

Thoroughly Modern Thomas: Faith and Science in Aquinas

John C. Médaille

(I)t is impossible for the that one and the same thing should be believed and seen by the same person. Hence it is equally impossible for one and the same thing to be an object of science and of belief..."

St. Thomas Aquinas (ST 2-2.1.5)

"To have faith is to enter in a practical way into the invisible world, to realize the presence of God, to wait for his visit, to deliver oneself over to him, to abandon oneself into his hands.""

Cardinal Newman

St. Thomas and the Modern World

The Modern world glories in its science which has allowed us to see to the very edge of the universe, to the beginnings of time, and even to the invisible world that may be the very boundary marker between physics and metaphysics. Throughout the world, pride of place is given to science, which has come to mean *Western* science, since the science we know is forged almost entirely in European civilization. Yet why this should be so is not entirely obvious. Europe (and her children, the Americas) is a very young civilization. The East had advanced cultures with mathematicians and scientists of note while Europe was a still collection of Celtic tribes in rude huts; when Rome was still young and ignorant, Egypt, Persia, India, and China were already both ancient and learned.

So why did modern science take hold in the West and in the West alone? Some believe that we moved so quickly to knowledge because we abandoned the baggage of belief; that we have so much

learning because we have so little faith. Now it is undeniably true that we have little faith, but it would be completely wrong to ignore the role that men of faith had in setting science free from faith. Indeed, it is precisely the concerns of the scholastics which have made Western science so pre-eminent in the world, concerns which established science on a firm intellectual footing. Within the confines of Thomism we can see all the seeds of the scientific viewpoint, so much so that in the victory of science we can see the triumph of St. Thomas. However, this turns out very much to be a paradoxical triumph, one that forces us to re-examine the very definition of faith.

Knowledge: To See is To Know

For Thomas, "The nature of science consists in this, that from things already known conclusions about other matters follow of necessity (DT 2.2)."¹

¹ All references to the *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius* will be cited as "DT" followed by the question and article number.

This idea of a necessity that compels our intellect means that we can have a true knowledge of the world without resorting to faith, because “the human mind can see the truth by natural light without anything being added. (DT 1.1)” Thus nature can be studied apart from faith. It is not that the action of God is entirely absent from this knowledge, since the intellect, like all created active powers, functions under the movement and direction of the creator (DT 1.1), but this role is primarily conservative in that God “causes the natural light within us by conserving it, and directs it that it might see... DT 1.1.R8).” For Thomas, knowledge in man arises entirely from the senses (DT 1.3) and moves not from the general to the particular, but the other way round. Sense data has priority in understanding, for “the intelligible species is what is understood secondarily; but that which is primarily understood is the object, of which the species is the likeness (ST 1.85.2).”² Nevertheless, our knowledge is not limited to things, to mere objects, for while the knowledge of the objects is primary, *intellectual* knowledge consists in knowledge of universals which are “distinctly and determinately known (ST 1.85.3).” This knowledge is (or can be) both universal (and hence necessary) and integral (and hence complete): “In this way, we can have knowledge not only of the universal whole, which contains parts potentially, but also of the integral

whole (ST 1.85.3).” The particulars are that *by which* the mind understands (ST 1.85.2), but the mind can reach clear and distinct ideas about the universals using analysis and synthesis (ST 1.85.5).

Further, Thomas has tremendous confidence in the intellect, so much so that that he regards it as properly infallible when the terms are correctly understood, as in the case of self-evident propositions.

Therefore, also in regard to those propositions, which are understood as soon as the terms thereof are understood, the intellect cannot err, as in the case of first principles from which arises infallible truth in the certitude of scientific conclusions (ST 1.85.6).

It is only *accidentally* that the intellect may be “deceived in the quiddity of composite things,” but as regards simple things “we cannot be deceived (ST 1.85.6).” This it is possible to achieve scientific infallibility if only a connection can be made between some particular proposition and a self-evident one. In all of this we see the germ of the scientific method: a movement from particulars of the sensual world to the universals of the intellect, a movement which may proceed in infallible certitude (at least in theory) if it is accomplished according to criteria which the intellect may easily see. The idea of sight is crucial: the body sees with the eyes and the mind sees with the intellect, and both may attain to certitude. But this picture is not complete without looking at the role that faith plays and its relation to science, and what kind of vision it entails; for just as science involves sight, faith involves a relative darkness.

They are taken from *Faith, Reason and Theology*, Armand Maurer, translator, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987).

