

SAINT AUGUSTINE'S VIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

Introduction and Background to the Faith / Reason Controversy

In a sense, the problem of faith and reason is *the* problem of Christian apologetics. Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli observe that “there are always five possible answers to the question of the relation between any two classes or sets of things.”¹ That being the case, there are five ways in which faith and reason can logically be related. Those five ways can be termed rationalism, fideism, identity, dualism, and partial overlapping. *Rationalism* holds that faith is a subclass of reason. In other words, everything that can be discovered by faith can also be discovered by reason, but not the other way around. In this view, reason is highly superior to faith. *Fideism* is the polar opposite of rationalism, seeing reason as a subclass of faith. Christian apologist Norman Geisler writes that “religious fideism argues matters of faith and religious belief are not supported by reason. Religion is a matter of faith and cannot be argued by reason. One must simply believe.”² Fideism thus sees faith as highly superior to reason. *Identity* is a position that sees equality among faith and reason. What can be discovered by faith can likewise be discovered by reason. While this position is a logical possibility, Kreeft and Tacelli note that it is not actually held or argued by anyone.³

¹Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 33.

²Norman L. Geisler, “Fideism,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 246.

³Kreeft and Tacelli, 36.

Dualism is the “separation of church and state” position. Dualism divorces faith and reason by “(a) reducing reason to scientific, mathematical and empirical reasoning, and (b) reducing faith to a personal, subjective attitude.”⁴ Dualism makes religion a “private matter” and, if followed consistently, effectively negates apologetics. Finally, *partial overlapping* understands that both faith and reason are avenues to truth and have distinct roles in apologetics. This is the majority view among Christian apologists, though the degree and kind of overlap still distinguishes different apologetic systems.

This partial overlapping of faith and reason introduces a question that did not exist prior to the Christian era: In what sense can a philosophy be considered “Christian?” If the Christian philosopher accepts truth propositions on the basis of authoritative revelation, is not his so-called philosophy really theology instead? The “pure” philosopher, as a critic of Christian philosophy might put it, does not allow an element of faith to inform his reason. Such a “pure rationalist” maintains, as scholar Etienne Gilson notes, “that religion and philosophy are so essentially different that no collaboration between the two is possible at all.”⁵ Gilson continues: “Nobody today would dream of talking of Christian mathematics, Christian biology, or Christian medicine. But why? Because mathematics, biology and medicine are so many sciences, and because science, in its conclusions no less than its principles, is altogether independent of religion. To speak of Christian philosophy is equally absurd and the expression should be discarded.”⁶ Prior to the Christian era, men could justifiably

⁴Ibid., 36.

⁵Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 3.

⁶Ibid.

philosophize with such a pure rationalist approach. As Gilson observes, however, “it is a fact that between ourselves and the Greeks the Christian revelation has intervened, and has profoundly modified the conditions under which reason has to work. Once you are in possession of that revelation how can you possibly philosophize as though you had never heard of it?”⁷

In short, Christian doctrine created a crisis by authoritatively answering many of the ultimate questions that philosophers had for centuries probed independent of Divine revelation. What was the pagan philosopher to make of this intrusion of revelation into the world of reason? Or, more important to us, what was the Christian philosopher to make of the efforts of the pagan philosophers now that God had spoken? One of the first Christians to address this issue was Tertullian, who introduced the proverbial question, “What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?”⁸ Speaking for many theologians during and after his lifetime, Tertullian exclaimed, “We have no need for curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry after the gospel. When we believe, we desire to believe nothing further. For we need believe nothing more than ‘there is nothing else which we are obliged to believe.’”⁹ Those who follow this resolution, says Gilson, have essentially concluded that “since God has spoken, it is no longer necessary for us to think. The only thing that matters for every one of us is to achieve his own salvation; now all that we need to know in order to achieve it is there, written down in the Holy Scriptures; let us therefore read the divine law, meditate upon it, live according to its

⁷Ibid., 5.

