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## The Proper Role of Credibility in the Work of Theology



### I. The Current Context

It is commonplace for those who look upon distinctively modern Christian theology as mostly a shabby affair to blame an excessive concern with establishing the credibility of the faith's central claims to self-proclaimed enlightened, secular minds. In Protestant theology, the villains are often John Locke, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the entire intellectual project known as Liberal Protestantism. In the Catholic world this fault is associated with the Modernists of the early twentieth century condemned by *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, and, in the minds of some, resurgent in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. The problem with both of these theological approaches, so the argument goes, is that in their quest to present Christian faith as credible within modernity, theologians have allowed systems of thought antithetical to revealed faith to determine and delimit what Christians are entitled to hold about God, Christ, and the nature of human existence. Christian doctrines, therefore, are either translated into a modern idiom denuded of their proper ontological density or eliminated altogether. When this happens, the traditional theological task of "establishing the motives of credibility"<sup>1</sup> for

1. John Lamont offers a nice description: "Motives of credibility' is the term that theologians have coined to refer to the publicly available evidence accessible to believer and unbeliever alike, that can be used to support the contention that the Christian message is communicated by God. The fact that the motives are accessible to both believers and unbelievers means that they cannot include evidence whose acceptance would presuppose faith." *Divine Faith* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2004), 47.

the Church's dogmatic teachings appears to be at odds with the primary vocation of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*.

One should not be surprised, therefore, that many traditionally minded Catholic intellectuals exhibit less concern than previous generations to attune their presentations of the faith to modern notions and sensibilities. When thought to be faced with a choice between fidelity and convincing non-believers that Church teachings are worthy of their belief, these theologians and philosophers choose fidelity. I would even go further and argue that many traditional Catholic thinkers have developed protective strategies to avoid dealing with the very same issues that motivated modern theologians to devise new, ostensibly more "credible" interpretations to the faith. Foremost among these strategies is the attempted creation of a pre-modern, or perhaps one can say *non-modern*, context for doing theology, a context in which distinctively modern challenges such as the philosophical turn to the subject, the historical-critical approach to the Bible, the ecumenical movement, and religious pluralism play no significant role. The working assumption for such a stratagem is that modern theologians have exaggerated the challenges these developments pose to traditional ways of thinking about God revealed in Christ. Thus one witnesses a resurgence of interest in doing theology as Thomas Aquinas did, sometimes termed "ressourcement Thomism" or as Augustine did, or other premoderns.<sup>2</sup> Another option is to offer as model for new theologians to emulate once almost certainly to be forgotten figures such as Matthias Scheeben and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. The attraction seems to be that these men operated before the questions and issues that emerged in the twentieth century, especially during its latter half, had a significant impact on Catholic confidence concerning the adequacy of traditional articulations of Catholic doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

In this vein, two recent converts to Roman Catholicism, R. R. Reno

2. *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Romanus Cessario, O.P.*, edited by Reinhard Hüter and Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

3. Recent efforts to retrieve Scheeben include: Aiden Nichols, O.P., *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Naples, Florida: Augustine Institute Press, 2010) and Bruce Marshall, "Renewing Dogmatic Theology," *First Things* 23, no. 5 (2012): 39–46. Efforts to retrieve Garrigou-Lagrange include: *Reason with Piety: Garrigou-Lagrange in the Service of Catholic Thought* (Naples, Florida: Sapientia Press, 2008); Richard Peddicord, O.P., *Sacred Monster of Thomism: An Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P.* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2004).

and Reinhard Hütter, have called for a return to Neo-Scholasticism in view of the splintering of Catholic theology following Vatican II. According to Reno, the Neo-Scholastics were convinced “that all modern solutions—from Descartes to Locke, from Kant to Comte, from Rousseau to Mill, from Schleiermacher to Hegel—had failed ... [and that] ... the basic structure of the Thomistic theory of knowledge and the Thomistic account of nature and grace provided a lasting solution.”<sup>4</sup> With this confidence of the failure of the modern and the perennial viability of Thomism, Neo-Scholasticism sustained much of Catholic intellectual life from the mid-nineteenth century until the eve of the council. Its collapse was the largely the work of what Reno calls the “heroic” generation, most prominently, Henri De Lubac, S.J., Karl Rahner, S.J., Bernard Lonergan, S.J., and Hans Urs von Balthasar. These figures sought to dethrone Neo-Scholasticism by casting it as a system whose success was premised on a refusal to deal with new trends of thoughts and new cultural development in the world outside the Catholic ghetto. Although their efforts were wildly effective—within a short time the old ways were barely remembered—success came at a high and ironic price. With their Goliath thoroughly defeated, the efforts of these one-time Davids were much less compelling. Moreover, the graduate students of the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s who were required to study their writings, without any background in the system they opposed, received a truncated version of Catholic theology and not enough to build a fully Catholic theological system. Indeed, with the old enemy nothing more than a dark memory, the following generations found themselves unable to comprehend, much less appreciate, the achievements of these heroes of the conciliar era. Reno’s proof of the ultimate failure of the heroic generation is the fact none of them have bequeathed to the Church a unified school of Catholic thought capable of training students in a coherent method. Reinhard Hütter moves in the same direction, but adds that the “discontinuity” with Catholic tradition found in the later work of Rahner has played an especially deleterious role. Rahner’s influence helped solidify the notion that Catholic theology could be done apart from a solid grounding in the tradition.<sup>5</sup> For both Reno and Hütter,

4. R. R. Reno, “Theology after the Revolution: A Review of Fergus Kerr’s *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*,” *First Things* no. 173 (May 2007): 15–21; <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/04/100-theology-after-the-revolution-10> (accessed March 31, 2012).

