



Natural Reason in the *Summa contra Gentiles*

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A distinctive feature of Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles* is the central role the author assigns to natural reason in his project of manifesting the truth of Christian faith. Reason is supposed to give a rational account of the truth of what faith professes about God, to arrive at a *veritas demonstrativa*, which will be shown to accord with the Christian religion. It is mainly because of this emphatic and what seems to be a rather presumptuous role of natural reason that the work has occasioned so much discussion and, consequently, diversity of opinion among the interpreters of Aquinas's thought. Is the *Contra Gentiles*, insofar as reason is the leading principle of the investigation, to be regarded as a kind of 'philosophical' *summa*, as it was sometimes labeled in the past? The objection immediately arises that the fourth book explicitly deals with those truths of faith which are above reason. And further, on account of its declared subject-matter—the truth of the Catholic faith—it seems unmistakably a theological work or, more exactly, a work in which the truth of Christian faith is expounded and defended. Those who stress the theological character of the work, a work written from the point of view of faith, usually refer to what seems to be the original title: "On the Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Errors of the Infidels."¹

1. In early manuscripts of the work the title used is "Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium." See the Leonine edition of the *Contra Gentiles* in

The riddle of the *Contra Gentiles* goes deeper than the question of whether it is intended primarily as a theological or as a philosophical work, based on reason as a common human faculty for truth. As Pegis notes in his introduction to the English translation, the work has posed two main problems for its interpreters.² One concerns the purpose and nature of the work with reference to the historical situation that occasioned it. What position does it take in the historical encounter of the Latin West with the Greco-Islamic philosophical conception of the world? The second problem, according to Pegis, concerns the internal organization of the *Contra Gentiles*. How are its four books related to one another? What is its main point of view or idea that inspires the work as a whole?

The commonly accepted view takes the *Contra Gentiles* foremost as a work of Christian apologetics intending to give a rational defense of faith against the Greco-Islamic philosophical picture of the world. According to Pegis, the work is part of the Christian reaction against Islamic intellectual culture, especially against Islamic Aristotelianism. And Chenu, in his well-known *Introduction*, regards it as an “apologetic theology,” a defense of the whole body of Christian thought against the Greco-Islamic scientific conception of the world.³ Weisheipl agrees with this view: the author of this work must be seen primarily as an apologist whose aim is to convince the learned Muslims and Jews in Spain of the truth of the Christian faith and to combat their erroneous opinions.⁴

The apologetic view of the *Contra Gentiles* can draw support from an old tradition according to which Thomas was asked by Raymond of Peñafort, the former master general of the Dominican Order, to compose a work “against the errors of unbelievers” as an aid in

Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII. P. M. edita (Rome, 1882–), 13:xiib, and the references in Mark D. Jordan, “The Protreptic Structure of the ‘Summa contra Gentiles,’” *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 173–209, at p. 182, n. 31. It seems likely that this long and awkward title has been abbreviated into “summa contra gentiles.”

2. *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis et alii (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), General Introduction, p. 20.

3. Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 3rd ed. (Montréal: Institut d'études médiévales, and Paris: J. Vrin, 1974), p. 250.

4. James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work*, rev. ed. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), p. 133.

conversion. This story, the source of which is a chronicle written by the Dominican Peter Marsilio in 1313, links the work with the training of Dominican missionaries for an apostolate among the learned Muslims and Jews in Islamic Spain, who were thoroughly versed in Aristotelian philosophy. In spite of its imaginative charm this testimony seems to be no more than a piece of hagiographic invention.⁵ As Jordan remarks, the *Contra Gentiles* would be an odd missionary manual by the Dominican standards of the thirteenth century. Contrary to the ideals of Dominican missionary activity, its author shows very little familiarity with the religious beliefs and languages of his adversaries. Chenu too qualifies the missionary and even apologetic intention of the *Contra Gentiles*. It is clear, he says, that the work exceeds by far the requirements of a simple missionary manual. It is above all a work devoted to the contemplation of the truth (“une oeuvre de contemplation de la vérité”).⁶

According to Corbin, in his voluminous book on the development of Aquinas’s theological thought, the *Contra Gentiles* must be seen as a strictly theological work, a work written for Christian believers about the truth of their Catholic faith. It is Aquinas’s “second comprehensive theological discourse,” a second *summa* in which Aquinas resumes and modifies the project of his first *summa*, the *Scriptum*, in the light of the results of his methodological investigation in the commentary on Boethius’s *De trinitate*.⁷ Therefore Aquinas’s intention to combat the errors of the unbelievers is not to be taken as motivated by any practical or apologetic urgency; it is but a secondary means of manifesting more effectively the brightness of truth by contrasting it with the darkness of falsehood.⁸

5. See Michel Corbin’s critical analysis of the story about Raymond de Peñafort in *Le chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974) and also the extensive discussion in Jordan, “Protreptic Structure,” pp. 174–182. Jordan concludes that the circumstantial evidence does not really help us to understand the *Contra Gentiles*.

6. Chenu, *Introduction*, p. 253.

7. Corbin, *Chemin de la théologie*, p. 630.

8. Corbin, *Chemin de la théologie*, p. 509. René-Antoine Gauthier takes the same view in his “Introduction historique” to *Thomas d’Aquin, Somme contre les Gentils* 1, trans. R. Bernier and M. Corvez (Paris: Lethielleux, 1961) 1:87: “si dans ce propos l’erreur a sa place, ce n’est pas dans le mesure où elle est professée par des hommes, c’est dans la mesure où par son contraste elle rend plus lumineuse la vérité.”

Corbin's analysis of Aquinas's methodological reflection on the problem of the autonomy of theology versus philosophical thought is impressive and very subtle. His fundamental assumption is that the three main works about Christian doctrine mark the different phases on the road of Aquinas's theological development. Compared to the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas's final solution to the problem of the inner unity of theology as science of faith, the theological concept of the *Contra Gentiles* still shows an inner ambivalence on account of its division of the truth of faith into a part accessible to reason and a part not accessible. This inner rupture in its structure indicates that the philosophical part is not yet adequately integrated in the theological synthesis.

Within the scope of this essay we cannot fully do justice to Corbin's complicated thesis. One can wonder, however, to what extent the *Contra Gentiles* is comparable with the *Summa theologiae* in the light of Aquinas's search for a satisfying conception of theology. The suggestion that Aquinas, writing the earlier work, was seeking to solve a problem he finally succeeded in solving when he wrote the later one cannot claim any support from what he explicitly declares to be his intention in the *Contra Gentiles*. I see no reason why the *Contra Gentiles* should not be approached as a work in its own right, with an intention different from the *Summa theologiae* and an intelligible structure adapted to that intention. So it is not at all evident to me that the *Contra Gentiles* must be regarded as 'theological' in the same sense as the *Summa theologiae* is explicitly meant to be a theological *summa*, nor as a *summa* in the sense of a comprehensive work dealing with the whole of Christian doctrine.

