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**THE BALANCE OF FAITH AND REASON:
THE ROLE OF CONFIRMATION IN
THE THOUGHT OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one
who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.
—2 Peter 3:15¹

In the midst of a plurality of religions, Christians are committed to the proposition that the fullness of truth can only be found in communion with Christ and His Church, but if they do not wish to hold their beliefs irrationally, then they must also have some account or reason for why they believe what they do. The so-called “evidentialist objection” against Christianity, which concludes that one should not believe the truths of Christian faith, relies upon two powerful premises that strike at the heart of this tension between faith and reason: (1) one should not believe what does not have sufficient evidence, and (2) Christian beliefs do not have sufficient evidence. The evidentialist objection is troubling, for Christians defending their beliefs do not wish to say that they are founded upon mere human evidence, for they believe by faith; yet still, Christians also wish to affirm that “those who place their faith in this truth, for which human reason offers no experience, do not believe lightly, as those following unlearned fables.”²

¹ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). All subsequent scriptural citations (save those found within a text) will be from this edition of the Bible.

² “Huiusmodi autem veritati, cui ratio humana experimentum non praebet, fidem adhibentes non leviter credunt, quasi indoctas fabulas secuti” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra*

St. Thomas Aquinas offers a unique and compelling solution to this objection, which satisfies the Christian need to have faith be a gift from God, while respecting the proper role of reason. In solving the evidentialist objection, it is especially helpful to focus on St. Thomas's teaching on the role of divine confirmation of revealed truths—for the nature of this confirmation and the extent to which it is necessary for Christian belief provides at least one key to understanding the order of faith and reason within the Christian life.

Solutions to the Evidentialist Objection

For St. Thomas, two extremes must be avoided by the Christian who wishes to provide some sort of justification for his belief. On the one hand, a Christian cannot say that what he holds by faith is able to be proved by human reason: "Arguments from human reason have no place in proving what is of faith."³ For the doctrines of the faith should not be "included under the measure of philosophy, as if someone would not believe unless he could hold it through philosophy, since on the contrary, philosophy should be brought under the measure of faith."⁴ The reason why the articles of faith must themselves be beyond human reason is because faith is the "the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1), and if human reason could demonstrate the articles of faith, then they would be intellectually seen and known, and thus, no longer pertain to what is held by faith proper (that being said, for Aquinas, the preambles of faith are indeed demonstrable by human reason). However, this does not necessarily mean that there is no reasoning involved in the act or acts that are prior to belief and which lead one to assent to the articles of faith.

Gentiles, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus XIII (Romae: Typis Riccardi Garroni, 1918), lib. 1, c. 6, 18). This translation and all subsequent translations of St. Thomas are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ "Argumenta rationis humanae non habeant locum ad probandum quae fidei sunt" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Pars prima summae theologiae: a questione I ad quaestionem XLIX*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus IV (Romae: S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1888), q. 1, a. 8, ad 1).

⁴ "Ea quid sunt fidei includantur sub metis philosophiae, ut scilicet si aliquis credere nolit nisi quod per philosophiam haberi potest, cum e converso philosophia sit ad metas fidei redigenda" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus L (Roma: Commissio Leonina, 1992), q. 2, a. 1).

For a Christian does not wish to say that there is no reason why he holds his beliefs to be true rather than those of non-Christians; fideism is the opposite extreme that must be avoided by Christians. As has been mentioned above, a Christian does not believe the truths of faith lightly. Thus however one ultimately solves the evidentialist objection, the following two points must also hold true: (1) one must always maintain that the articles of faith are themselves unable to be demonstrated by human reason and (2) one must hold that the articles of faith are reasonably or justifiably held.

Concerning the precise nature of this justification or reasonability of Christian belief, there exists a wide range of opinions. For even if one admits that the articles of faith are not themselves demonstrable by human reason, the testimony to these articles by witnesses is indeed accessible, and therefore, it would appear that men must have some way to determine whether the testimony that they receive is worthy of belief. In the *Summa theologiae* and throughout his works, Aquinas is clear that the reason why Christians believe the truths of faith, truths that are above human reason, is because it is God who reveals them: "The faith of which we are speaking does not assent to anything except because it is revealed by God."⁵ Thus, the justification for believing that the doctrines of Christian faith are true is that they are revealed by God Himself, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. St. Thomas goes even further and says that "we do not believe what is above human reason unless it is God revealing."⁶ But this presents a further problem, for it means that there must also be some means by which man can know that it is really God Who is revealing: either directly, in a special revelation, or through the testimony of witnesses.

Here again, there exists a range of views concerning how one knows whether or not it is God Who is revealing or whether the witnesses are actually testifying in God's name. On one end of the spectrum, one finds the Lockean opinion of scholars like Richard Swinburne, who holds that there are rational means of determining whether or not a message is from God, and moreover, he claims that it is every man's epistemic duty to ensure that the testimony he receives is really from God. Under this interpretation, the manner in which one ensures that the testimony is really from

⁵ "Non enim fides de qua loquimur assentit alicui nisi quia est a Deo revelatum" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Secunda secundae summae theologiae: a questione I ad quaestionem LVI*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus VIII (Romae: S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1895), q. 1, a. 1, resp.).

⁶ "Non credimus nisi Deo revelante" (*SCG* 1.9).