5. “Rahner himself, however, developed in ways that led him to read Vatican II more and more through a hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture, and this mentality came to define

the solution is a return to the unified system fashioned by Neo-Scholasticism, to a time when Catholic theologians were confident that traditional answers were sufficient to uphold the credibility of the faith.<sup>6</sup>

The allure of returning to a more self-assured, more coherent way of doing theology after the fissiparous creativity that marked much late twentieth-century Catholic theology is plain enough. In the first place, the task of theology is more straightforward when there is no need to worry overly much about, for example, historical challenges to the credibility of biblical accounts of Jesus and the early Church, contemporary philosophical challenges to traditional metaphysics, how certain formulations will sound to non-Catholic Christians, Jews, and so on and on. There are undeniable attractions in the notion that we can go back to a simpler time in which Catholic theology consisted primarily in intramural debates over finely grained theological problems between the different schools of Thomism, with the occasional skirmish with the followers of Soctus. Moreover, there was something undeniably enervating in the anxiety expressed by many theologians after the Council that, apart from serious revision, Catholic belief could no longer be credible to the thoughtful modern.<sup>7</sup> Theology could not long operate on the assumption that the burden fell wholly upon Catholicism to demonstrate that it was not as retrograde as its cultured despisers had so casually concluded. A reaction was inevitable; especially as modernity itself lost its swagger and modernized Christianity its evangelical shine.

• Yet, the understandable desire on the part of many theologians to re-

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the work of most of his American disciples. For them, faithful to the theme of discontinuity, the basic thrust of Transcendental Thomism—to revise and renew a continuous theological tradition—no longer seemed important. As a result, the third generation of American Rahnerians has merged with those who understand systematic theology exclusively as critical reflection on the role of religion in political and cultural contexts, usually in service of a program of liberation, self-realization, and social justice. Today, post-post-Rahnerians treat revision of the Catholic faith and morals—always in pursuit of the paradigmatic modern Protestant goal of relevance—as the main task of Catholic theology.” Reinhard Hütter, “The Ruins of Discontinuity: Looking for Answers to the Fragmentation of Catholic Theology in America,” *First Things* no. 209 (2011): 37–41; <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/12/the-ruins-of-discontinuity> (accessed, March 31, 2012).

6. Hütter has developed his ideas in “A Forgotten Truth?—Theological Faith, Source and Guarantee of Theology’s Inner Unity,” in *Dust Bound for Heaven* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 313–46. In this essay, Hütter compares an early work of Walter Kasper on theological method to one by the Neo-Scholastic, Francisco Muñoz, O.P.

7. Examples of such an approach are, of course, legion, but a particularly influential one is Hans Kung’s *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976).

enact pre- or non-modern Catholic thought and practice in our present context cannot be authentically Catholic if it eschews the responsibility to present the faith as credible to contemporary minds and hearts. The simple fact is that the most influential theologians in the years leading to Vatican II and after were convinced that the credibility of traditional Catholic theology was vulnerable to changes in philosophy, historiography, the appreciation of the Christian and the religious other. They sincerely believed that if Catholicism were not to lose adherents, some revision and adjustment would be required. Whether or not some, many, or most overestimated the power of these challenges and were led to compromise of essentials of the faith, their quest to preserve the credibility of faith in a new context was deeply rooted in Catholic tradition. Accordingly, one must be suspicious when traditional thinkers present themselves as avoiding the mistakes of post-conciliar theology when in reality they are simply avoiding, or excessively downgrading, the questions that motivated revision. The Church needs its intellectuals to face fully and honestly the challenges our modern and postmodern culture presents to the rational credibility of the Catholic faith. To retreat to the comfort of a theological space in which the difficult questions are no longer asked or simply dismissed is to fail the Church, not only in its evangelical mission, but also to neglect the important service theologians can offer believers besieged by a culture hostile to the commitments of faith. In other words, there can be no either/or between fidelity and concern for modern credibility. It will have to be both/and, even if it means running the risk of repeating the mistakes of a repudiated generation.

The modest goal of this essay is to offer a sketch of the history of the question of credibility in Catholic theology as a way to understand the issues involved in any contemporary attempt to uphold a traditional articulation of Catholic faith responsible to reason. Others have presented this history in great detail and sophistication; I am, of course, reliant upon their efforts even as I am not attempting anything like their comprehensiveness.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I am restricting my treatment to two issues. The first is the inherent and perhaps unresolvable tension in claiming that the rational credibility

8. The classic work on the act of faith and its relationship to credibility is Roger Aubert's magisterial survey, *Le Problème de l'acte de foi: Données Traditionnelles et Résultats des Controverses Récentes*, 2nd ed., revised and corrected (Louvain: E. Warny, 1950). Other important works are: Avery Dulles, SJ, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); John Lamont, *Divine Faith*.