The *Contra Gentiles* is a work in which the author intends to manifest the truth of the Catholic faith. In order to proceed in a disciplined and responsible way, so Aquinas remarks in the beginning of 1.3, it is essential to determine by which method this truth can be manifested. Faced with the truth of the things faith professes about God, we are asked to consider how the truth of God is accessible to our intellect. This reflection leads to a *duplex modus veritatis* (1.3), a twofold mode of truth in the things we profess about God. Some truths that "we" (the Christian community) profess about God exceed the grasp of reason, as for example that he is one and three. Other things we believe to be true about God can be known by natural reason, namely things, such as God's existence and his unity, that

have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason. The division of the *Contra Gentiles* is based on this twofold mode of truth. In the first three books natural reason is the leading principle of the inquiry into the truth. Here reason investigates the truth about God and the universe as perceived and confirmed by faith. In the fourth book, however, Aquinas goes on to discuss the truth of those elements of Christian doctrine which are outside reason's natural competence. Aquinas's program of manifesting the truth of what is professed by faith requires an acute sense of the nature and limits of the human capacity for knowing the truth. Reason has to be persuaded to make truth in itself not dependent on its own power of understanding but rather to correct itself and its forms of thought in order to understand, without any presumption to comprehend, the higher intelligibility of faith. It is characteristic of the *Contra Gentiles* that natural reason, in its search for truth, is constantly reminded of its human point of departure. The work is not only, in the first three books, an investigation of truth by means of reason. It is also, throughout the whole work, an investigation of reason itself in relation to the truth. Reason is that which investigates and is itself investigated. I take this double role of reason as one of the most distinctive features of the *Contra Gentiles*. Aside from the idea of "truth in itself," natural reason is the main character in it.

In what follows I would like to focus on the role natural reason plays in the *Contra Gentiles* and especially on the way Aquinas tries to enlighten reason and to confront it with its human and creaturely condition. In order to do this I will concentrate on Aquinas's discussion of the relationship between faith and reason in the introductory chapters and in the prologue of book 4. But first questions about the author's intention and audience have to be considered.

THE OFFICE OF THOSE WHO ARE WISE

The *Contra Gentiles* is, strictly speaking, neither a theological nor a philosophical work. Although its subject matter may be rightly characterized as theological and its method to a certain extent as philosophical, both categories are nevertheless unsuitable for

describing its proper point of view. For Aquinas, to argue theologically means to argue from premises given by revelation. Theology is *scientia fidei*, an argumentative and discursive exposition of the doctrine of faith, in which reason fulfills an instrumental role, particularly with regard to the so-called “*praeambula fidei*.” The preambles include what can be naturally known about God, those things the truth of which is required and presupposed by faith, for instance that God exists, that God is one, immaterial, and so on. The position of reason in the *Contra Gentiles* is different from the one it occupies in the “*praeambula*.” This expression does not even occur. Aquinas does make a distinction between truths about God which can be known by natural reason and truths which exceed the power of reason. Yet this distinction is based on the scope of natural reason and is formulated without any reference to revelation.

The possibility of determining the scope of natural reason with respect to the divine truth requires a standpoint that leaves room for a critical assessment of reason’s competence in divine matters. This standpoint appears to be that of the wise. It is Aquinas’s declared intention to assume the task of someone wise (*officium sapientis*). With this “office,” Aquinas creates something new, an intellectual point of view that is formally different from theology as well as philosophy.

In 1.1 (“*Quid sit officium sapientis*”), Aquinas describes the task of those who are wise. On the basis of a few well-chosen references and formulas he sketches in an ingenious way the intellectual perspective of the wise. The fundamental idea is introduced right in the beginning with the motto, taken from one of the wisdom books: “My mouth shall meditate truth, and my lips shall hate impiety” (Proverbs 8:7). These words, from the mouth of a personified Wisdom, suggest a twofold office for someone wise, namely, to meditate and speak forth divine truth and to refute opposed error. Someone wise is first and foremost interested in the question of truth—and not of any truth, just the truth of the first principle. As it belongs to those who are wise to consider the truth claimed by human opinions and beliefs, so it belongs to them to refute any opposing falsehood, that is, the opinions that wrongly claim to be true.

The office of the wise is introduced without any reference to faith and faith’s claim to truth. The point of view of the wise concerns the truth and nothing but the truth. It is only in 1.2 that Aquinas

connects the “truth” with how the Christian tradition concretely perceives the truth. The *officium* as he intends to pursue it is formulated as follows: to make known the truth that the Catholic faith professes and to set aside the errors that are opposed to it.

The leading point of view in the *Contra Gentiles* can be circumscribed as the sapiential interest in the truth of what Christians confess about God. The *sapiens* is defined as one who considers human beliefs and opinions about the meaning of the universe in the light of their ‘truth value’. Significantly, Aquinas does not use the expression “Catholic truth,” as he does in the prologue of the *Summa* (where he calls himself a doctor of Catholic truth). The one who is wise does not expound a sacred doctrine; he does not consider the meaning reality has in the light of divine revelation. He is particularly concerned with the truth that the Catholic faith *professes*.⁹ His starting point lies at the human level of how people think of the truth and what they profess to be the truth, however much authorized by a divine revelation. The *sapiens* does not proceed from the truth itself as revealed in Scripture. He examines human opinions and beliefs, even if they are based on revelation, in the light of the truth. He argues, collects arguments, and most of all he examines arguments in the light of the truth, since his expertise permits him to discriminate and to judge the arguments pro and contra. It is especially important to emphasize this human point of departure. Only at the level of faith as a human articulation and a religious embodiment of a revealed truth is it possible to confront the claims of faith with alternative claims made by those outside the Christian community, and to investigate faith’s truth by means of human reason.

To be wise is to consider things in the light of truth. This truth is what Aquinas calls the “truth of the universe,” the final end to which all things are ordered. This end is the ultimate meaning of reality, especially of human life. In 1.2 it becomes clear that the “truth of the universe” has been given a normative and substantial expression in the *fides catholica*. This, at least, is what Aquinas believes, and it is from this point of view that he assumes his office. The term “*officium*”

9. ‘*Profitetur*’ means to speak forward, to declare openly that something is true. See also 1.9: “*veritatis, quam fides profitetur et ratio investigat.*” In citing or quoting from the *Summa contra Gentiles*, I use the edition of Ceslaus Pera, Petrus Marc, and Petrus Caramello (Turin: Marietti and Paris: Lethiellux, 1961–1967).

refers to a public task.¹⁰ Someone who holds an '*officium*' is charged with a task or duty directed to others, for the benefit of the community he lives in. For Aquinas, this community is the Christian community of believers (*fideles*), which is based on the truth-consensus of faith.