⁸Tertullian, “On the Rule of the Heretics,” in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 5.

⁹Ibid., 5-6.

precepts, and we shall stand in need of nothing else, not even of philosophy.”¹⁰ Though Saint Augustine would be broadly grouped with Tertullian in that family of Christian theologians who put a premium on faith, he would not altogether reject philosophy as some of the more extremists in this family would advocate. Rather, Augustine would pursue philosophical reasoning, but only guided by the sure-handedness of revelation. As Gilson again comments, because the pure reason of the ancients led them into all sorts of false doctrine, Augustine would argue that “henceforth the only safe plan is to take revelation for our guide and make an effort to understand its contents - and this understanding of the contents of revelation will be philosophy itself.”¹¹

Saint Augustine on Faith and Reason

Augustine’s Conversion

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was born to a pagan father, Patricius, and a Christian mother, Monica, who sought to bring him up according to her faith.¹² Author Vernon J. Bourke elaborates: “Monnica (sic) gave him some rudimentary instructions in Christian doctrine. He learned to revere Christ and to look forward to eternal life. Even something of the significance of the sacrament of baptism must have been explained to him.”¹³ But overall, Augustine’s knowledge of Christianity remained rather crude and

¹⁰Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 6-10.

¹¹Gilson, *Mediaeval Philosophy*, 5.

¹²Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2 (New York: Image Books, 1993), 40.

¹³Vernon J. Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom: Life and Philosophy of the Bishop of Hippo* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1945), 5.

fragmentary due to the peculiar practice known as the “Discipline of the Secret,” which, by withholding doctrinal instruction from catechumens, was intended to prevent pagan desecration of the teachings of the Church.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this lack of discipleship left the young Augustine with no intellectual moorings to endear him to the Christian faith once he became exposed to non-Christian philosophies later on in life. One such philosophy, writes historian Frederick Copleston, was the teaching of the Manichaeans, “which seemed to offer him a rational presentation of truth, in distinction from the barbaric ideas and illogical doctrines of Christianity.”¹⁵ Particularly attractive to Augustine was the materialism of Manichaeism and the dualistic “explanation” it gave to the problem of evil. This intellectual approach to the world, as opposed to what we might anachronistically term Christian fundamentalism, led Augustine as a teenager to fully detach himself intellectually and morally from the faith of his mother Monica.¹⁶

His endearment to Manichaeism, however, was destined to be relatively short-lived. After a disappointing meeting with the Manichaean bishop Faustus in 384, Augustine found himself growing intellectually dissatisfied with Manichaeism, which had failed to answer some of the intellectual difficulties troubling his young, probing mind. About this same time, he became acquainted with the preaching of Saint Ambrose, whom he found “a more learned man than Faustus” and “able to expound the Old Testament in a manner that was new to Augustine, but which seemed rather

¹⁴Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁵Copleston, 41.

¹⁶Ibid.

reasonable.”¹⁷ The allegorical method of interpretation employed by Ambrose “opened up for Augustine a new avenue of approach to Holy Scripture. He was now ready to return to his boyhood status as a catechumen in the Catholic Church, though he was not yet convinced that the Catholic way was that of the wisdom he was seeking. He knew that Manicheism was no good; now he saw that there might be something good in Catholicism, but he was still uncertain about its positive value.”¹⁸

In addition to his disillusionment with Manichaeism and his renewed interest in Catholicism, Copleston writes that exposure to neo-Platonism soon convinced him, contrary to his earlier views, to accept “the idea of immaterial reality. In addition, the Plotinian conception of evil as privation rather than as something positive showed him how the problem of evil could be met without having to have recourse to the dualism of the Manichaeans.”¹⁹ The immediate effect of this neo-Platonic influence was to convince Augustine that Christianity was not illogical and barbaric after all, but was a reasonable faith. He thus began to read the New Testament again, particularly the letters of the Apostle Paul. And having grown disgusted with his moral depravity, the thirty-two year old Augustine surrendered to faith in Christ in the summer of 386.²⁰

Augustine’s personal pilgrimage to faith in Christ anticipates the more developed, albeit unsystematized, view of faith and reason that would later be expounded throughout his voluminous writings. Reason led him to acknowledge the intellectual plausibility of

¹⁷Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest*, 50.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹Copleston, 42-43.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 43.