of the faith is not a proper motivation for accepting it. Although Catholic theologians have been more or less united in asserting that there are very good reasons, independent of the convictions of faith, to believe that Catholic teaching is vouchsafed by divine authority, they have just as consistently insisted that these reasons are not why a Catholic accepts the faith as true. The salvific assent of faith, what is often termed "divine faith," that God has spoken in Christ and through the Church, is premised upon the authority of the revealing God as first truth and independent of any arguments for the credibility of what has been revealed. The second issue I wish to highlight is the importance of context in determining how theologians over the centuries have gone about establishing the motives of credibility. To argue that a particular belief is "credible" as opposed to "doubtful" or "incredible" is to anticipate an audience with a predictable manner of assessing religious truth claims. In other words, the faith's credibility at any given time or place is determined by particular cultural formations outside the Church. If the Catholic theologian is to retrieve this important aspect of the tradition, he or she will not only need to deal with the tensions between faith and reason but also grapple with determining the characteristics of the contemporary audience with respect to arguments of credibility.

## II. Credibility in the History of Theology

Concern that the Christian Gospel be presented and judged as worthy of belief is as old as the faith itself. In the New Testament we find Jesus presented as fulfilling Jewish messianic prophecies and as a miracle-worker.<sup>9</sup> These stories function not merely to witness to what Jesus did and said but also as confirmatory signs to future readers that the Church's claims about Jesus' divinity are to be trusted. The logic is pretty simple and also quite Jewish: if Jesus fulfilled prophecies or performed miracles, it could only be because he was doing God's own work. The supreme instance of this kind of reasoning is the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Indeed, when St. Paul encounters the risen Jesus, he quickly deduces that since only God has the power over death, the followers of Christ he was sent to persecute were not blasphemers but were proclaiming God's own truth (Acts 9.1; 1

9. "A careful study of the NT throws considerable indirect evidence on the way in which the infant Church carried out its apologetical encounter with Judaism, with paganism, and with deviant tendencies that arose within the Christian community." Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 1.

Cor. 15.12–19). Just as the true prophets of Israel had always been revealed as such by God's confirming activity, the resurrection of Jesus was divine validation of the Gospel preached by his followers. Paul's own recounting of the tradition of Jesus' appearance after his death to the apostles and others to the believers at Corinth (1 Cor. 15.1–8) adds an interesting twist. He tells his readers that some of the witnesses to this miraculous event are still alive (1 Cor. 15.6), holding out the possibility that they could check the story for themselves.<sup>10</sup> This apologetical strategy was clearly intended to increase the persuasive power of Paul's witness, to believer and potential believer alike, despite the fact that few or perhaps none of the Corinthians would have been able to take up the challenge. Paul holds out this enticing possibility not because of any incredulity with the miraculous on the part of the letter's audience beyond the normal suspicion against fraud, but because of the importance of the claimed miracle to the faith. Paul's desire is to present a credible argument for the foundational truth of the faith in ways appropriate to the expectations of his audience. This approach finds New Testament sanction with 1 Peter's imperative that followers of Christ "always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1 Peter 3.15).

Concern to support the credibility of the faith was a significant preoccupation of the Church Fathers, as well.<sup>11</sup> St. Augustine put the necessity for this task in a particularly straightforward manner: "no one . . . believes anything unless he has first thought it ought to be believed."<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is a matter of singular importance to discern what informs the "ought." That is, what kinds of evidence render the Gospel more credible and to whom? As Paul makes clear, the audience includes believers as well as unbelievers. Accordingly, the apologetics of the New Testament presume that reports

10. I am following the interpretation of this passage found in Ulrich Wilkens, *Resurrection: What the Early Christians Thought about the Resurrection* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1978).

11. For Dulles' treatment of the apologetics of "the patristic era" see *A History of Apologetics*, 22–71. Others include: Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003); *The Spirit of Early Christianity: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). A more technical treatment of Clement of Alexander, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine is found in John Lamont, *Divine Faith*, 28–46.

12. Augustine, "On the Predestination of the Saints," in *St. Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, translated by John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 221.

of fulfilled prophecies or miracle working will be received as the kinds of things that increase the credibility of the underlying message. Thus, the very act of seeking credibility assumes a culturally particular context in which credibility can be established in certain ways. Part of the wisdom of the Fathers was the recognition that the context had shifted in significant respects from that envisioned by the biblical writers. In addition to miracles and fulfilled prophecies (which still played a significant part of Patristic apologetics), there were also arguments that the new movement deserved tolerance from the Roman authorities, that the refutation of Jewish critics were without merit, and that a deep harmony existed between Christian faith and the best of Greek philosophy. With respect to the last, early Christian intellectuals gave much of their apologetic energy to showing that the God of Israel and Jesus possessed the attributes required of the sole God: immateriality, eternity, impassibility, and so on.<sup>13</sup> While some historians of theology, most notably Adolf Harnack, have argued that this excessive concern for philosophical credibility led to a distorting Hellenization of the God of Bible, others, such as Benedict XVI, have seen a providential encounter between the legitimate insights of Greek thought and the new faith. If the Fathers had rejected the challenges presented by the philosophers, they would have been guilty of failing to see that faith in the Word of God entails commitment to God as “logos.”<sup>14</sup> A religion severed from reason is both dangerous and unworthy of adherence. Accordingly, the Fathers had a general sense that Greek philosophy disclosed enough of the truth of things that the faith was well served by presenting itself as credible in light of it.