Aquinas's way of speaking about truth may sound rather pretentious to our ears. If he assumes that the Catholic faith, by divine guarantee, is the expression of the truth, so that each deviation from this faith is necessarily a deviation from the truth, what can he do, acting as one who is wise, but simply repeat and reconfirm the traditional formulas of faith? Or does Aquinas, as a wise man, pretend to have a privileged access to the truth itself? Is the wise person someone who *knows* the truth? I do not think Aquinas would put it in this way. Someone wise is not in full possession of wisdom, but one whose task it is to make known, in whatever way, the truth as professed and claimed by the Catholic faith. In other words, Aquinas proposes to show, to his fellow believers, that the Catholic *claim* to truth can in fact be understood and self-consciously affirmed, against the numerous alternative claims, as a reasonable claim to *truth*. Aquinas does not pretend to have an immediate access to truth itself, by transcending the human point of view from which any rational investigation of truth proceeds.¹¹ The beliefs and opinions of people about the "truth of the universe" are open to a critical evaluation and assessment, not by an appeal to an intuition of truth, but by examining those opinions in the light of the logical basis—for example natural reason or an authoritative expression given to it (the writings of Aristotle!)—on which people actually base their claims. Neither reason nor faith provides an immediate access to the truth. Every hold on truth and every expression given to it in human discourse is mediated by the world of sense-experience to which our intellect is naturally directed.

10. An *officium*, Aquinas explains in *Summa theol.* 2–2.183.3 ad 2, implies that one carries out an activity that is related to others ("actus qui referuntur ad alios"). For instance both a doctor and a judge hold an *officium*. Aquinas refers to Isidore's *Etymologiae* 6.19 (PL 82:252). Isidore there explains '*officium*' etymologically as doing things that are not offensive to anyone, but beneficial for all ("officium est ut quisque illa agat quae nulli officiant, id est noceant, sed prosint omnibus"). The relation to others as a part of the office is mentioned by Aquinas explicitly in *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.1 ("aliis disserere").

11. Recall the remark in *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.48 (Pera no. 2258): "Non igitur homines in cognitione veritatis sic se habent quasi in ultima fine existentes."

Aquinas's point of departure is the "truth of the universe" as formulated, reflected on, preached, and experienced in the faith of the Christian community. There exists a Catholic consensus about truth based on Scripture and tradition. Yet this consensus of the community of believers is never a totally undisputed and unrivalled possession of truth. The Christian community in the thirteenth century saw its own convictions and beliefs confronted with other claims to truth, which by their very existence called the claim of faith into question. These are the *errores infidelium*, the more or less persuasive claims to truth that are contrary to the Catholic consensus. Out of respect for the truth these errors are to be taken with all seriousness. They are not simply to be disregarded as evidence of malice or stupidity. It belongs to the task of those who are wise to discuss these alternative claims, to analyze how it came about that reason falsely convinced itself of its truth, and to set them aside as unjustified and untrue. This is their office, their service for the benefit of the Christian community of believers, which is now able to appropriate self-consciously the truth it confesses over against the erroneous claims of others.

It seems to me that Aquinas's immediate aim is not to prove the validity of the Catholic claim before others (*infideles*). His office is not one of missionary activity aiming at conversion. On the contrary, the office is needed because of the threatening effect the various errors have on the Christian consciousness of truth. Natural reason, according to its historical reality in Greco-Islamic philosophy, calls the Christian perception of truth into question. In this sense, the *Contra Gentiles* seems to me comparable to Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.¹² The *Guide* is meant for the educated Jew who experiences difficulties in reconciling the traditional faith and law as the basis for Jewish life with the Aristotelian philosophical view of the world. Maimonides' intention is that the law may be understood by the way of truth (*per viam veritatis*); his aim is to show the intellectual Jew a way of reading and appreciating the spiritual truth of Scripture behind its anthropomorphic and symbolic appearance, which causes so many perplexities. Both the *Guide* and the *Contra Gentiles* are addressed to a community of believers living in a determinate historical constellation. In both communities the sayings of Scripture have a normative

12. See Jordan, "Protreptic Structure," p. 196, who points to some interesting similarities and some dissimilarities between the *Guide* and the *Contra Gentiles*.

force for the spiritual and moral life of believers. Both Maimonides and Aquinas are engaged in interpreting the sayings of Scripture, not in the sense of biblical exegesis, but in an exegesis that aims at a rational appreciation of the deeper truth of Scripture. At the end of each chapter of the *Contra Gentiles* a passage from Scripture is given to confirm the truth found by reason. It confirms that the truth of reason is not set aside by the higher intelligibility of Scripture, which is founded in the divine truth itself.

REASON AND THE EXISTENCE OF 'OTHERS'

The *officium* of the wise is not as such necessarily committed to reason as the way of giving the truth of faith a rational expression. Aquinas introduces natural reason in answer to the existence of 'others', outside the Christian community, who do not accept the authority of Scripture and whose counterclaims, therefore, cannot be refuted successfully on the basis of Scripture. One of the problems Aquinas sees himself confronted with is that some people, "such as Mohammedans and pagans," do not have a holy book in common with Christians (*nobiscum*) on the basis of which disputes in matters of truth can be settled. Therefore, he concludes, in order to deal with the errors of these 'others,' we must have recourse (*recurrere*) to natural reason, since all are forced to give their assent to reason. Reason is a kind of common ground and provides Aquinas with a common language that enables him to discuss the truth in a way compelling to the opponent of faith.

Aquinas clearly opts for natural reason by way of *strategy* in order to deal with erroneous opinions of non-Christians, not because reason is thought to be superior. In fact, natural reason is even deficient (*deficiens*) in respect to "divine matters." But the fact that some hold opinions, based on rational thought, that are contrary to Christian faith is a motive for Aquinas to descend to the common ground of reason and to speak the same language, the language of a philosophical discourse on the "truth of the universe." This strategy leads to the general program of the *Contra Gentiles*, formulated as follows: "while we are investigating some truth, we shall also show what errors are set

aside by it; and we shall likewise show how the demonstrative truth (*veritas demonstrativa*) is in accordance with the Christian religion.”¹³

In the *Contra Gentiles*, at least in the first three books, Aquinas enters by way of strategy into the discourse of reason and employs the language of the *philosophi*. This appears even from the choice of arguments and the use of a specific philosophical vocabulary. For instance, the treatment of the divine essence in book 1 relies heavily on the metaphysics of Avicenna. Without mentioning his name Aquinas borrows several arguments from Avicenna. He even speaks about God’s simplicity in terms of “necesse esse,” which is particularly striking as this formula is completely absent in the *Summa theologiae*.¹⁴ Apparently, the investigation of the truth of what faith professes by means of reason is not a process of inventing new arguments without any precedent but more one of appropriating and reformulating the available arguments of the philosophers whose writings give witness to what reason can investigate with respect to the truth of God.

Another typical example of the language of natural reason in the *Contra Gentiles* is the word ‘*felicitas*’, a term used in the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics*. ‘*Felicitas*’ refers to natural human happiness, the ultimate human perfection that can be reached in virtue of natural powers. This natural happiness, as conceived by the philosophers, consists in contemplating the truth as perfectly as possible within the limits of earthly life.¹⁵ ‘*Beatitudo*’, on the other hand, is a typical word of faith. It refers to the Christian view of happiness as something that consists in the vision of God which is expected to come in a future life by divine grace. So when Aquinas comes to speak about the necessity of grace for human perfection (3.147, “Quod homo indiget divino auxilio ad beatitudinem consequendam”), he uses ‘*beatitudo*’.¹⁶

13. *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.2: “Simul autem veritatem aliquam investigantes ostendemus, qui errores per eam excludantur; et quomodo demonstrativa veritas fidei christianae religionis concordet.”