God is by weighing the probability of it actually being from God. In the words of John Locke, “Whether it be a divine revelation, or no, reason must judge.”⁷ Locke defines reason as “the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deductions made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties.”⁸ And since reason “can never permit the mind to reject a greater evidence to embrace what is less evident,”⁹ whether or not one should accept a revelation as being from God is strictly a matter of evidence for Locke.

Swinburne’s views on this matter are similar: “We need to take steps to acquire beliefs as probably true, that is, as rationally well supported as we can get them.”¹⁰ Thus, under this interpretation, the motivation for believing the articles of faith is that it seems probable to human reason that the revelation is from God. Once a man has accepted that a revelation is probably from God, then he further assents to that revelation’s content, and this is faith, according to this picture. Furthermore, for Swinburne and Locke it is unreasonable to accept the truths of faith without having first received this kind of evidence.

It seems, however, that the opinion of Aquinas himself is against this view, for he clearly states in the *Summa theologiae* that “when someone either does not have the will, or does not have the prompt will, to believe, unless he is induced by human reason—being thus led by human reason diminishes the merit of faith.”¹¹ And again, further on in the *Summa*, he associates the desire to see signs with a lack of faith:

But he has the more perfect faith who does not require helps of this kind to believe. Hence, to disclose the lack of faith in some, the Lord says, “Unless you see signs and wonders, you do not believe” (John 4:48). And from this it can be understood that those who are so prompt of spirit that they believe God even without beholding

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), bk. 4, ch. 19, §10, 328.

⁸ *Id.*, §2, 324.

⁹ *Id.*, §10, 328.

¹⁰ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 88.

¹¹ “Cum quis aut non haberet voluntatem, aut non haberet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, nisi ratio humana induceretur. Et sic ratio humana inducta diminuit meritum fidei” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 2, a. 10, resp.).

signs—these are blessed in comparison to those who do not believe unless they see such things.¹²

Thus, from these passages and many others like it throughout his writings, it appears that for St. Thomas there is ultimately something wrong with demanding human reasons before believing that a particular revelation is actually from God. Again, though, it must here be emphasized that this does not mean that Aquinas thinks there is no means by which one can distinguish true revelation from false—what it does mean is that, for Aquinas, human reasons for accepting revelation are both unnecessary and unfitting to the Christian. Thus, if one follows Aquinas, Swinburne and Locke are at least wrong to insist that an appeal to human evidence is necessary in order to justify Christian belief.

On the other end of this spectrum of opinions regarding the justification of faith, one finds the opinion of scholars like Alvin Plantinga, who holds that, in the act of faith, the truths of revelation are simply held as first principles or *basic beliefs*:

My Christian belief can have warrant, and warrant sufficient for knowledge, even if I don't know of and cannot make a good historical case for the reliability of the biblical writers or for what they teach. I don't *need* a good historical case for the truth of the central teachings of the gospel to be warranted in accepting them. I needn't be able to find a good argument, historical or otherwise . . . It doesn't require to be validated or proved by some source of belief *other* than faith.¹³

Plantinga claims that his opinion is faithful to the thought of both John Calvin and St. Thomas Aquinas. He says that Scripture is “self-authenticating” and even “self-evident” in a sense: “For the person with faith . . . the great things of the gospel seem clearly true, obvious, compelling.”¹⁴

¹² “Est autem perfectioris fidei qui non requirit huiusmodi auxilia ad credendum. Unde, ad arguendum defectum fidei in quibusdam, dominus dicit, Ioan. IV, nisi signa et prodigia videritis, non creditis. Et secundum hoc, potest intelligi quod illi qui sunt tam prompti animi ut credant Deo etiam signis non visi, sunt beati per comparationem ad illos qui non crederent nisi talia viderent” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Tertia pars summae theologiae: a questione I ad quaestionem LIX*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus XI (Romae: S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1903), q. 55, a. 5, ad 3).

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 259.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 264.

Belief for Plantinga is “an immediate response to the proclamation.”¹⁵ The reason why Plantinga thinks that it is reasonable to believe the truths of the Gospel without any further verification other than the truths themselves is because of the working of the Holy Spirit in renewing man: “The internal instigation of the Holy Spirit working in concord with God’s teaching in Scripture is a cognitive process or belief-producing mechanism that produces in us the beliefs constituting faith.”¹⁶ Thus, in Plantinga’s view, both the revelation (or the testimony to the revelation) and the interior working of the Holy Spirit are required before one is justified in accepting that revelation, but what is *not* required is a calculation of the probability of that revelation being divine or true (as in Swinburne and Locke). Plantinga’s account is very compelling, as it avoids the unreasonable expectations of Swinburne and Locke, and it further provides an epistemological theory that better conforms to the experience of Christian believers. Plantinga depicts faith as simply a basic knowledge that is given solely by the gift of God, and this is an idea that seems to be very much in line with both Scripture and with many texts from St. Thomas himself (as will be shown below).

Yet Plantinga’s solution is also somewhat dissatisfying—as Swinburne himself complains.¹⁷ Plantinga successfully shows how Christian belief may be taken as a properly basic belief, and he further defends Christian belief against the attack that claims it is unwarranted or unjustified, but he does not explain exactly how a Christian is supposed to distinguish true revelation from false. For Plantinga, Christian beliefs are simply recognized to be true and divine, due to the help of the Holy Spirit, and there is little more that can be added to this account. As for religious pluralism, Plantinga regards this phenomenon as simply “a manifestation of our miserable human condition”¹⁸ that does not in itself constitute an objection against Christian belief. Thus, even if Plantinga’s account is mostly accurate, it does not provide a helpful explanation of the recognition of the divine to those who have not yet received such recognition, nor does it completely account for how true recognition of the divine can

¹⁵ *Id.*, 267.