Yet, while the Fathers confidently asserted the reasonableness of being a Christian, the majority of them was also clear that faith is not a reasoned deduction from the evidence. For example, Clement of Alexandria com-

13. Important studies of this aspect of patristic thought include Wolfhart Pannenberg’s “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2, translated by George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 119–83; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993).

14. “John thus spoke the final word on the Biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of Biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist.” Pope Benedict XVI, “The Regensburg Address,” in James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 135.



pared faith in Christ to a student accepting what is taught by a beloved and trusted teacher. Since Christ is the Son of God, the doctrine he teaches can be trusted absolutely. Likewise, Origen, who spent much energy and time refuting the criticisms of the pagan Celsus, denied that a good Christian believer should be unshaken by such criticisms. There was no absolute need to refute Celsus to prove the faith; the spiritual power of the Gospel itself provides sufficient warrant. Chrysostom also rejected any need for evidence for the faith beyond that God has spoken in Christ.<sup>15</sup> John Lamont sums up their common position as follows:

All of them react to pagan criticism of the irrationality of Christian belief by flatly contradicting it. They claim that it is rational; and the reason they give for its rationality is the fact that it is believing God, who has the highest possible degree of authority. This authority gives faith a certainty that is equal to, or greater than, that of any other kind of knowledge. This certainty is not conferred by the signs or evidence for God's having spoken, although these signs suffice to make the fact of his having spoken beyond reasonable doubt. Faith is not based on these signs, it is based simply on God's spoken word.<sup>16</sup>

This twofold approach of a faith supported by evidence but not accepted for that reason will be followed by the majority Catholic tradition.

During the Middle Ages, working out the rational credibility of faith lay near the heart of Western theology; but, again, one must be careful to note another shift in context. The alien and culturally powerful conceptual framework of polytheism faced by the Church Fathers had disappeared with the creation of Christendom. There was awareness of Islam as a competitor, of course, but it would be a serious mistake to confuse the role arguments for the rational credibility of the faith played in medieval scholasticism with how they functioned in the Patristic period. Yes, the discovery of Aristotle's thought presented a challenge for those convinced by his philosophy to articulate Christian truth, in its terms, whenever beneficial. Nonetheless, even taking into account the Averroists in Paris, the views of Aristotle did not present medieval intellectuals with an opposing thought-world in light of which faith must be established as credible. Aquinas himself alludes to this fact in his *Summa contra gentiles* when he asserts that his job in defending the faith is rendered more difficult than the Fathers because, unlike them, he does not have personal experience of the "sacri-

15. For references, see Lamont, *Divine Faith*, 30-44 and Dulles' *Assurance*, 21-23.

16. Lamont, *Divine Faith*, 46.

legious remarks of individual men," which would tell me which arguments should be used "as the basis of proceeding to a refutation of their errors."<sup>17</sup> Aquinas had to imagine what would count as rationally credible to the intellectual opponents of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Such arguments, however imperfect the setting, were seen as necessary, and the master of theology in a medieval university was called upon to engage all possible objections to the truth of the Gospel and provide counter-arguments appropriate to the matter at hand. All are aware of Aquinas's rational arguments for the *preambula fidei*, such as demonstrations that there exists a deity with the proper attributes, the world is a creation, and that the highest form of human happiness is everlasting contemplation of God.<sup>19</sup> When dealing with revealed truths inaccessible to natural reason, however, Aquinas restricts himself to probabilistic arguments for the fittingness of the Incarnation and other revealed mysteries.<sup>20</sup> Reason supports revealed faith by dutifully responding to all objections coming from those who view the faith as irrational or unworthy of God's nature. While such arguments are necessary to demonstrate that the faith is not contrary to reason, Aquinas follows the Fathers in rejecting any notion that the act of faith can be based upon them.

Aquinas's approach to the proper theological placement for rational demonstrations for the credibility of Christianity comes through his analysis of the act of faith and, in particular, his assertion that God's authority as revealer is the formal object of faith (*formalis ratio obiecti*).<sup>21</sup> The formal object of a thing known is the means by which it is known, that is, what motivates the intellect that a judgment is worthily made. Aquinas gives the example of geometry whereby, "the conclusions are the things known

17. SCG I, chap. 2, no. 3.

18. The whole quotation points even more to Aquinas's sensitivity to the contextual character of such argumentation: "To proceed against individual errors, however, is a difficult business. . . . In the first place it is difficult because of the sacrilegious remarks of individual men who have erred are not so well known to us so that we may use what they say as the basis of proceeding to a refutation of their errors. This is, indeed, the method that the ancient Doctors of the Church used in the refutation of the errors of the Gentiles. For they could know the positions taken by the Gentiles since they themselves had been Gentiles, or at least had lived among the Gentiles and had been instructed in their teaching." SCG I, chap. 2, no. 3.

19. A recent treatment of this aspect of Aquinas's thought is found in Ralph McInerny, *Preambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), esp. 26–32.