14. See *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.15, 1.16, 1.18, 1.19 and particularly 1.22, on the identity of essence and *esse* in God. This last chapter, as Weisheipl remarked, is almost a paraphrase of Avicenna’s *Metaphysica* 8.4 (*Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, p. 133).

15. See *Summa theol.* 1.62.1: “Una (ultima perfectio) quidem, quam potest assequi virtute suae naturae: et haec quodammodo beatitudo vel felicitas dicitur.”

16. Earlier, in 3.25 (Pera no. 2068), Aquinas mentions in one passage both “beatitudo” and “felicitas.” The first is connected with a text from Matthew 5:8: “Blessed (*beati*) are the pure in heart, for they will see God”; the second, with

Aquinas is fully aware of a distinctive language and vocabulary of the *philosophi* as opposed to the language of Christian faith. He writes here from a point of view that never loses sight of this distinction.

It is part of the strategic motivation that Aquinas does not surrender completely to natural reason. Reason does not play the role of judge, standing above the claims of believers and unbelievers. Reason is in fact claimed by one of the parties, the one in which the errors against the Christian faith are to be found. Aquinas's acceptance of reason goes together with the recognition that on numerous issues the claims of reason, as embodied in the opinions of philosophers, conflict with the Catholic consensus about truth. His intention is to show that in the erroneous opinions reason is in fact entangled in error and has arrived at conclusions that are incorrectly derived from the basic principles by which reason proceeds in its understanding of truth. The investigation by means of reason is at the same time an investigation of reason itself according to its concrete embodiment in the philosophical doctrines with which Aquinas was acquainted.

Who, then, are these 'others', the *infideles*? And in what sense can Aquinas be said to address himself to them? In his book about Aquinas's conception of theology, Patfoort argues that the *Contra Gentiles* is a comprehensive teaching of Christian doctrine to be read by believers in order that they may explain and defend the truth of faith to non-Christians. The work should be seen as a presentation of Christian doctrine for the purpose of an ecumenical debate ("une tentative d'oecuménisme") between Christians and the learned Muslims and Jews in Spain.¹⁷ Patfoort sees evidence for the missionary intention in Aquinas's use of the phrase "to convince the adversary" (1.9). Here Aquinas explains how he proposes to proceed. First, he intends to treat those truths of faith which are within reason's competence. With respect to this kind of divine truth, he will bring forward

Aristotle's *Ethics*. From 3.25 on, Aquinas uses the term "felicitas" almost exclusively, except, for instance, in 3.62 (Pera no. 2376), where "beatitudo" is used in connection with an erroneous opinion of Origen, who in spite of his being a heretic still belongs to the Christian tradition.

17. Albert Patfoort, *Thomas d'Aquin: Les clés d'une théologie* (Paris: FAC-éditions, 1983), p. 105: "Bref la *Summa contra Gentiles* serait une école de présentation aux infidèles de la foi chrétienne, une tentative d'oecuménisme, avant la lettre, entre chrétiens et infidèles."

both demonstrative and probable arguments, “by which our adversary may become convinced.” Then, in book 4, those truths will be dealt with which exceed the power of reason, in which case we ought not to try to convince the adversary by arguments but only to answer his arguments and objections against the truth.

Are these words to be understood in the sense that Aquinas intends to provide a collection of arguments for his fellow-believers in order that they may effectively persuade the unbeliever of the truth of the Christian faith? Is to convince the same as to convert by rational means? Patfoort takes ‘*convincere*’ in the subjective sense of persuasion. He is not much impressed by the difficulty with which Gauthier confronted him, namely, that in medieval Latin ‘*convincere*’ does not yet have the modern meaning of “persuading someone to believe that something is true or false.”¹⁸ In its medieval use, ‘*convincere*’ should be taken in a more objective sense as referring to the outcome of a logical process of argument that is compelling for all the participants in the dispute, regardless of whether some of them feel subjectively convinced. According to the rules of a scholastic disputation the opponent is forced to give his assent when the conclusion is shown to follow logically from premises on which both partners agree. *Convincere* does not appeal to the will, as does rhetorical persuasion, but to the intellect. By the logical force of the argument the intellect is compelled to give its assent.¹⁹

Therefore I cannot agree with the view put forward by Jordan either.²⁰ According to him, the division into two types of truth has “a rhetorical motivation” and separates two “possibilities for effective

18. Patfoort, *Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 114, n. 19.

19. See for example *Scriptum super Sent.* 3.24.2.2a arg. 4, ed. Pierre Mandonnet and M. F. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–1947), no. 40: “omnis probatio convincens intellectum ad assentiendum facit scientiam”; *Summa theol.* 1–2.51.3 co (*Opera omnia* [Leonine] 6:328b): “una propositio per se nota convincit intellectum ad assentiendum firmiter conclusioni”; and 2–2.4.1 co (8:44a): “per auctoritatem divinam intellectus convincitur ad assentiendum his quae sunt fidei.” These texts, which are cited by Patfoort (*Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 117) to underline his ‘subjective’ view of *convincere*, clearly favor the ‘objective’ sense. As it is the self-evident proposition which logically founds the truth of the conclusion, and which in virtue of this logical foundation compels the intellect, so it is the authority of God, revealing himself in Holy Scripture, which is the logical ground for us to give our assent to the truth of faith.

20. See Jordan, “Protreptic Structure,” pp. 173–209.

persuasion.” As based on the distinction between the realm in which reason can be persuaded by demonstration and one in which reason can be addressed but not conclusively persuaded, Aquinas’s program is formulated “in terms of a rhetorical or pedagogical efficacy.” However, contrary to Patfoort, Jordan does not think Aquinas’s intention is to convince directly the prospective convert, but to show rather to believers how an adversary *could* be convinced. “As it teaches believers how to persuade, the *Contra Gentiles* must also persuade believers to become habituated in the whole of Christian wisdom.”²¹

It seems to me misleading to read in the use of *convincere* an intention of rhetorical persuasion. The twofold mode of truth is primarily a logical division, a division of the truth claims of faith into one part that can be demonstratively made known as true in the light of natural reason and another, the truth of which cannot be made known in the light of reason. Reason derives its force and capacity for truth from first and self-evident principles, which are constitutive for our human, sense-mediated mode of knowing the truth. So by the logical force of its principles the human intellect knows the truth of those things that fall under the senses. What transcends the domain of sense-experience can be known only in so far as its knowledge is implied in the very intelligibility of sensible things. Through the rational procedure of demonstration, therefore, one can never conceptually grasp the truth of God himself. The light of reason cannot make the truth of God as such present to our intellect. Only in this sense might rational arguments have a persuasive force for the believer, since reason does not contribute to the inner truth and certainty of faith—the truth of which is founded in God’s knowledge of himself (*prima veritas*)—but only to the way the truth of faith can be appropriated within the domain of human experience and understanding.²²

21. Jordan, “Protrepetic Structure,” p. 190.

22. It is against this background that the great number of arguments, so characteristic for the *Contra Gentiles*, must be understood. By the fact that for each articulated aspect of the divine truth the reader is given a series of diverse arguments, taken from the writings of the philosophers and the Christian doctors, he becomes aware that no argument as such is capable of conceptualizing adequately the intended truth itself, but is a more or less convincing way of leading the human intellect to a rational understanding of the truth of faith. In each chapter the truth under discussion is not defined by the logical conclusiveness of any singular argument.