² References to the Summa are from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981).

Faith: Seeing is NOT Believing

For his definition of faith, Thomas adopts the motto of *Hebrews*: “Faith is the evidence of things unseen.” However, as soon as a thing is seen, it is no longer a matter of belief, since a thing “cannot be seen and believed at the same time (ST 2-2.1.4.R2).” “Hence it is equally impossible for one and the same thing to be an object of science and of belief (ST 2-2.1.5).” Thus, by a rather strict interpretation of *Hebrews*, science and faith are mutually exclusive. Faith *does* however play a role in the mundane workings of natural reason, for the human reason works by degrees and some things which can eventually be known must at first be merely accepted:

But what we first know is known on the strength of what we eventually come to know; so from the very beginning we must have some knowledge of those things which are more knowable in themselves, and this is possible only by faith. (DT 3.1)

While this refers to things that can be known naturally, there are other things that cannot be known naturally and hence can only be believed. Therefore Thomas can quote Isaiah, “Unless you shall have believed you will not understand (DT 3.1).” Thus both in mundane and supernatural matters, Thomas establishes a clear priority of faith over reason. However, this is a temporal priority only, a condition arising from ignorance which will retreat with the advance of knowledge.

Faith itself forms a mean between science and opinion; with opinion it shares uncertain subject matter, but with science it shares

certitude and “unerring firm assent” (DT 3.1). With both, it shares the fact that it concerns *propositions*, “on the part of the believer, and in this respect the object of faith is something complex by way of a proposition (ST 2-2.1.2).” Faith then is primarily directed at creeds and statements that are consequent on creeds, creeds which are to be accepted on authority alone. In fact, if you will believe only when moved by human reason, then the merit of faith is lessened,

For just as a man ought to perform acts of moral virtue, on account of the judgment of his reason, and not on account of a passion, so ought he to believe matters of faith not on account of human reason, but on account of the Divine authority. (ST 2-2.2.10)

It is clear then that while Thomas establishes a clear priority of faith over reason, this priority is purely temporal and contingent. Faith is needed for reasons which are purely negative and related only to our present state. We need faith because of the “initial weakness of the human mind, which reaches its perfection only at the end (DT 3.1).” We need it because “In us, however, the intelligible light is darkened by its union with the body and the bodily powers and this hinders it so that it cannot grasp the truth that is even naturally knowable (DT 1.1.R4).” Further, although faith is a virtue, it is paradoxically one shared by the demons (ST 2-2.5.2), but not by the angels (ST 2-2.5.1), nor is it shared with the blessed in heaven, since perfect understanding is not compatible with faith (ST 2-2.8.2). Therefore faith and science are mutually exclusive: the more you have of one, the less you must have of the other.

Faith or Science, But Not Both

Thus for St. Thomas faith is a stopgap, and the gap is clearly our sinful and ignorant condition. It is faith that fills the gap, but only until something better comes along, namely knowledge; as the gaps are closed, the domain of faith diminishes, and here we see the genesis of the “God of the gaps.” At the end of time faith disappears entirely and we have a vision of the divine essence (ST 1-2.3.8) and obtain perfect knowledge of it (ST 1-2.4.3), a knowledge without the gaps and hence without faith. But while we walk the earth, we need faith, a need that will diminish in time and disappear eventually. Faith may have a certain priority in the world, but *actual* priority belongs properly to science. Whatever the temporal exigencies may be, there is a clear priority in Thomas of *knowing* over *believing*; faith is ultimately subordinate to science. Indeed, the order found in St. Paul is reversed; it is not knowledge that will pass away (1 Cor 13:8) while faith abides (1 Cor 13:13), but precisely the opposite: knowledge will be all and faith nothing.

There is also a priority in the sources, for knowledge rests on reason and intelligibility, while faith rests solely on authority, the chief authority being the Sacred Scriptures themselves. But even here Thomas seems to see a relative darkness, for faith is about propositions, but the scriptures are largely about images. Thus in scholastic terms the scriptures actually hide the truth as much as they reveal it. The only reasons Thomas can offer for this is to hide the faith from unbelievers and from the unlearned (DT 2.4). This divine discretion is confined to the scriptures,

for of that which God must speak in pale images, the theologians may speak of in “clear” propositions. It seems strange that a privilege denied to God is accorded to scholastics. Further, the whole question of prophecy appears to be contaminated, as it were, by its connection with images. Thomas presents a hierarchy of prophecy in which prophecy improves to the degree that it becomes less involved with images and more involved with clear statements (ST 2-2.174.3). This schema in fact seems very close to the schema on prophecy and images that Spinoza presents in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, with only the minor difference that while Thomas believes all of it, Spinoza believes none of it. But on the principles themselves, they seem to agree, so much so that one wonders if Spinoza had read St. Thomas.