20. Aquinas's argument for the fittingness of the Incarnation is in SCG IV, chap. 54.

21. My treatment of Aquinas here follows Aubert, *Le Problème de l'acte de foi*, 43–71.

materially, while the middle term of demonstration, by which the conclusions are apprehended, are the formal account of the knowing."<sup>22</sup> Things are different, however, when the object of knowing is divinely revealed and therefore beyond the reach of natural reason. Unable to discern the truth of what is revealed by science, believers are motivated to accept the faith as true because it is revealed by God and God is truth itself. As first truth, God is an unimpeachable authority, and in faith the believer accepts what God has revealed for no other reason than because it is revealed by God.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Catholics believe what the Church professes (the material objects of faith) because they believe that its profession is God's own.<sup>24</sup>

The imperfect character of the act of faith from the perspective of the human knower, that is, that the believer assents to something that she does not see to be true from either first principles or the operations of reason, means that the will must play a role. Accordingly, Aquinas describes faith as "an act of understanding assenting to divine truth by command of the will, moved by God in grace."<sup>25</sup> Yet while this act of volition commands the intellect to assent to what is not certainly known, Aquinas insists the assenting will cannot be without rational motivation, otherwise, its willing would not be a free act. In a move with significant consequences for future theologians, the Dominican master will distinguish between external inducements [*exterius inducens*] and internal causes [*causam interiorem*] leading to faith.<sup>26</sup> "One who believes has a sufficient inducement for believing, for he is led to faith by the authority of God's teaching confirmed by miracles and, still more powerfully, by the interior instinct of God inviting him to believe; thus he does not believe lightly."<sup>27</sup> The internal cause provides a motive for saving faith by leading the will to accept as a desirable good the eternal life that is a reward for belief. This movement of the will is itself the result of an inpouring of God's grace. In addition, God provides external inducements that what is purposed for belief is truly divine, persuasive arguments which give a believer confidence that God stands behind these purported truths and marvels.<sup>28</sup> Among the latter, Aquinas lists the mira-

22. ST II-II, q. 1, a.1. I am using the translation in *On Faith: "Summa Theologiae" 2-2. Qq. 1-16 of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Mark D. Jordan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 33.

23. ST II-II, q. 1, a. 1.

25. ST II-II, q. 2, a. 9.

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

28. "In one way, as an outward inducement, such as a miracle seen or a human persuasion

24. ST II-II, q. 5, a. 3.

26. ST II-II, q. 1, a. 4, ad 3.

cles of Jesus,<sup>29</sup> as well as the saints.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in a decision that will have enormous impact on later Catholic apologists, he will point to “the wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith” and the consequent effect that even the humble “believe such lofty truths,” “accomplish such difficult actions,” and “have such high hopes.”<sup>31</sup>

Aquinas’s approach to argue both for reason’s capacity to ensure faith’s credibility as revealed truth and that the works of reason belong outside the act of faith was standard among the Scholastics. A number of prominent Franciscans, however, were led to distinguish between acquired and infused faith, the former the product of reason, the latter the product of grace and thereby salvific. Although the category of acquired faith is found in Alexander of Hales, it is given greater prominence by Duns Scotus, who argues that infused faith adds no new evidential content, but merely enables a firmer assent of the will through the power of grace. When addressing the question of why infused faith is salvific but not acquired faith, Scotus offers no reason beyond the testimony of the Bible and the doctors of the Church that this is God’s positive decree.<sup>32</sup> Less voluntaristic theologians will seek other reasons, but the effort required to keep acquired and infused faith separate would only increase in the face of the Reformation

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inducing one to faith.” ST II-II, q. 6, a. 1. Aquinas adds that the insufficiency of the outward inducements requires an “inward cause” [*causam interiorem*], which is the elevating power of grace.

29. “For since those things which are of faith surpass human reason, they cannot be proved by human arguments, but need to be proved by the argument of Divine power: so that when a man does works that God alone can do, we may believe that what he says is from God: just as when a man is the bearer of letters sealed with the king’s ring, it is to be believed that what they contain expresses the king’s will.” ST III, q. 43, a. 1.

30. “But because oral teaching that is offered requires confirmation so that it may be accepted, unless it be evident in itself, and because things that are of faith are not evident to human reason, it was necessary for some means to be provided whereby the words of the preachers of the faith might be confirmed. Now, they could not be confirmed by any rational principles in the way of demonstration, since the objects of faith surpass reason. So, it was necessary for the oral teaching of the preachers to be confirmed by certain signs, whereby it might be plainly shown that this oral teaching came from God; so, the preachers did such things as *healing the sick*, and the *performance of other difficult deeds*, which only God could do.” SCG III, chap. 154, no. 8.

31. “This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is the clearest witness of the signs given in the past; so that it is not necessary that they should be further repeated, since they appear most clearly in their effect. For it would be truly more wonderful than all signs if the world had been led by simple and humble men to believe such lofty truths, to accomplish such difficult actions, and to have such high hopes. Yet it is also a fact that, even in our own time, God does not cease to work miracles through His saints for the confirmation of the faith.” SCG I, chap. 6, no. 4.

32. For discussion of this see Dulles, *Assurance*, 36–37; *Divine Faith*, 83–89.

and the emergence of Enlightenment thinkers certain that reason can be the sole guide in all things, including faith. In other words, the balance begun by the Fathers between motives of credibility and faith as trust in God as revealer was hard to maintain in the ruins of Christendom.