One cannot conclude from the phrase “to convince an adversary” that the *Contra Gentiles* is meant to support a historical debate of Christian missionaries with Islamic and Jewish intellectuals. It seems very unlikely that in Aquinas’s mind the ‘adversaries’ stood for a historically definable group of people. He was much more interested in the content of the errors, in the fact that they represent actual possibilities of rational thought, which can produce in the mind of people false conceptions of God (and thus of a false god). The list of errors is not restricted to contemporary thought. The errors are attributed to the ancient natural philosophers, to the “Platonists,” to Avicenna and Averroes (they are not in all respects trustworthy guides in interpreting Aristotle), to heretics like Origen and the Manichees, but most of all simply to “quidam,” to anonymous teachers who hold a more or less reasonable opinion, based on philosophical principles, that conflicts with the truth of Christian faith. They are all formally *adversarii* so far as they hold an opinion that objectively calls into question the truth as confessed by the Christian community (“*quae de Deo confitemur*”). So a manifestation of the truth of faith would only be successful if the opposed error is shown to be an error. When the opponent bases his claim on reason, the only way to combat this erroneous claim is by means of reason, by showing with rational arguments that in the light of truth reason must correct itself.

Reason, however, is not simply a timeless, *a priori* logical basis for deciding conflicting truth claims in history. Natural reason itself is a historical entity in the sense that the masters of the medieval university learned what natural reason is and should be from reading and assimilating the writings of Aristotle, Avicenna, and others. This means that natural reason was not neutral in respect to the truth. Reason was connected with a philosophically elaborated picture of the “truth of the universe.” The great theological debates of the thirteenth century were all about elements of this picture that were felt to be contrary to the traditional Christian view, such as the eternity of the world, the unity of the intellect, and the nature of human happiness. In the process of assimilating the Aristotelian corpus the medievals were confronted with claims of reason that they could not accept. Aquinas’s strategy is to discuss and combat the claims in the light of reason’s own criteria and rules learned from the *philosophi* themselves. In so far as faith not only requires confession, but also reflection and understanding in order to be a human faith, Aquinas shows the

believer how 'philosophical' reason can be assimilated if only reason is brought to correct its errors and false pretensions and becomes aware of its human point of view in relation to the truth of faith.

The investigation of reason as embodied in philosophical thought is especially directed at those issues which are typical of the rationalistic spirit of Greco-Islamic philosophy. The work includes themes such as cosmological determinism versus the Christian perception of human morality (arguments against fate, against a determining influence of the stars on the human acts of will and intellect), Islamic necessitarianism versus God's freedom in creation (*non per necessitatem naturae sed per voluntatem*) and the certainty of God's providence without this imposing necessity on the course of things. Another point of interest is Aquinas's concern to reconcile the absolute simplicity of God's essence with his knowing and willing many things. These are just a few examples to illustrate which philosophical ideas are envisaged and denounced by Aquinas in the *Contra Gentiles* and how he seeks to purify reason from its necessitarianism in order to integrate rational thought in his exposition of the Christian perception of the "truth of the universe."

THE TWOFOLD CONDITION OF NATURAL REASON: THE HUMAN CONDITION OF REASON

A crucial question preliminary to the project of the *Contra Gentiles* asks to what extent reason can be integrated in the Christian perception of truth without its character as a faith-based relation to the truth being dissolved. Can reason be convinced of the reasonableness, even of the necessity, of holding something in faith? This question as to whether it is fitting (with regard to what in human nature is rational) to hold a truth in faith is dealt with in 1.4–5 according to the twofold division of truth. With respect to both types of truth an apparently very reasonable objection can be made. First, an inspired doctrine proposed to human beings for belief would seem rather useless (*frustra*) within the realm of what naturally can be known about God, since reason can handle it sufficiently by itself. Second, human beings should not be asked to believe what

their reason cannot investigate. The divine Wisdom has endowed human nature with reason, which should be sufficient for it to attain the knowledge of God required for its perfection. In both objections natural human reason claims to be self-sufficient in matters of truth, even with the help of an argument based on divine providence.

A reason that cannot tolerate our being asked to hold something on faith represents a veritable Trojan horse for the Christian community. If reason were justified in its claim to autonomy, the only way Christianity could affirm its faith would be by rejecting reason, by excluding rational reflection based on philosophy. Aquinas chooses not to go along that way. It is his conviction that natural reason can be integrated in the Christian consciousness of truth, but not unless reason gives up its claim to autonomy and acknowledges its human condition in knowing the truth. Not reason as such, but the presumption of reason to have an absolute hold on truth prevents a reasonable understanding of the truth of faith. So the issue is not a defense of the 'reasonableness' of Christian faith before reason. Aquinas's objective is to confront natural reason with its own condition, to make reason aware of its limitations in order to prevent reason from unreflectively imposing its own limits on the search for truth. We need more truth than our reason can grasp.

According to Aquinas, three awkward consequences would follow if the truth about God that can be known naturally were left solely as a matter of inquiry for human reason. These consequences all concern the *human* condition of reason. Reason is embodied in human life, is a part of the human being, which does not coincide with its reason. First, the exercise of reason depends on external conditions that are not equal for all human beings. Some people do not have the physical disposition required for a rational inquiry into the truth. Not everyone is naturally gifted with intellectual powers sufficient to pursue the highest level of knowledge. Others are prevented from contemplating the truth in matters divine by the necessities of daily life. Not everyone has the leisure for contemplative inquiry, which is required for arriving at the highest peak of human knowledge. Finally, there are some who are cut off by indolence (*pigrity*), that is, human inertia. For in order to arrive at knowledge of God, a knowledge of many things must already be possessed. The whole of philosophy has to be learned to prepare oneself for the highest philosophical discipline of metaphysics, which deals with divine things. It has to

be recognized that not everyone wishes to carry out such a great intellectual labor for the mere love of knowledge.

The second reason why it would be inconvenient to make the knowledge of God dependent solely on natural reason concerns the condition of reason itself. As a part of human life reason requires a great deal of training and education. The process of education takes time. In order to grasp the truth by means of rational inquiry, reason needs a long training—not only the reason of the individual, passing from turbulent and foolish youth to the ripeness and wisdom of old age, but also reason in its historical development. The history of philosophy bears witness to the slow development of philosophical reason towards a more profound and metaphysical view of the nature of reality. As Aquinas remarks in *Summa theologiae* 1.44.2, “the ancient philosophers gradually, and as it were step by step, advanced in the knowledge of truth.” Only after a long time and with great difficulty is human intellect made capable of thinking from a metaphysical perspective about the truth of God.