Christianity, which in turn led him to recognize the authority of the Christian God. Faith, submitting to the authority of God, the Bible, and the Church opened the door to a greater understanding of Christian doctrine, which enabled him to articulate crucial defenses of the faith in his mature years. As culled from his various writings, Augustine's view of the relation between faith and reason can be summed up in the following: 1) reason discovers true authority; 2) true authority demands faith; 3) faith rewards with understanding; and 4) reason helps explain faith.

Reason Discovers True Authority

Though authority has temporal priority over reason by the fact that it exists prior to the *discovery* of its existence, yet “in the order of reality, reason is prior.”²¹ Reason has priority in the order of reality because “no one believes anything unless he has first thought that it is to be believed.”²² Once discovered, authority is preeminent; but reason is the means of discovery and as such is prerequisite to faith. Without recourse to reason, we would not be able to discover or recognize credible authority: “Authority demands belief and prepares man for reason. Reason leads to understanding and knowledge. But reason is not entirely absent from authority, for we have got to consider whom we have to believe, and the highest authority belongs to truth when it is clearly known.”²³ Again, “it

²¹Augustine, “Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil 2.9,” in *Fathers of the Church*, ed., Ludwig Schopp et al., vols. 1-19 (New York: CIMA, 1948-1954). Quoted in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *What Augustine Says* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 14.

²²Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints 5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 13.

²³Augustine, “Of True Religion 24,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 14.

is yet necessary that everything which is believed should be believed after thought has led the way.”²⁴

Augustine cites miracles and prophecy as the two main sources that confirm the authority of the Scriptures and the Church. Miracles have great apologetic value for bringing unbelievers to faith: “Therefore God, who made the visible heaven and earth, does not disdain to work visible miracles in heaven or earth, that He may thereby awaken the soul which is immersed in things visible to worship Himself, the Invisible.”²⁵ In recounting New Testament miracles such as healings and the raising of Lazarus, Augustine remarks that “The Lord did those things to invite us to the faith.”²⁶ Additionally, miracles also serve to strengthen the faith of the believers: “The belief of the resurrection of our Lord from the dead, and His ascension into heaven, has strengthened our faith by adding a great buttress of hope.”²⁷

The primary historical miracles that reveal and legitimize the authority of the Scriptures and the Church are the resurrection and ascension of Christ. In *City of God*, Augustine argues: “It is indubitable that the resurrection of Christ, and His ascension into heaven with the flesh in which He arose, is already preached and believed in the whole world. If it is not credible, how is it that it has already received credence in the whole world?”²⁸ The miracles of the resurrection and the ascension are testified to and

²⁴Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints 5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 14.

²⁵Augustine, “City of God 22.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 24.

²⁶Augustine, “Sermons on New Testament Lessons 88.1-3, in Geisler, *Augustine*, 25.

²⁷Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine 1.15,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 25.

²⁸Augustine, “City of God 22.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 26.

confirmed by the miracles of the apostles: “We ourselves admit that the prophets wrought some miracles like those performed by Christ. For among these miracles what is more wonderful than the raising of the dead?”²⁹