With the onset of the Reformation and the first stirring of Modernity, the context for demonstrating the credibility of Catholic faith became increasingly complex and hostile. To be sure, Catholic apologists of this period no longer had to conjure their opponents out of dusty codices or secondhand accounts of travelers; their opponents stood before them and were armed with clear ideas and relatively predictable standards of assessment. If the opponent was a Protestant, the Catholic could either challenge the rational coherence of *sola scriptura* as a theological principle or defend distinctively Catholic doctrines on biblical grounds. If the opponent was a rationalist, whether attacking revealed religion or religion itself, the terms upon which credibility could be determined were relatively obvious. Not surprisingly, Catholic apologetics thrived in this new environment. Indeed, in the face of these attacks, one can discern an increased confidence that the truth of the Catholic faith could be demonstrated with near certainty. The clearest magisterial expression of this confidence was Vatican I's *Dei Filius*.

Pius IX's council sought to balance faith carefully between the condemned extremes of fideism and rationalism. Accordingly, it described faith, on the one hand, as "a supernatural virtue ... inspired and assisted by the face of God" by which members of the Church "believe that what [God] has revealed is true, not because of the intrinsic truth of things ... recognized by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, it taught that the supernatural character of faith neither diminishes its "harmony with reason" nor reduces it to a "blind impulse." Rather, a reason open to the truth finds both "exterior helps," such as miracles and prophecies, and the "interior helps of the Holy Spirit." Together, "they are the most certain signs of divine revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all people." The document goes on to add the Catholic Church as itself a sign of the credibility of the message it preserves and proclaims with authority. "The Church by herself, with her marvelous propagation, eminent holiness and inexhaustible fruitfulness in everything that is good, with her Catholic unity and invincible

33. *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (DS), ed. H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann, 43th ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013), no. 3008.

stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable testimony of her divine mission.”<sup>34</sup> Nearly a decade later, the next pope, Leo XIII, will assert along the same lines: “In the same manner, reason declares that the doctrine of the Gospel has even from its very beginning been made manifest by certain wonderful signs, the established proofs, as it were, of unshaken truth; and that all, therefore, who set faith in the Gospel do not believe rashly as though following cunningly devised fables, but, by a most reasonable consent, subject their intelligence and judgment to an authority which is divine.”<sup>35</sup>

Although these conciliar and papal statements were clearly intended to set the Church’s apologetic strategy in a hostile world on a firm theological footing, it left too many unanswered questions and was too vulnerable to critique to easily serve this function for long. For example, if the credibility of faith was so strong on rational grounds, how could it not play some role in moving the unbeliever to faith? Or, otherwise put, how could an unbeliever presented with this evidence reject the faith and not be guilty of irrationality?<sup>36</sup> On the other side of the ledger, how could the believer’s faith not be affected negatively or remain committed to reason when these arguments are cast into doubt? The tensions between the demands of reason and a faith motivated by authority had been part and parcel of Catholic theology since the patristic period but they became more acute as the Enlightenment matured and the intellectual challenges to traditional Catholicism gained in strength. Among the many such challenges, we can mention the demonstrable success of empirical rationality and its application to more and more of reality. If this new form of reason had proved so successful in overthrowing traditional thinking concerning nature, why should it not be applied to the claims of religious faith? Of equal importance was the development of a new historiography that eschewed reliance on authoritative witnesses to past events and sought to reconstruct the past in accord with what the new science was revealing about the way the world operated.

34. DS, no. 3013.

35. *Aeterni Patris*, para. 5. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_04081879\\_aeterni-patris\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris_en.html) (accessed April 27, 2012).

36. The danger of one thinking that this is consequence of Catholic teaching explains the following condemnation of Vatican I: “If anyone says that the assent of Christian faith is not free, but that it necessarily follows from the arguments which human reason can furnish in its favour; or if anyone says that God’s grace is only necessary for that living faith which worketh through charity, let him be anathema.” DS, no. 3035

This not only made any apologetical appeal to miracles problematic, but served to undermine the public's confidence in the historical credibility of the scriptures.

From our contemporary perspective we can discern two basic responses with respect to the credibility of Catholic faith: 1) the assertion of different standards for the educated and the uneducated, and 2) the importation of the motives of credibility into the act of faith itself. The first response is found in the writing and teaching of an influential Jesuit professor at the Gregorian University, Louis Cardinal Billot, S.J. (1846–1931), which reached the public through his popularizer, J. V. Bainvel, S.J.<sup>37</sup> Billot followed the tradition of comparing the assent of faith to the human act of believing something on the basis of another's authority. I believe my doctor when she tells me that my symptoms indicate pneumonia because she is a doctor, and not on account of any personal expertise in such matters. Bainvel termed this kind of faith as one of "simple authority" and offered the exemplar of a child placidly accepting the authority of a loving parent.<sup>38</sup> Yet, given the high claims of rational credibility for faith asserted by Vatican I, Billot is compelled to ask whether this kind of trust in divine authority meets these standards. To answer this question, Billot notes a complexity within the common human experience of trusting the authority of another. That is, the extent to which it is rational to accept the testimony of another without quibble depends on one's access, either through opportunity or education, to potentially supportive or undermining evidence that the one speaking is to be trusted. To return to our example, it is quite rational for me as a patient to accept the diagnosis of the doctor simply because she is a doctor with medical training and not because what she says sounds right to me. Likewise, in faith the believer accepts what God reveals because he is God and to be trusted; the credibility of what has been purportedly revealed plays no role. Yet, while it is true enough that when I am sitting on that examination table covered merely, and inadequately, by a tie-in-the-back smock, I am at the mercy of my doctor's authority and humbly accept it, this acceptance need not be final. I may well have reason to question my

37. Billot's writings were not widely published, but see J. V. Bainvel, SJ, *Faith and the Act of Faith*, 3rd ed., translated by Leo C. Sterck (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder, 1926).