The third awkward consequence concerns the *results* of human reasoning. Rational investigation does not lead infallibly to true results. Owing to the weakness of the power of judgment and to the admixture of sense-images, reason’s true conclusions will be mixed with errors. Even if some conclusions are demonstratively proven, not all people are sufficiently versed in logic to be able to judge the power of demonstration and to discern valid demonstrations from probable or sophistical arguments. Certitude is not only a matter of logically correct reasoning, but most of all of human appreciation and assessment of the logical conclusiveness of an argument. “That is why it was necessary that the unshakeable certitude and pure truth concerning divine things should be presented to men by way of faith.”²³

The message of *Contra Gentiles* 1.4 is that reason is a human capacity, embedded in concrete human life, and that therefore it is not convenient to make the human perception of the “truth of the universe” dependent solely on the inquiry of reason. So from the point of view of the human condition of reason, the factual claim of

23. *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.4: “Et ideo oportuit, per viam fidei, fixa certitudine, ipsam veritatem de rebus divinis hominibus exhiberi.”

Christianity to have a divinely inspired doctrine does make sense and should not be condemned as unintelligible.

THE CREATURELY CONDITION OF THE REASON

It is not immediately evident why we should believe something on the authority of divine revelation, the truth of which cannot be examined by reason because it is said to be above reason. What could be the meaning of this 'above' for human reason? Why is the truth of faith called 'supra-rational' and not simply irrational, outside the categories of reason? Only when reason realizes its creaturely condition in knowing the truth can it acknowledge something beyond its power as having nevertheless the character of truth. The revelation of something that exceeds the power of reason has the beneficial effect of confronting reason with its creaturely condition, of making reason aware that truth as such is not defined by its own rational comprehension of truth.

The central issue of *Contra Gentiles* 1.5 is the limitedness of natural reason in relation to the truth. In the first argument Aquinas's point is that reason may not impose its own limits on human desire. We are directed to a higher good than human fragility can experience in the present life. The human mind must be "called to something higher than our reason" ("evocari in aliquid altius quam ratio nostra") in order that we learn to direct our desire to a higher end than reason can experience.

The second argument put forward by Aquinas is a most interesting and difficult one to understand. His point is that reason should think correctly about God. Since God's substance surpasses the natural knowledge of which human beings are capable, reason is persuaded to think about God as something that exceeds its conceptions. By the very fact that some things about God are proposed to human beings for belief, reason becomes aware of its limits in relation to the truth of God. It is brought to think about God as being above everything that reason can think. So the very fact that some truths are revealed that go beyond reason makes reason reflect on its limits and correct its view of God—not in the sense that revelation provides reason

with new information, but in the sense that reason comes to a new understanding of what it means to have a conception about God at all. Confronted with the supra-rational claim of faith reason acquires a Socratic insight into how its conceptual knowledge is related to God's truth. Reason knows God to be beyond its knowledge of God (*sciat se Deum nescire*).²⁴

The next argument also concerns the limits of reason. Some, so Aquinas says, have such a presumptuous opinion of their own rational ability that they deem themselves able to measure the nature of everything. It is the presumption that the capacity of reason imposes its own measure on the truth itself. Especially in book 4 the presumption of reason is a recurring motif. According to Aquinas, this presumption arises from a misunderstanding of reason with respect to its own capacity for truth. Reason thinks itself to be the source of truth. From this rationalistic presumption the human mind might be freed by a perspective on truth that surpasses reason.

In the last argument Aquinas turns against those who, out of falsely conceived humility, argue that human beings should restrict themselves to earthly matters and leave the divine matters to God alone. Once again, reason should not restrict the human quest for truth to its own capacity. Aquinas cites with approval the remark of Aristotle: "man should draw himself towards what is immortal and divine as much as he can." There is more truth to be known than human reason can handle.

CAN REASON RECOGNIZE ITSELF IN FAITH'S INTELLIGIBILITY?

If reason, aware of its own condition, cannot and may not reject a faith-based claim for truth, then the next question arises

24. This is an Anselmian motif, as in *Proslogion* 15, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1946–1961), 1:112: "Ergo, Domine, non solum es quo maius cogitari nequit, sed es quiddam maius quam cogitari possit." See also Thomas Aquinas *Quaestiones disputatae De potentia* 7.5 ad 14, ed. Paulus M. Pession in *Quaestiones disputatae II*, 10th ed. (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1965), p. 60b: "illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo quod sciat se Deum nescire, in quantum cognoscit, illud quod Deus est, omne ipsum quod de eo intelligimus, excedere."

whether the believer's holding something in faith really corresponds to an objective truth. Is it not just foolishness to place one's faith in the truth of "wonderful stories" ²⁵ that are beyond human experience? It is clear that reason does not have access to the logical ground on which the truth of faith is based. But does faith have its own reasons or is it just 'wishful thinking'? Aquinas counts as legitimate reason's concern that people should not frivolously believe what they have heard.

The question of levity in 1.6 does not, as one might think at first sight, concern the credibility of faith, as if to justify the believer's act of faith. Aquinas is not so much interested in the typical modern question, "Is it rational to give assent to what is proposed to me for belief?" It is not a matter of the subjective evidence on the part of the believer, but of whether the subjective belief that something is true corresponds to an objective truth. Only when faith is related to an objective truth, not essentially different from the truth of reason (see 1.7), can reason be expected to investigate the truth claims of faith and to refute objections against it. Even when faith is said to be above reason, it cannot lack truth, without which it would be foolish to believe, nor have a different kind of truth, which would contradict human reason. So the question posed by Aquinas in 1.6–7 is preliminary to his project in the *Contra Gentiles*: How can reason recognize itself in the truth of faith?

His answer comes down to the simple observation that in the history of the Christian religion human reason has apparently recognized itself in the proclaimed faith. It is very unlikely that the Christian faith should be based on fables invented for credulous people. The divine origin and the truthfulness of the Christian message have been confirmed, not only by way of miracles but also, more convincingly, by the inspiration given to human minds, "so that simple and untutored persons come to possess the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence."²⁶ Aquinas's point is that the wisdom of the apostles, which was not esoteric but public and therefore open for human reason to assess its character as wisdom, cannot

25. *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.6 (Pera no. 35): "quasi doctas fabulas secuti, ut II Petri (I,16) dicitur."

26. *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.6 (Pera no. 37): "et, quod est mirabilis, humanarum mentium inspiratione, ut idiotae et simplices, dono Spiritus sancti repleti, summam sapientiam et facultatem in instanti consequerentur."

be explained in a purely human way (e.g., by education). Further, by the arguments of this inspired wisdom many people, both simple and learned, became convinced and converted to Christian faith. They were not persuaded by the force of arms or by the promise of pleasure; even in the midst of the tyranny of persecutors they chose to join the Christian movement. Could it be by any other motive than the force of truth? Christian faith preaches values that are contrary to the 'natural' human inclination to the visible and material world. So evidently it was not 'worldly' motives that led so many people to accept the truth of faith. On the contrary, people were asked to give up the pleasures of the flesh and the things of the world in order to set their hopes on something invisible. Evidently they were willing to do so, not because they were all stupid or misled, but because they recognized the inner truth and felt convinced by it.