Faith then, as the mean between opinion and knowledge, emerges as *relative ignorance* which will be replaced by *certain knowledge*. In adopting this view, Scholasticism anticipates the key tenet of the Enlightenment and a key premise of the Modern World. The moderns also see faith in terms of relative ignorance. For the scholastic, this ignorance will one day be replaced by the beatific vision; for the scientist, it will be replaced by the long-promised “Theory of Everything.” Insofar as the Theory of Everything remains in the future and is believed to convey the solution to every dilemma, it remains an *eschatological* hope; insofar as the beatific vision will convey and organize all knowledge, it is a *scientific* hope. There is an irreducible irony in this.

The Paradoxical Triumph of Thomas

There is a terrible paradox at the heart of the Thomistic faith: at the moment we see God, we will cease to believe in Him; he will become merely the object of all our knowledge, for knowledge will be all and faith nothing. The modern world may be characterized as the triumph of reason over faith. While this is not at all what Thomas intended, yet it is not incompatible with his theology. He believed that while our certain knowledge must be deferred until the end of time, there was no limit on the advance of our relative knowledge. And seeing as faith is something whose content must be reduced, it is no wonder that philosophers sought to reduce it to nothing, to find self-evident premises, clear and distinct, and which did not depend on any authority save their own senses or their own intellect. Although Thomas expected to triumph at the end of time, he may be properly said to be victorious now, for in truth, the modern world is the bastard child of the Catholic Church in general and any DNA test performed on the child will reveal the paternity of Thomas. Thus this child, however unruly and rebellious, is not one we may easily disavow, and the scientist who disdains Thomas disdains his own origins. The modern world, desacralized though it may be, is still the continuation of a Christian world, and it needs only to find the way to recover its spiritual sources. That is a topic far beyond the scope of this paper, but let me suggest that the answer will lie in re-establishing the ontological validity of faith, and not merely its temporal usefulness.

As long as one is talking about faith in propositions, it is difficult to see

how Thomas can be in error; the more truth we see in a statement the less need we have for faith. However, one must ask if faith needs to be limited to propositions, to be merely a mean between absolute knowledge and relative ignorance; we must have a definition of faith that does not require that it be opposed to knowledge. Maurice Blondel lays down the presuppositions of such a definition:

...That the truth is loved as a being; that it is not treated as a simple object of study which can be disposed of at will; that there is a promise to give oneself to it as to a person; and that its conditions are accepted in advance in order [to] be worthy of knowing it better. Consequently, to say that this truth is penetrated only by letting oneself be penetrated by it, that it gives itself only to one who makes a self-gift, is to retrieve the well-known words of St. Augustine: *There is entrance into truth only by way of love. Ways of acting lead to understanding. When what is somehow or other known is loved, by this very love it comes about that it is more fully and better known.* (italics in original)³

The solution to the problem would appear to arise naturally from these presuppositions, for that kind of truth which is “loved as a being,” to which one “gives oneself,” and whose “conditions are accepted in advance” is a *personal* truth and the kind of faith that this involves is faith given, not to some object like a creedal statement, but to another *person*. And when we recall that

³ Maurice Blondel, “What is Faith?” reprinted in *Communio* (Summer, 1987) 171.

Jesus is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” we shall have no difficulty in grasping intuitively this concept of faith. Indeed, if ultimate truth is a *subject* rather than an *object*, faith can be no other than this handing of ourselves over to the other. Faith, then, rather than emerging as a temporal expedient given by a God too stingy to give us “real” knowledge, appears to us as “a healthy disposition, the synthesis of our powers of knowing, of willing, of loving, in relation to beings capable themselves of knowledge and of goodness, and, above all, in relation to God.”⁴ Finally, this allows us to endorse Newman’s definition of faith which Blondel quotes: “To have faith is to enter in a practical way into the invisible world, to realize the presence of God, to wait for his visit, to deliver oneself over to him, to abandon oneself into his hands.”⁵ This, I think, is the faith for which modern man pines, and not for just another explication of a proposition.

⁴ Blondel 173.

⁵ Blondel 173.