But even if one rejects the testimony of historical miracles, one still must account for a present miracle, the existence of the Church: “But if they do not believe that these miracles were wrought by Christ’s apostles to gain credence to their preaching of His resurrection and ascension, this one grand miracle suffices for us, that the whole world has believed without any miracles.”³⁰ In other words, even if one unreasonably rejects the miracles of Christ and the apostles, he still must explain the existence of the Church. That present miracle of the Church is testified by the mass conversion of pagans to Christian faith: “Even if there were no preceding testimonies concerning Christ and the Church, who is there whom the sudden shining of the divine brightness on the human race ought not to move to belief; when we see the false gods abandoned, their images everywhere shattered, their temples overthrown or converted to other uses, the many vain rites plucked out by the roots from the most inveterate usage of men, and the one true God invoked by all?”³¹ Christian faith, therefore, is reasonable because its authority is clearly evidenced by the historic miracles of the gospels and the apostles as well as the present miracle of the Church. Faith in Christ is not a blind leap in the dark but a reasoned submission to credible authority.

²⁹Augustine, “Letters 137.4,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 24.

³⁰Augustine, “City of God 22.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 26.

³¹Augustine, “On Faith of Things Unseen 7.10,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 28.

The second evidence of Divine authority discoverable by reason is fulfilled prophecy, such as but not limited to “the incarnation of Christ, and all those important marvels that were accomplished in Him, and done in His name.”³² Fulfilled prophecy serves two functions. First, it gives us confidence that yet unfulfilled prophecy will likewise come to pass. Second, it provides solid proof that the Scriptures are divinely inspired and authoritative: “All these things are now seen to be accomplished, in exact fulfillment of the predictions which we read in Scripture; and from these important and numerous instances of fulfilled prophecy, the fulfillment of the predictions which remain is confidently expected. Where, then, is the mind, having aspirations after eternity, and moved by the shortness of this present life, which can resist the clearness and perfection of these evidences of the divine origin of our faith?”³³ A reasonable person can examine history and clearly see the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Such a person should be moved to faith in the authority of God and Scripture because of such rational evidence.

As regards Augustine’s personal conversion, the importance of reason, particularly of Platonic philosophy, cannot be overstated. He had rejected the faith of his mother and had turned to the more intellectually satisfying philosophy of the Manichaeans. And even after he had all but nominally rejected Manichaeism, “he still retained some of the basic concepts of that religion. Evil was an eternal, infinite, and material substance, standing in contra-position to God. Mind was a subtle body; as yet he had no concept at all of a spiritual substance.”³⁴ But even the pure reason of neo-

³²Augustine, “City of God 10.32,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 27.

³³Augustine, “Letters 137.4,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 27-28.

³⁴Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest*, 48.

Platonism convinced Augustine of the errors of these doctrines and enabled him to see that Christianity was reasonable in its claims after all. Though reason did not coerce faith, it established for Augustine the credible authority of the Scriptures and the Church by answering two of his earliest objections to Catholicism.

First, as Rourke explains, through the influence of Plotinus “not suddenly but gradually, Augustine formed a concept of spirit” which was further refined by his reading of Saint Paul.³⁵ Rourke observes that “it is well to remember that the Neoplatonic concept of spirit performed a valuable service in enabling Augustine to bridge the gap between Manichean materialism and the Christian understanding of a purely immaterial substance.”³⁶ Augustine attests to this in *City of God*: “The Platonic philosophers, then, so deservedly considered superior to all the others in reputation and achievement, well understood that no body could be God and, therefore, in order to find Him, they rose beyond all material things.”³⁷ Second, the neo-Platonists transformed Augustine’s thinking on the existence of evil. Prior to their influence in his life, he had rejected the Christian teaching in favor of the dualism of the Manichaeans which taught that evil was an eternal, positive entity. But as Rourke explains, “Plotinus’ simple suggestion was that evil was not a substance; it was nonbeing; this lack of absolute goodness was necessarily present in an imperfect world. This suggestion was all that Augustine needed. He decided that evil, in the cosmic sense, was not a substance but the privation or corruption of what

³⁵Ibid., 57.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Augustine, “City of God 8.6,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 57.