¹⁶ *Id.*, 284.

¹⁷ “The question which worries the atheist and many a theist is not, I suggest, Plantinga’s question about whether Christian belief is warranted in his sense, but my question about whether it is rational in the above sense—whether it is probably true, given our evidence—and it would have been good if Plantinga had considered that question” (Richard Swinburne, “Plantinga on Warrant,” *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 207).

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 456.

completely account for how true recognition of the divine can be differentiated from merely supposed recognitions of the divine.

As regards St. Thomas's own opinion, it is difficult to ascertain exactly where he stands on this issue. Not only is there disagreement about what St. Thomas's actual opinion is, but some scholars also see some development in Aquinas's thought, which adds a further layer of complexity to the issue.¹⁹ That being said, according to the careful and detailed analysis of Fr. James Brent, O.P., St. Thomas's account is largely in agreement with the account of Plantinga:

God's spiritual touch upon the heart of the listener . . . inclines the listener to believe, and the inclination to believe serves as light for making a judgment by inclination . . . A person presented with testimony to the gospel, being inclined to believe on account of God's spiritual touch upon the heart, sees by the light of his or her own inclination just how right it is to believe. The listening person knows whether to believe by way of inclination.²⁰

Though limited space does not allow for a full defense of Brent's interpretation of Aquinas here, it is true that his description of the act preceding faith seems to be very faithful to Aquinas's writings: "For faith, two things are required: one is the inclination of the heart to believe, and this is not from hearing, but from the gift of grace; but the other is the determination about what is to be believed and this is from hearing."²¹ Thus, Aquinas answers the evidentialist objection by appealing to a gift of God that disposes the heart to believe, rather than to mere human evidence that makes it probable that God is revealing. In other words, Christian beliefs are rightfully held as first principles because they are known to be revealed by

¹⁹ "As Aquinas's views on grace matured, so did his understanding of the process that produces the properly and essentially basic judgment of faith" (Fr. James Brent, O.P., "The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs in Thomas Aquinas" (Doctoral dissertation, St. Louis University, 2008), 230). Note, however, that Brent does not think that Aquinas ever held the view that Christian beliefs should be based on human evidence: "The passages . . . are too evenly distributed from throughout Aquinas's productive years to make any such case" (id., 140).

²⁰ Fr. James Brent, O.P., "Knowing Whether to Believe," Unpublished Paper, 14.

²¹ "Ad fidem duo requiruntur: quorum unum est cordis inclinatio ad credendum et hoc non est ex auditu, sed ex dono gratiae; aliud autem est determinatio de credibili et istud est ex auditu" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume 37 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), c. 10, lect. 2, §844).

God, and they are known to be revealed by God by the grace of God that disposes the heart and not by (mere) human evidence. Thus, the “sufficient evidence” that is reasonably required by a rational human being turns out to be the action of God Himself upon the human heart.

If Plantinga and St. Thomas are correct, though, then why would God choose to confirm revelation through miracles or other signs? Brent lists three probable reasons: (1) the confirmation makes the truths of faith easier to believe; (2) it allows one to compare revelation claims in order to help sort out what is to be believed; and (3) confirmation can verify that faith is reasonable or prudent, against any objections to the contrary.²² Although these reasons are certainly true, there are at least two additional important points that should be considered in regard to confirmation. (1) First, for Aquinas, “confirmation,” divine or otherwise, is not part of a strict terminology and thus not limited to merely external signs; so that when it comes to divine confirmation, St. Thomas does not draw a sharp distinction between outward signs and the divine instinct that moves the heart. This is an important point to note, because while Aquinas does indeed say that external signs themselves are not necessary to have in order to justify belief, he does seem to think that some sort of divine confirmation is necessary, as will be shown more fully below. (2) Moreover, once one realizes that divine confirmation is not limited to mere external signs, the external signs themselves gain a new level of meaning and become more than just mere corroboration of the articles of faith. These additional considerations do not fundamentally alter Plantinga or Brent’s interpretation of Aquinas, but they do help explain other passages in Aquinas that seem to be somewhat Lockean and, what is more important, they provide a more developed picture of the nature of confirmation in divine revelation—thus showing not only that the Lockean picture is wrong, but also how aspects of the Lockean picture do indeed point to valuable truths concerning the relation between divine revelation and human reason.

Confirmation in Divine Revelation

It is difficult to point to passages that explicitly lay out what Aquinas means by the term *confirmare* or *confirmatio*; in most passages, the term seems to imply “strengthening” or “establishing,” but elsewhere, Aquinas explicitly interchanges the term with *probare*, which has the

²² Cf. Brent, “Christian Beliefs in Aquinas,” 223–225.

stronger sense of “proving.”²³ In passages that explicitly regard the teachings of faith, the term “confirmation” often refers to outward miracles or visible signs, but sometimes it also refers to the authority of scripture and even to the workings of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in these contexts, it simply refers to whatever establishes that the revelation is truly from God, whether this is an internal or an external confirmation.