38. "To believe is to know and to affirm a truth, not because we see it in itself—that would be *science*;—not because we see the truth of it in the word of God,—that would be *scientific faith*;—but simply and solely *because God has said it*, simply and exclusively, upon the authority of the divine word." Bainvel, *The Act of Faith*, 60.

doctor's prescription later because I have spoken to someone with more medical knowledge than I or because I found a website that explains the issue at hand to me in an understandable and convincing manner. Of course, the credibility I find in the doctor's word shifts as I educate myself further and, consequently, the reasonableness of accepting her authority. In other words, the level of trust I can with reason invest in my doctor's authority changes as I gain expertise. Accordingly, if I have knowledge upon which to assess the competency of my physician it would be contrary to reason not to employ it.

For Billot, if human faith has this dynamic, something akin must pertain to Catholic faith. While true faith is a matter of trusting God's word because he is God, there are also two types of evidence by available to potential or wavering believer capable of providing certitude that whatever God reveals must be true and that God has in fact spoken in Christ and speaks through the Church. With respect to the first kind of evidence, Billot is thinking of metaphysical principles that make the idea of God uttering falsity an impossible. The second kind of evidence concerns the historical credibility of Jesus' miracles, his fulfillment of prophecies, and the resurrection, as well as the moral miracle that the Church has clearly been throughout the ages. These supports do not touch upon the credibility of the content of the purported revelation, but only that the revealer is to be trusted without question. Faith remains a matter of trusting God, therefore, even for the tutored. Yet, what about the person without the capability or the access to the motives of credibility, is her act of faith rational? Yes, because the expectations for aligning one's trust in an authority is relative to one's education. What is not rational for the learned can be rational for the simple.<sup>39</sup>

Although Billot's position, which is more complex than presented here, enjoyed great influence among Catholic theologians during early decades of the 20th century, it left enough ambiguity to allow for a wholly different approach to the matter to arise. In reaction to the problems involved in combining escalated confidence that Catholic faith could be demonstrated

39. Avery Dulles summarizes Billot on this point as follows: Can uneducated persons obtain sufficient rational evidence to exclude the probability of error? Billot and his school reply that such cannot be held to a type of certitude exceeding their capabilities. To accept the fact of revelation on the word of parents and teachers may be prudent for them, although not for more educated Christians. Their rational certitude of the fact of revelation can be 'relative' or 'respective,' in the sense of being adequate for themselves." *Assurance*, 105.



by reason alone with an insistence that such confidence is not the motivation for divine faith, Maurice Blondel and Pierre Rousselot, S.J. shifted the whole question by placing the judgment of credibility within the graced act of faith. In part this involved a reconfiguring of the traditional Thomistic division between nature and grace. The claims made by Billot and others, in an effort to be faithful to Vatican I, for the power of reason to demonstrate the truth of faith seemed to endanger the need for a faith produced by the infusion of grace. Some theologians would even speak of a natural judgment of credentia that expresses a duty to assent to the Catholic faith in light of the evidences of reason.<sup>40</sup> If this is true, what remains for grace to do? To avoid this overlap, Blondel and Rousselot argued that grace is at work in the reasoning about the truth of faith and rejected the idea that someone could come to certainty that Catholicism was the true religion by purely natural means. In his *Letter on Apologetics*, Blondel argues that the effects of grace on the will as well as the intellect is determinative in how any particular person receives the arguments that God has in fact spoken in Christ and through the Church.<sup>41</sup> When presented with the claims of faith, a potential believer must see that what the Church proclaims about God is good for him, meeting his needs as a person. If the judgment leads to assent, it is God's grace at work stimulating and shaping the believer's affections so that the arguments in its favor increase in power. Apart from such divine involvement, the external signs of credibility would not warrant the full surrender that is the nature of authentic faith.<sup>42</sup>

Rousselot's *The Eyes of Faith* makes a similar point.<sup>43</sup> Working off of Thomas' idea that the intellect is drawn toward the true just as the will is drawn to the good, Rousselot postulates that these two faculties work together under the power of grace to arrive at the judgment that the faith is worthy of belief. Whereas traditional defenders of the rationality of faith focus on the evidential force of particular assertions of fact, e.g., miracles accomplished, prophecies fulfilled, and examples of heroic virtues by the

40. Among the theologians who treat of credentia is the Dominican A. Gardeil, *La Crédibilité et L'Apologetique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1908). Aubert treats Gardeil's proposal in *Le Problème de l'acte de foi*, 393-451.

41. Maurice Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995).

42. For treatments of Blondel, see Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 271-79, and Aubert, *Le Problème de l'acte de foi*, 277-94.

43. Pierre Rousselot, S.J., *The Eyes of Faith, Answer to Two Attacks*, translated by Joseph Donceel, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

saints, they forget that people do not make life decisions in light of a collection of particular pieces of evidence. Rather, it is the often unarticulated connections among the particulars that together constitute evidence worthy of momentous change of mind.