Still the possibility exists that faith has a different kind of truth, a different 'logic' than that of rational thought. We are told that the truths of faith surpass the human intellect. But what if they simply contradict the logic of our rational minds? According to Aquinas, the exercise of human reason is made possible by some basic principles, the truth of which is known naturally. Those principles cannot be thought to be false since they are constitutive of rational thought and human understanding of truth. Now if the truth claimed by the Christian faith were opposed to a truth of reason, we could not accept them both as true, since our rational nature makes this impossible. We would have to give up our nature if we were asked to accept contrary opinions as true.

This kind of conflict, however, is quite improbable, since it would mean a conflict in God himself. As a created faculty human reason is related to the truth according to principles that are not established by reason itself, but by the transcendent source of all truth. Only when we realize that natural reason is not an independent source of truth will it become clear that in principle there cannot be a conflict between the claims of reason and the truth of faith. It is impossible for faith to have a 'logic' of its own, a logic that would be irrational to the eyes of reason. Even if reason cannot demonstrate fully the truth of what faith professes, it still can appreciate its higher intelligibility by reflecting on the traces and likenesses of the divine mystery within the sensible world. When reason gives up its presumption to be the measure of the truth, it can pursue its quest for truth beyond the

limits of rational demonstration. The mystery of God is not a mystery because it defeats the attempts of reason to understand, but because its truth attracts reason beyond its comprehension.

THE THREEFOLD KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GOD

With the transition to book 4, the critical point in the plan of the *Contra Gentiles* has arrived. Now the method of investigating the truth of what faith confesses by means of reason does not suffice any more. In book 4 Aquinas intends to deal with those elements of faith's confession about God which are beyond human experience, beyond what natural reason can investigate. Faith professes the mystery of God as the "truth of the universe" according to three parts: first, the confession that God is one and three; second, the mystery of the incarnation of God's son; and third, the resurrection of human bodies together with the everlasting happiness of human souls. Human experience can offer no evidence for these claims. What now can be the task of reason? Must it be silenced before the supra-rational truth of faith?

The transition to the supra-rational truths of faith gives Aquinas cause to assume the *duplex modus* from the beginning in order to clarify the epistemological basis of this division in truth with respect to our intellect. What faith professes about God can be verified in the light of reason only to a certain extent. Why is this? Because it is connatural to the human intellect to derive its knowledge from sensible things. Departing from sensible things, it cannot arrive through itself at a proper concept of God's essence. Only by reflecting on the intelligible order that reason perceives in the sensible world is it led to some knowledge of God as the first principle and cause of all being. Since the way human reason follows in its search for truth clearly does not suffice to manifest the whole truth of what faith professes, there must be a different way by which the truth of faith *supra rationem* comes down to us. Aquinas has thus far left the nature of this second "way" in the dark. At the beginning of book 4, he must make clear what the proper logical foundation of this supra-rational truth is and how this truth is given to us.

In the prologue of book 4, Aquinas describes two ways given to human beings for attaining some knowledge of God. The first way

is through creation (*via per creaturas*), the second through revelation (*via per revelationem*). Both ways are forms of mediation. Each effects a mediate union between the knower and the known, the human intellect and the divine substance. For both ways the divine truth (*veritas divina*) is but mediately present to the human intellect. The intellect is related to God through articulated claims, the truth of which it does not know in the light of God's own truth. The two ways correspond to reason and faith as the two 'logical' forms under which divine truth can become present in human discourse. It becomes present not perfectly, but only in an anticipatory and still 'darkened' way. In the case of the way *per creaturas*, the medium is the hierarchical order of natures in the world, the result from God's providential plan. This medium not only presents an imperfect likeness of God's essence, it is known adequately by the human intellect only with great difficulty. Human beings can reach only a faint knowledge of God by pursuing the way upward in creation with reason. As the perfect knowledge of God is the end of human existing, and since human beings, as creatures, cannot remain idle, a second way to God through revelation accords perfectly with the divine goodness. "In order that man might have a firmer knowledge of Him, God revealed certain things about Himself that transcend the human intellect."²⁷ The insufficiency of natural reason with respect to the perfect knowledge of God is one motive for God's descending through revelation to human knowledge.

Even the knowledge handed down to us through revelation remains imperfect, however, since the way of revelation too is 'mediated' by our sense-bound susceptibility. What comes to us by revelation is received according to the mode of our nature. Revelation is not a voice from heaven. It does not produce an immediate encounter between human beings and God. God's revelation, according to Aquinas, comes to us within the visible world in the form of speech (*per modum locutionis*). God's word is made known through the speaking of prophets and apostles, through preaching that aims to instill faith in those listening. Faith comes from hearing. The truth of the revealed message does not appear to be seen; it has to be believed (*non videnda sed credenda*).

27. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.1 (Pera no. 3341): "ut firmior esset hominis de Deo cognitio, quaedam de seipso hominibus revelavit, quae intellectum humanum excedunt."

There is a certain order in God's revelation, well suited to human needs and capacities. The biblical history of revelation shows a pedagogical structure of increasing disclosure on God's part. Humanity advances slowly, gropingly, towards understanding of God. The way of revelation does not end in faith. Human beings seek to see what they believe. The biblical revelation points forwards to a future in which they will be freed from their earthly condition and raised up to see the truth now only revealed.

Although the way of revelation is consummated in an immediate knowledge of God, so long as we live on earth the knowledge of faith cannot completely satisfy our desire to see God. Aquinas gives two reasons why revealed knowledge fails to satisfy in comparison to the full knowledge enjoyed by those who see God. First, only a part of the divine mystery has been revealed in Scripture. Second, this partial truth has come to us "under certain likenesses and darknesses of words" ("sub quibusdam similitudinibus et obscuritatibus verborum"). In the obscure sayings of Scripture, the divine mystery is hidden by veils ("velaminibus occultata"), so that only the *studiosi* may grasp the hidden sense behind the surface, the sense that is unaffected by the mockery of the incredulous.

By describing the way of revelation in contrast to the natural knowledge of God, on the one hand, and the eschatological vision of God, on the other hand, Aquinas has now set forth the hermeneutical and methodological principles for the procedure of book 4. In dealing with truths of faith revealed by God, one must take the sayings of Scripture as principles. On the basis of them, one must try one's best to understand the true sense of what is taught obscurely in Scripture. One must also defend it against the attempts of the unbelievers to make it seem ridiculous ("a laceratione infidelium defendendo"). One should not presume to understand the things of faith perfectly—in other words, to prove their truth by reducing them to principles evident in the light of reason. On the contrary, these truths must be proved by the authority of Scripture. The truth of what faith professes has its logical basis in the *prima veritas*, the divine truth as known by God himself.²⁸ The claims of faith can only be proved

28. As Aquinas notes in 4.1 (Pera no. 3345), the angels and the other beatified know the divine mysteries in the First Truth, that is the perfect knowledge by which

from the authoritative expression of the *prima veritas* in Scripture. Nevertheless, it remains to show that the truth of faith is not opposed to natural reason, so that the Christian faith may be defended “against the attacks of the unbelievers” (“ab impugnatione infidelium”).