If instead one interprets confirmation in a narrower sense, so that it only refers to external miracles, then it is indeed true that Aquinas does not think confirmation is necessary for belief. As Brent points out, “People who believe due to a process of instinct alone, without possessing corroboration drawn from miracles and other signs, do nothing contrary to reason in so believing.”²⁴ And moreover, “In fact, Aquinas says in several places it is more praiseworthy for people to believe *without* considering such confirmatory signs.”²⁵ However, the problem with limiting the term “confirmation” to mean only external miracles is that Aquinas himself does not seem to limit the term in that way.

There are a number of passages that show that for Aquinas, divine confirmation has broader connotations, and, if it is understood in this broad manner, such confirmation may indeed be necessary in order to judge that a revelation is from God. In c. 6 of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas explicitly sets out to explain why it is the case that Christians do not hold their faith lightly. Here, he says that the divine wisdom “manifests its own presence and the truth of its teaching and inspiration by fitting arguments.”²⁶ He continues, “In order to confirm that which exceeds natural knowledge, it [divine wisdom] visibly manifests works that surpass the ability of all nature.”²⁷ Aquinas then lists some examples of this confirmation: the curing of illnesses, the resurrection of the dead, miraculous signs in the heavens, etc. But St. Thomas does not end the list here; instead he continues with one final example of divine confirmation: “And what is even more wonderful, the inspiration of human minds, so that the simple and uneducated, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, reach in an instant

²³ Cf. Roy J. Deferrari, *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1986). See also *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 111, a. 4.

²⁴ Brent, “Christian Beliefs in Aquinas,” 219.

²⁵ Brent, “Knowing Whether to Believe,” 15.

²⁶ “Quae sui praesentiam et doctrinae et inspirationis veritatem, convenientibus argumentis ostendit” (*SCG* I.6).

²⁷ “Ad confirmandum ea quae naturalem cognitionem excedunt, opera visibiliter ostendit quae totius naturae superant facultatem” (id.).

the highest wisdom and eloquence.”²⁸ It is clear that Aquinas is here stating that this inspiration or motion of the Holy Spirit is a part of the divine confirmation, whose purpose is to reveal both God’s presence and truth. St. Thomas explains that he is here following St. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, in which St. Paul himself states that the doctrines were confirmed (lat. *confirmata*, gr. ἐβεβαιώθη) to men by God’s bearing witness “by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will” (Heb 2:4). In his own commentary on this epistle, St. Thomas remarks that “God gave testimony by two sensible signs, namely, by miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ Thus, both miracles and the workings of the Holy Spirit are two different types of divine confirmation, which is itself a manifestation of God in His power and truth.³⁰

St. Thomas continues this line of thought in the following chapters of the *Summa contra Gentiles*. He says that “it is criminal to believe that what is so evidently divinely confirmed is false,”³¹ which means that one must always be willing to follow whatever is divinely confirmed, but on the other hand, he notes that “those who introduced erroneous sects proceeded by contrary paths,”³² which at least implies that what proceeds by contrary paths, i.e., what is only humanly and not divinely confirmed, is not to be followed. St. Thomas continues by asserting that the “only means of convincing adversaries of this truth is from the authority of the Scripture *confirmed by divine miracles*: for we do not believe what is above human reason unless it is God revealing.”³³ Here, however, as in many other Thomistic texts, one must be very careful not to stray from St. Thomas’s meaning—for it would be easy to interpret the above passages from the *Summa contra Gentiles* in a Lockean or evidentialist manner. But as has

²⁸ “Videlicet in mirabili curatione languorum, mortuorum suscitatione, caelestium corporum mirabili immutatione; et, quod est mirabilius, humanarum mentium inspiratione, ut idiotae et simplices, dono spiritus sancti repleti, summam sapientiam et facundiam in instanti consequerentur” (id.).

²⁹ “Deus autem duplici signo sensibili contestatus est, scilicet miraculis et donis Spiritus Sanctus” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume 41 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), c. 2, lect. 1, §99).

³⁰ “Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23–24).

³¹ “Nec . . . tam evidenter divinitus confirmatum sit, fas est credere esse falsum” (*SCG* I.7).

³² “Hi vero qui sectas errorum introduxerunt processerunt via contraria” (id., c. 6).

³³ “Singularis vero modus convincendi adversarium contra huiusmodi veritatem est ex auctoritate Scripturae divinitus confirmatae miraculis: quae enim supra rationem humanam sunt, non credimus nisi Deo revelante” (id., c. 9); emphasis mine.

been shown above, the “confirmation” that God is revealing can take many different forms and is not limited to mere human evidence. An evidentialist would interpret St. Thomas as saying that man has a duty to receive and to test external miracles before he accepts what appears to be revelation, and indeed, the above passages do seem to indicate that man has a duty to seek some sort of divine confirmation, but still, they do not warrant construing this confirmation to mean mere “human evidence” or “external miracles.” Instead, the confirmation of revelation should be taken in a broader sense to include any manifestation of God’s presence and truth.

There are several passages from throughout the *Summa theologiae* that demonstrate these same points regarding confirmation. In one of the few places where St. Thomas deals directly with the objection that the Christian doesn’t have sufficient evidence to believe, he responds, “He who believes has sufficient motive to believe, for he is moved by the authority of the divine teaching confirmed by miracles and, what is more, by the interior instinct of God inviting. And hence, he does not believe lightly.”³⁴ (In the original Latin text, it is even clearer that St. Thomas is here stating that the divine teaching is confirmed by two kinds of confirmation, namely, miracles and the interior instinct.)

