable that the rest of faith that we cannot know by reason is true as well.
2. *Defense of the Mysteries*: The mysteries of the faith cannot be proven by reason, but they can be shown that all objections against them are either fallacious or inconclusive. In other words, reason can show that these mysteries are not offensive to reason.
3. *Miraculous*: The overall content of faith, as a whole, can be shown to come from a credible source. These are the *motiva credibilitatis* or “motives of credibility”. Any messenger of God needs credentials and authentication. It is imprudent and irrational for one to believe in an article of faith without having some reason for thinking that God had in fact actually proposed it in the first place. In harmony with our ability to reason, God chose to accompany his internal grace with external signs that testify to the authority and legitimacy of the message.<sup>2</sup>

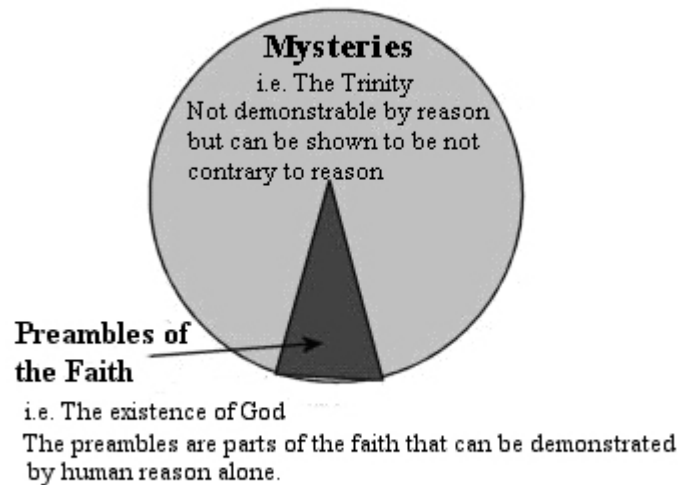
These sources of rationality for faith are diagrammed below. Notice that some of the things that are known by faith can also be known by reason, but this is a small portion of the whole picture of what is known by faith. For the rest of the pie, reason can show that attacks against these doctrines are false or inconclusive, and reason can show the whole picture, that is all of the faith, to have come from a credible source:

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<sup>2</sup> The First Vatican Council puts it; “Nevertheless, *in order that the submission of our faith should be in accordance with reason, it was God's will that there should be linked to the internal assistance of the Holy Spirit external indications of his revelation, that is to say divine acts, and first and foremost miracles and prophecies, which clearly demonstrating as they do the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, are the most certain signs of revelation and are suited to the understanding of all.*” (Vatican I, Session III, 4) emphasis added

## The Overall Content of Faith

Overall content can be shown to have come from a reliable source  
based upon miracles or motives of credibility



## Three Facets of Rationality in Regards to Faith

The CCC sums it up: "What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe "because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived". So "that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit." Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most *certain* signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "motives of credibility" which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> CCC 156, emphasis added