The same holds for faith, for the *lumen fidei* ["the light of faith"], when we perceive something as credible. Short of a miracle this light does not provide us with new objects for knowing; *determinatio fidei est ex auditu* ["faith is specified by what we hear"]. But it accounts for our perceiving the connection, making the synthesis, giving the assent. The sufficient reason for these operations, which ... is not located in *representations* entertained.<sup>44</sup>

The intellect, therefore, played a necessary role in gathering the piece of evidence into a convincing whole. This activity for Rousselot is not prior to the act of faith, but rather is within it and under the influence of grace. In other words, "the *reasonableness*" of faith "derives from its very *supernaturalness*."<sup>45</sup>

It is difficult to exaggerate the influence Blondel and Rousselot would have on the Catholic approach to the credibility of faith in the twentieth century. Although certain Thomists saw in their approach a collapsing of the natural and the supernatural aspects of the faith and thus, in essence, undermining the rational credibility of the faith, others such as Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner would follow them in wholly refashioning the traditional distinctions between nature and grace, and faith and reason. To make a very and complex long story very short and simple, these efforts to bring the motives of credibility within the act of faith itself and under the purview of grace appeared in the eyes of many to render the traditional work of establishing the motives of credibility obsolete. It is not too much to say that the standard arguments in support of the Church's claim to be a legate of revealed truths (e.g., miracles, prophecies, the glorious history of the Church) fell almost out of sight and were replaced with anthropological arguments which sought to correlate what had been revealed in Christ with fundamental human desire. The questions over which generations of theologians had energetically debated concerning the proper balance of nature and grace, intellect and will, and faith and reason lost their urgency, and with them a sense of the continued importance of establishing the motives of credibility of faith.

44. *Eyes of Faith*, 28. Emphasis in original.

45. *Ibid.*, 45.

### III. Conclusions

What does this history teach the contemporary theologian seeking to maintain fidelity to Catholic tradition in our contemporary context? I find two broad lessons. The first is simply the seriousness with which Catholic theologians have taken to demonstrate the credibility of the faith, i.e., that the option to believe what the Catholic Church teaches is a rational one. Beginning with the New Testament, Christian intellectuals have recognized the importance of showing the reasonableness of the assent of faith, not only in order to counter the attacks of critics but as an aid to the believer. Arguments for credibility serve this purpose even if authentic Catholic faith is not a conclusion from the working of human reason, but a trusting assent to what God has freely revealed of himself and his plan of salvation. As we have seen, maintaining the proper balance between a faith that is well supported by evidence and one that is not accepted for that reason, proved a difficult task, especially as the Church faced the challenges of the collapse of Christendom and the rise of secular reason. Yet, the very fact that theologians exerted so much energy on the problem is testimony to the importance of holding together the supernatural character of faith and its rational credibility. Thus, no theologian hoping to work within the greater tradition can avoid the issues that threaten to undermine the credibility of Catholicism. If the theologians of the conciliar eras all too often exaggerated the revision such challenges required and lost their way, their concern for credibility in the modern age was itself deeply rooted in tradition. Ironic it would be, therefore, if the would-be traditional theologian of today lost touch with this tradition in an effort to avoid the mistakes of their modern predecessors. Yet, any effort to reconnect with the issue of credibility will need to confront the questions raised by Blondel and Roussetot on whether grace and nature should be distinguished to the point of making 'scientific faith' possible. Any return to a time prior to their contributions will require massive efforts to either resurrect the traditional motives or coming up with new ones that neither rely upon a graced intellect or the intrinsic appeal of the content of revelation.

The second lesson is the importance of context for the question of credibility. As we have seen, theologians adjusted their arguments for the faith in light of the anticipated audiences, whether Jewish, pagan, Muslim, Protestant, or secular. Not only did the kinds of argument offered change

in light of the chances of a positive reception but also how the arguments were made. For this reason, the contemporary traditional theologian interested in establishing the faith's credibility will first need to determine his or her audience. This will be no easy task. Contemporary societies are marked by what Brad Gregory has described as "a hyperpluralism of religious and secular commitments, not any shared or any convergent view of what 'we' think is true or right or good."<sup>46</sup> While some continue to believe that they have the truth in matters of religion, it is rare that some one believes an objective argument will settle things. Of course, there are still committed atheists roaming the land and the airwaves asserting that no rational person could believe in a supernatural being much less believe that he has spoken a universally significant Word. Yet, such pugnacious secularists are the exception and they appear just as out of step with their age as the most committed believer. Reason, it is thought, simply does not have the power to decide such matters. Ours is time when the surest sign of moral elevation is to allow an easy-going tolerance and let others believe about religious matters what they will unless they directly threaten public life. The would-be apologist seeking an audience for the credibility of the Catholic faith is, therefore, very likely to be disappointed.

Does this mean the end of apologetics? I do not think so, but it does mean that Catholic theologians must develop new and creative strategies. If the theologians of the early modern period had to learn how to operate in the ruins of Christendom, the contemporary Catholic faces the ruins of modernity. The task, however, remains the same: to present the Catholic faith as credible to whomever might encounter its message. This means that the Catholic intellectual must honestly confront every challenge that might obstruct a potential believer's path to faith or threaten the peace of someone already committed to the faith. Any retreat to a more comfortable past is to abandon those who live in the present. Such neglect can find no support from the tradition.

46. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 11.