Earlier in the *Summa*, St. Thomas explicitly says that for a man who is instructing others in divine teachings it is necessary that he “confirm or prove what he says, otherwise his teaching would not be efficacious.”³⁵ Here St. Thomas also distinguishes human confirmation from divine confirmation: “But confirmation in those things that are placed under reason is through arguments. But in those things that are divinely revealed and above reason, the confirmation is through those things that are proper to divine power.”³⁶ Thus, here as elsewhere, St. Thomas does not limit confirmation to mere human arguments, and he still thinks that confirmation in this broader sense is somehow a necessary part of divine teaching.

³⁴ “Ille qui credit habet sufficiens inductivum ad credendum, inducitur enim auctoritate divinae doctrinae miraculis confirmatae, et, quod plus est, interiori instinctu Dei invitantis. Unde non leviter credit” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 2. a. 9, ad 3).

³⁵ “Ut possit confirmare vel probare ea quae dicit, alias non esset efficax eius doctrina” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Prima secundae summae theologiae: a questione LXXI ad quaestionem CXIV*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus VII (Romae: S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1892), q. 111, a. 4, resp.).

³⁶ “Confirmatio autem in his quae subduntur rationi, est per argumenta. In his autem quae sunt supra rationem divinitus revelata, confirmatio est per ea quae sunt divinae virtuti propria” (id.).

As a final proof of the manner in which St. Thomas uses the term “confirmation,” it is helpful to look at the text of his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, in which St. Thomas especially emphasizes the importance of believing *readily*, without the need of external signs and without basing one’s belief upon human reason. Rather, a Christian believes “neither because of natural reason, nor because of the testimony of the law, nor because of the preaching of others, but only because of the truth itself.”³⁷ Here as well, St. Thomas divides confirmation into at least two different kinds: “God testifies to someone in two ways, namely sensibly or intelligibly . . . He testifies intelligibly by an inspiration in the hearts of those who ought to believe and to hold.”³⁸ Moreover, both of these kinds of manifestation are works of God, which confirm His presence and teaching: “From the fact that He does the works of God, it can be evidently known and believed that Christ is God.”³⁹ Thus, even though Christians believe only *because* of the truth and not *because* of external signs, it must be remembered that the manifestation of the truth is at least part of the nature of divine confirmation.⁴⁰ Throughout his commentary on John’s Gospel, St. Thomas only condemns dependency upon sensible signs; he does not condemn dependency upon the interior workings of God, and indeed, he asserts that this internal confirmation is necessary in order for men to know that God is revealing. In explaining the passage, “If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin” (John 15:24), St. Thomas takes pains to make clear that “the works” refer to both exterior and interior manifestations of God:

³⁷ “Nec propter rationem naturalem, nec propter testimonia legis, nec propter praedicationem aliorum, sed propter ipsam veritatem tantum” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, vol. 35–36 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), c. 4, lect. 5, §662); this translation and all subsequent translations of this work are mine.

³⁸ “Deus testificatur alicui dupliciter, scilicet sensibiliter et intelligibiliter . . . Intelligibiliter autem testificatur inspirando in cordibus aliquorum quod credere debeant et tenere” (id., c. 5, lect. 6, §820).

³⁹ “Evidenter ergo congosci potest de Christo et credi quod sit Deus, per hoc quod facit opera Dei” (id., c. 10, lect. 6, §1466).

⁴⁰ “The primary sign of credibility, to judge from the Gospels, would seem to be the person of Jesus, with His vitality, determination, and compassion, and His uniquely authoritative manner of teaching and acting. As *secondary signs, not wholly separable from the person and work of Jesus*, the Gospels call attention to the miracles” (Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, Theological Resources (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 20); emphasis mine.

But it must be noticed that Christ attracts by word, by visible and invisible signs, namely, by the moving and stirring of hearts from within . . . This interior instinct is therefore the work of God for acting well, and he who resists it, sins . . . [This passage] must be understood not only of what is visible, but also of the interior instinct, and the attraction of the teaching. If indeed this had not been done among them, they would have no sin.⁴¹

Thus, it is not true to say that confirmation is a wholly unnecessary feature of divine revelation, for “through the works of God, we are led to a knowledge of Him.”⁴²

Further on, in discussing the doubting of St. Thomas the Apostle, Aquinas notes that, in fact, “it would have been excusable enough if he had not believed immediately, because, as it says in Sirach 19:4, ‘He who believes quickly is light in heart’.”⁴³ Thus, Aquinas recognizes that the sin of the doubting apostle does not lie in his act of discerning whether or not the revelation was from God, but instead, Aquinas locates the sin in the apostle’s hardness of heart, which Aquinas identifies with his “not wanting to believe except by a sensible proof.”⁴⁴ Thus, here again, it is clear that only the type of confirmation that is “sensible proof” is unnecessary, and there is indeed a certain kind of proof or confirmation that is needed prior to the act of belief. At the very least, it is necessary for an interior moving of the heart to take place before one can make the judgment that a revelation is indeed coming from God.⁴⁵

⁴¹ “Sed est attendendum, quod Christus attraxit verbo, signis visibilibus et invisibilibus, scilicet movendo et instigando interius corda . . . Est ergo opus Dei instinctus interior ad bene agendum, et qui ei resistunt, peccant . . . Intelligendum non solum de visibilibus, sed etiam de interior instinctu, et attractu doctrinae: quae quidem si in eis non fecisset, peccatum non haberent” (id., c. 15, lect. 15, §2055).