Natural reason still has its part to play in book 4. Reason will appear once again in the encounter with the ‘others’. It is not that the truth of faith as such has to be ascertained by reason, but rather that some, using reason, have conceived opinions that set up obstacles—may still set up obstacles—to the process of human understanding and the expression of the revealed truth. In this respect the “attacks of the unbelievers” are thought to be dangerous by Aquinas, even when they are not intended as attacks but as corrections of faith-formulas in the light of what some take to be truth. These arguments are “attacks” so far as they attempt to show that the Christian claim to truth cannot be substantiated. The Christian theologian, acting in the office of the wise, cannot simply put these attacks aside. After all, they appeal to the natural human respect for and obligation to truth. They are dangerous, because wrong ideas about God may cause believers to direct their lives to the wrong end.

For example, with respect to the “generation” in God of the eternal Son, certain teachers “presumed to measure this mystery by their own comprehension of it and conceived various and vain opinions about it.”²⁹ In the views of heretics like Arius and Sabellius, reason has apparently taken offense at the truth of faith and so has distorted the mystery by measuring it with its own logic. In these attacks, reason presumes to correct faith in the light of what it thinks to be the truth without reflecting critically on its own relation to the truth. To defend the Catholic faith against these heretical opinions, Aquinas will show that faith, as articulated and confessed by the Christian Church, is not impossible in the light of reason.

What does it mean to show that the truth of faith is not impossible in the light of reason? At first sight it would seem that Aquinas intends to defend the Catholic faith by refuting reason’s various objections.

the divine truth is seen in itself. The imperfect knowledge of faith is derived from this perfect knowledge.

29. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.4 (Pera no. 3358): “Huius autem doctrinae veritatem quidam perversi homines suo sensu metiri praesumentes, de praemissis vanas et varias opiniones conceperunt.”

Reason has to be silenced, since these truths of faith are said to be outside reason's competence. It seems no wonder, then, that reason turns into a heretical reason when it tries to understand the mystery of faith. But in fact the point of Aquinas's discussion of Arius and Sabellius is rather to argue that reason, faced with the mystery of faith, need not agree either to keep silent or to become heretical. In the long development of Catholic orthodoxy, heretical reason has been defeated successfully by the truth of faith—not silenced by the political mechanism of ecclesiastical power. The development of Christian doctrine shows that human reason can correct itself as it tries to understand and to articulate the mystery of God hinted at in the obscurities of Scripture.

Catholic orthodoxy is the result of a learning in which the heretical views of Arius and Sabellius played an important part. The heretics found it quite contrary to rational truth to accept a "generation" in God. As Aquinas remarks, human reason, proceeding from the properties of creatures, experiences difficulties in a great variety of ways in this secret of divine generation.³⁰ It was because reason imposed its own categories on the divine mystery, without correcting these categories in the light of Scripture, that Sabellius and Arius were led to two opposed errors, the one denying the personal distinction between the Father and the Son, the other denying the full divinity of the Son. The Catholic faith, keeping to the middle road,³¹ holds with Arius against Sabellius that the Father is distinct in person from the Son, but with Sabellius against Arius that Christ is true and natural God, the same in nature as the Father, although not the same in person. Only the Catholic Church, taught by the texts of Scripture³² to correct the opposed errors of Arius and Sabellius, confesses a true "generation" in God. The fact that the Catholic faith is the middle road is a sign of its truth. "For, as the Philosopher says, even falsehoods give witness to the truth, for falsehoods stand apart

30. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.10 (Pera no. 3446): "humana ratio, ex creaturarum proprietatibus procedens, multiplicem in hoc secreto divinae generationis patitur difficultatem."

31. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.7 (Pera no. 3426): "Fides ergo catholica, media via incedens."

32. See *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.7 (Pera no. 3424): "Ex praemissis igitur et consimilibus sacra Scripturae documentis Ecclesia catholica docta."

not only from the truth but from one another.”³³ The opposed views of Arius and Sabellius condemned one another as false; the partial truth in each is saved in the whole truth of the Catholic confession. The development of Christian doctrine displays a proper rationality so far as human reason, confronted with its initial onesidedness, is led by truth itself to correct and transcend its categories in order to express the higher intelligibility of faith.

What has to be pushed back is the presumption of reason, its uncritical and unreflective attitude to the truth, and not reason as such. Reason has to learn, by reflecting on the origin of its categories in sensible reality, that the truth of faith is not impossible. Aquinas’s use here of a double negation is very striking. At the end of the chapter in which he sums up the various difficulties and impossibilities reason experiences with “generation” in God, he concludes that since truth is strong in itself and cannot be overcome by any attack, his intention must be to show that the truth of faith cannot be overcome by reason (“ratione superari non possit”).³⁴ This is a characteristic and illuminating remark. The next chapter (4.11), in which he carries out this intention, is most remarkable for its speculative depth and vision. Here reason learns that its own difficulties concerning divine “generation” can be overcome when it is brought to acknowledge that the hierarchical structure of the universe discloses a logic of perfection and unity that, at its very summit, admits plurality and distinction. The idea of a hierarchy is used to teach reason that its conceptual framework is derived from and adapted to a level of being that shows in itself a dynamic, self-transcending character. By the

33. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.7 (Pera no. 3426): “Ex quo etiam indicium veritatis catholicae sumi potest; nam vero, ut Philosophus dicit, etiam falsa testantur; falsa vero non solum a veris, sed etiam ab invicem distant.”

34. *Summa contra Gentiles* 4.10 (Pera no. 3460): “Haec igitur et similia sunt ex quibus aliqui, divinorum mysteria propria ratione metiri volentes, divinam generationem impugnare nituntur. Sed, quia veritas in seipsa fortis est et nulla impugnatione convellitur, oportet intendere ad ostendendum quod veritas fidei ratione superari non possit.” The idea of an objective truth, which excludes by its force every falsehood, still requires the rational labor of refuting and dissolving the arguments which are brought forward against the truth of faith. However powerful by itself, truth can only become effective within the realm of human life through the medium of reason. That is why the work of “dissolving” (*dissolvere*) the arguments which form an obstacle to the acceptance of the truth is so important to Aquinas.

very force of truth, reason is compelled to give up its objections. It has now come to understand that these difficulties are not taken from the nature of truth itself but from the way reason conceives truths, "proceeding from the properties of sensible things." The development of the Catholic expression of the truth of faith was at the same time reason's way of learning of rational reflection and self-correction. In it human reason is led to acknowledge that it does not establish by itself the conditions under which it knows the truth. It comes to see that truth is not constituted by its categories. It grasps, in other words, that it is a created faculty.³⁵

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