⁴² “Per opera Dei in eius cognitionem ducimur” (id., c. 9, lect. 1, §1300). “Faith is man’s answer to the external testimony of Christ, and at the same time to the interior attraction of the Father and the testimony of the Spirit. This is the twofold dimension of God’s one single word of love” (René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), 78).

⁴³ “Et quidem satis fuisset excusabilis, quod non statim credidit: quia, ut dicitur Eccl. XIX, 4: qui cito credit, levis est corde” (Aquinas, *Commentary on John*, c. 20, lect. 5, §2549).

⁴⁴ “Noluit credere nisi senibili argumento” (id.).

⁴⁵ “The Evangelists, particularly John, teach that one cannot sincerely accept the Christian message unless he experiences the inner attraction of grace and is willing to live up to the moral demands of the gospel” (Dulles, *History of Apologetics*, 20).

Even though Brent and Plantinga are correct in stating that external miracles are not strictly needed in Aquinas's account, it would not be a faithful rendering of his position to exclude all types of confirmation from the act that precedes belief.⁴⁶ But perhaps this is largely a question of definition, for neither Brent nor Plantinga want to imply that there is *no* justification involved in Christian beliefs. Brent simply concludes that "the Christian faithful possess internally accessible justification of a specific sort for their beliefs,"⁴⁷ which is precisely the position advocated here. What makes this position anti-evidentialist is the opinion that Christians "hold what is corroborated by reasoning otherwise than by reasoning,"⁴⁸ which indicates that the act which precedes faith, while corroborated by human reasoning, cannot simply be reduced to it. However, evidentialists are correct in thinking that there is some justification needed, which justification distinguishes Christian beliefs from false beliefs, and this is why Aquinas thinks that some confirmation is necessary, since "confirmation" can refer to both internal and external works of God; in other words, there has to be some way by which the human person can recognize that it is God revealing. Where evidentialists go wrong is in thinking that it is human reasoning itself that justifies the act of belief.

The Internal Works of God

At this point, one could object that if both external miracles and interior callings qualify as confirmation, then this is simply another version of evidentialism. That is to say, one could object that Brent and Plantinga are still appealing to a certain kind of evidence, but have simply shifted the problem to another level by calling their new evidence "divine instinct" or

⁴⁶ "If Christ had not performed visible miracles, however, there still remained other ways of drawing to faith to which humans would be bound to give assent. For humans were bound to give assent to the authority of the law and the prophets. They were also bound not to resist an inner calling" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibeta* 2, q. 4, a. 1, resp., in Brent, "Christian Beliefs in Aquinas," 126). "Sed quia sermo propositus confirmatione indiget ad hoc quod recipiatur, nisi sit per se manifestus; ea autem quae sunt fidei, sunt humanae rationi immanifesta: necessarium fuit aliquid adhiberi quo confirmaretur sermo praedicantium fidem. Non autem confirmari poterat per aliqua principia rationis, per modum demonstrationis: cum ea quae sunt fidei, rationem excedant. Oportuit igitur aliquibus indiciis confirmari praedicantium sermonem quibus manifeste ostenderetur huiusmodi sermonem processisse a Deo, dum praedicantes talia operarentur, sanando infirmos, et alias virtutes operando, quae non posset facere nisi Deus" (*SCG*, lib. 3, c. 154, n. 8).

⁴⁷ Brent, "Christian Beliefs in Aquinas," 222.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

“divine inspiration” instead. On this interpretation, before Christian belief takes place, human reason simply takes into account both these kinds of confirmation, treating them as evidence for the revelation, and then reason makes a judgment that it is probably God Who is revealing, and thus, one should accept the revelation as true.

In order to show why this evidentialist picture is not at all what Aquinas has in mind, one must again revisit his commentary on the Gospel of John. Here, Aquinas emphasizes the fact that no amount of human reasoning can ever lead to the act of faith itself.

Truly no one can come unless drawn by the Father . . . The human heart of itself tends to what is inferior and is unable to rise to what is above unless it is drawn. But if it does not rise up, this is not a failure on the part of the one who draws, who in Himself fails no one; but rather, this is because of an impediment belonging to the one who is not drawn . . . In the state of uncorrupted nature, there was no impediment preventing one from being drawn up, and hence all men could participate in it. But in corrupted nature, all are equally held back from this drawing by the impediment of sin; and therefore all need to be drawn up. But God, inasmuch as it depends on Him, extends His hand to draw up everyone.⁴⁹

This passage is essential to understanding the need to be moved by God’s grace before one can come to believe in Him. Aquinas is saying that the primary reason why it is absolutely necessary to be moved interiorly by the grace of God before one can know Him through faith is because of the presence of sin. There is something about the very nature of sin that drags human nature down and prevents men from being drawn up to higher things by God. In fact, sin blinds men to seeing the truths of higher things. Further on in this same commentary, Aquinas refers to the darkness of sin, which “does not belong to human reason in itself, but to the appetite, inasmuch as it is badly disposed through the passions or habit, desiring some-

⁴⁹ “Vere nullus venire potest nisi tractus a Patre . . . cor humanum ex se ad inferiora tendens, non potest sursum elevari nisi tractus. Si vero non elevator, non est defectus ex parte trahentis, qui quantum in se est, nulli deficit; sed est propter impedimentum eius qui non trahitur . . . in natura integra non erat aliquod impedimentum prohibens ab hac tractione, unde tunc omnes homines huius tractionis poterant esse participes. Sed in natura corrupta omnes per impedimentum peccati aequaliter prohibentur ab hac tractione; et ideo omnes indigent trahi. Deus autem omnibus ad trahendum manum porrigit quantum in se est” (*Commentary on John*, c. 6, lect. 5, §937).

thing as good that is nevertheless not truly good.”⁵⁰ Thus, both original and actual sin prevent men from being capable of knowing higher things insofar as they drag men’s desires to lower things that are not truly good. This darkness or ignorance of sin is culpable ignorance, however, because its source is an evil will: “Therefore this ignorance is no excuse, because they did not do so out of ignorance, but out of another root, namely, out of hatred and a certain malice.”⁵¹ Thus, no matter how carefully one investigates the things of God, if one’s heart is not oriented towards Him by a prior act of grace, then it is impossible to reach Him by the act of faith: “When therefore someone diligently inquires, either this is done from a good intention, in order to adhere to it, or from a bad intention, in order to condemn it.”⁵² Thus, in order for men even to have the capacity for the certain knowledge of these higher things that faith brings, and a knowledge of these things *as desirable*, God must Himself provide a remedy that re-orientes human desires to the things that are above: “Human ability is therefore unable to come to Christ through faith.”⁵³

How then does this re-orientation take place? First, St. Thomas notes that “the Father draws to the Son in many ways.”⁵⁴ Even though all men are drawn to a knowledge of God, “men are of diverse conditions, and are led to and disposed towards the knowledge of the truth in various ways.”⁵⁵ Some men are drawn more by external signs and miracles, and others are drawn more by the truth itself: “Therefore, in order to show the

⁵⁰ “Et istae sunt rationis humanae non ex se, sed ex appetitu, in quantum male dispositus per passiones vel habitum, appetit aliquid ut bonum, quod tamen non est vere bonum” (id., c. 8, lect. 2, §1144).

⁵¹ “Non ergo est eis ignorantia ad excusationem: quia non ex ignorantia hoc fecerunt, sed ex alia radice, scilicet ex odio et certa militia” (id., c. 15, lect. 5, §2049). “Causa incredulitatis vestrae, sed militia vestra . . . Ex Deo non sunt vitio et prava affectione” (id., c. 8, lect. 7, §1259).

⁵² “Quando enim aliquis diligenter inquirat: aut hoc facit bona intentione, ut scilicet ei adhaereat, aut mala, ut eum condemnet” (id., c. 9, lect. 3, §1340). “Quaerebant autem signum, non ut crederent, sed quia desperantes, quod signum ostendere non posset, et sic eum reprimerent et impedirent. Quia ergo prave quaerebant, non dedit eis signum apertum, sed occultum in figura, scilicet signum de resurrectione” (id., c. 2, lect. 3, §396).

⁵³ “Est ergo humana facultas deficiens ad veniendum ad Christum per fidem” (id., c. 6, lect. 5, §934). “Si caeca essetis, id est vos caecos reputaretis, recognoscentes per humilitatem peccatum vestrum, non haberetis peccatum: quia curreretis ad remedium. Peccatum enim remittitur per gratiam, quae non datur nisi humilibus” (id., c. 9, lect. 4, §1363).

⁵⁴ “Multipliciter Pater trahit ad Filium” (id., c. 6, lect. 5, §935).

⁵⁵ “Homines sunt diversae conditionis, et diversimode ad veritatis cognitionem perducti et dispositi” (id., c. 1, lect. 4, §119).

way of salvation to all, the Lord wished to open both ways, namely, of signs and of wisdom.”⁵⁶ Both of these types of confirmation are given and both draw men to God, but those men “who believe because of the teaching are more commendable, for they are more spiritual than those who believe because of signs, who are coarser and more on the level of sense.”⁵⁷ That being said, in the case of both the more spiritual man and the less spiritual man, the inner teaching is necessary before the act of faith can take place, whereas the external signs are only necessary for the less spiritual man, and only on account of his defects. Indeed, without this internal re-orientation of the heart, it is sometimes perhaps possible for someone to be convinced that a revelation is from God or probably from God—but this is the sort of equivocal belief that the demons have, and this kind of belief *does not incline one to the act of faith as such*, because faith is a certain assent to God’s revelation that is made *through* the will’s being directed to the higher good. Thus, St. Thomas says that “faith which is the gift of grace inclines man to believe according to some affection for the good, even if it is unformed [lifeless]. Hence, the faith which is in the demons is not a gift of grace, but rather, they are compelled to believe from a shrewdness of their natural intellect.”⁵⁸ In the *De Veritate*, q. 14, St. Thomas again confirms that such “faith” is only equivocally so called, for *such belief is not assented to by the will*, which assent is essential to faith and which assent can only be granted by a gift of God’s grace.⁵⁹

To get a clearer understanding of this interior teaching or movement of the heart, it is helpful to turn to St. Thomas’s commentary on the *De Trinitate*. Here he draws a comparison between the light of the understanding and the light of faith:

That which inclines one to assent to intellectual principles or to known conclusions is a sufficient induction that forces assent . . .

⁵⁶ “Ut ergo Dominus omnibus ostenderet viam salutis, utramque viam pandere voluit, scilicet signorum et sapientiae” (id.).

⁵⁷ “Sed commendabiliores sunt qui propter doctrinam credunt, quia sunt magis spirituales, quam qui propter signa, qui sunt grossiores et agis sensibiles” (id., c. 2, lect. 3, §418).

⁵⁸ “Fides quae est donum gratiae inclinatur hominem ad credendum secundum aliquem affectum boni, etiam si sit informis. Unde fides quae est in Daemonibus non est donum gratiae; sed magis coguntur ad credendum ex perspicacitate naturalis intellectus” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2).

⁵⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, Tomus XXII (Roma: Commissio Leonina, 1970), q. 14, a. 9, ad 4.

Hence also in the faith in which we believe in God not only is there an acceptance of the things to which we assent, but also something inclines one to assent; and this is a certain light, which is the habit of faith, divinely infused into the human mind.⁶⁰

St. Thomas further explains that this light of faith does not provide us with any propositional content, but instead it simply inclines us to assent to the truth that we hear. He then gives an analogy: as the senses are to the understanding that knows first principles, so is hearing to the light of faith. Even though all human knowledge comes through the senses, the intellect has a certain power by which it can recognize essences and first principles with certainty, through receiving the sensible forms and abstracting knowledge from them. Just so, even though all revelation comes to men through hearing the testimony of witnesses or even through a direct revelation, it is the light of faith that enables one to accept these principles as being certain, as being from God, and as being desirable to accept in themselves. In other words, only the light of faith, acting upon the testimony that is heard, can give the human intellect not only the certainty that it is God Who is revealing but also the ability to accept the revelation as good in itself to believe, since only the light of faith can incline men's wills to assent to these higher truths.

Conclusion

What does this broader picture of confirmation ultimately add to various accounts of the act of faith? Ultimately, it vindicates that part of the evidentialist objection which says that there must be something about revelation that makes it reasonable for a human being to accept. God does indeed provide many different means through which we may recognize that it is indeed He Who is revealing, by manifesting Himself through visible and invisible works, all of which draw men to Himself. However, the above clearly presents a very different account than that of the evidentialists, for it does not allow human reason alone to adjudicate between what revelation is from God and what revelation is not from God. Instead, one is only capable of grasping the invisible truths with an act of faith if one al-

⁶⁰ "Sed illud, quod inclinatur ad assentiendum principiis intellectis aut conclusionibus scitis, est sufficiens inductivum et ideo etiam cogit ad assensum . . . Unde et in fide qua in Deum credimus non solum est acceptio rerum quibus assentimus, sed aliquid quod inclinatur ad assensum; et hoc est lumen quoddam, quod est habitus fidei, divinitus menti humanae infusum" (Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4).

lows oneself to be moved interiorly by the grace of God. So much is this the case that, according to Aquinas, external miracles by themselves would never be able to bring one to faith and, in fact, one would not incur any guilt by refusing to believe solely on the basis of external miracles:

For if we speak of whatever miracles, they would have excuse if they had not been done among them by Christ. For no one is able to come to Christ through faith unless he is drawn . . . Therefore, if no one had drawn them to faith, they would be excused for their unbelief.⁶¹

That much being said, the act of faith is still reasonable and justifiable inasmuch as it is not made lightly, but it is made by the light of divine confirmation, which takes many forms, tailored to each individual, but which also always and necessarily involves a reshaping of the human heart so that it has a desire for the higher things. Even before the act of faith then, the Word first discloses Himself to our inmost being: “The Word of God is not only light in Himself, but also He manifests everything that is manifested.”⁶² Thus the saying is true that “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

**THE BALANCE OF FAITH AND REASON:
THE ROLE OF CONFIRMATION IN THE THOUGHT OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

SUMMARY

The evidentialist objection against Christianity, which states that the Christian faith does not have sufficient evidence to justify belief, can be troubling for Christians, for they do not wish to say that their beliefs are founded upon mere human evidence, and yet, they also wish to affirm that “those who place their faith in this truth, for which human reason offers no experience, do not believe lightly, as those following unlearned fables” (*SCG* I.6). St. Thomas Aquinas offers a unique and compelling solution to the evidentialist objection—a solution that confirms the Christian belief that faith is a gift from God, but which also respects the proper place of human reason within the believing life of men. St. Thomas

⁶¹ “Si nos loquamur de quibusque miraculis, haberent excusationem, si in eis facta non fuissent per Christum. Nullus enim potest ad Christum venire per fidem nisi tractus . . . Unde si nullus esset qui eos traxisset ad fidem, excusabiles essent de infidelitate” (Aquinas, *Commentary on John*, c. 15, lect. 5, §2055).

⁶² “Verbum Dei non solum in se lumen est, sed etiam est Omnia manifestans quae manifestantur” (id., c. 1, lect. 4, §118).

teaches that God provides both internal and external confirmation of what He reveals, although only the internal confirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to justify Christian belief. Aquinas's teaching concerning the role of divine confirmation of revealed truths provides at least one important key to understanding the delicate balance between faith and reason within the Christian life.

KEYWORDS: St. Thomas Aquinas, evidentialist objection, justified belief, divine confirmation, faith and reason.