is good.”³⁸ Augustine’s rejection of eternal duality is evident in *On the Nature of Good*: “No nature, therefore, as far as it is nature, is evil; but to each nature there is no evil except to be diminished in respect of good. But if by being diminished it should be consumed so that there is not good, no nature would be left; not only such as the Manichaeans introduce, where so great good things are found that their exceeding blindness is wonderful, but such as any one can introduce.”³⁹

Two more things should be briefly noted about Augustine’s view of reason as it verifies Divine authority. First, he argued that had the evidence that was available to Augustine been available to the ancients, no less than Plato himself would have become a Christian.⁴⁰ Second, Augustine argued vigorously for natural theology: “For quite apart from the voice of the Prophets, the very order, changes, and movements in the universe, the very beauty of form in all that is visible, proclaim, however silently, both that the world was created and also that its Creator could be none other than God whose greatness and beauty are both ineffable and invisible.”⁴¹ To prove the existence of God apart from the authority of Scripture, Augustine appealed to the cosmological and teleological arguments as well as arguments from perfection and truth. Reason, therefore, in the form of analyzing the evidence of miracles and prophecy, and by philosophically demonstrating Christianity’s plausibility, helps to discover true Authority to the end that one might bow to that Authority in the humble submission of faith.

³⁸Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest*, 58.

³⁹Augustine, “On the Nature of Good 17,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 182.

⁴⁰Augustine, “Of True Religion 4,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 23.

⁴¹Augustine, “City of God 11.4,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 20.

True Authority Demands Faith

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Augustine was not a strict fideist who advocated blind trust in unexamined authorities. Without a doubt, he stressed the indispensable role exercised by reason in discovering legitimate authority. Once Divine authority is recognized by the use of reason, however, it is completely unreasonable to do anything but submit to that authority, fully trusting its testimony. Philosopher and Christian apologist William Lane Craig says that Augustine sometimes “gives the impression of being a strict authoritarian; that is to say, he held that the ground for faith was sheer, unquestionable, divine authority.”⁴² Indeed, Augustine argued that “authority demands faith and prepares man for reason.”⁴³ But Augustine’s authoritarianism presupposes that credible authority has been discovered through reason. Hence, his “authoritarianism” is not blind trust prior to or apart from investigation but total submission only after reason has made its inquiry. Authors R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley point out that to Augustine “reason is subordinate to authority in dealing with divine matters. Reason may establish authority as a whole. Once that authority source is discovered, however, its individual teachings are accepted on the basis of its authority and only clarified by reason.”⁴⁴

According to apologist Bernard Ramm, “in Augustine’s thought authority means testimony. Hence faith and reason differ chiefly at this point. Faith is accepting the

⁴²William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 17-18.

⁴³Augustine, “Of True Religion 24,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 14.

⁴⁴R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984), 195.

truthfulness of testimony where reason is accepting the truthfulness of directly knowable propositions. The two great testimonies of Augustine are (I) the Bible, and (ii) the Church.”⁴⁵ Concerning the Scriptures, Augustine writes that “we were too weak by unaided reason to find out the truth, and for this cause needed the authority of the holy writings.”⁴⁶ The holy writings of Scripture are inspired by God and “regarded as canonical and of supreme authority and to which we give credence concerning all those truths we ought to know and yet, of ourselves, are unable to learn.”⁴⁷ To the God-breathed holy writings, Augustine found himself “bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place.”⁴⁸ And even though one might find a same particular truth in a secular book as in Scripture, “there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself.”⁴⁹ In short, an Augustinian might assert that if both a science book and the Bible truly record that the sky is blue, more credence must be given to the Bible because truth backed by authority is “more true.”

Furthermore, the authority of the Church is sanctioned by the Scriptures, which have “come down to us from the apostles through the successions of the bishops and the extension of the Church, and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission

⁴⁵Bernard Ramm, *Types of Apologetic Systems: An Introductory Study to the Christian Philosophy of Religion* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1953), 178.

⁴⁶Augustine, “Confessions 6.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 18.

⁴⁷Augustine, “City of God 11.3,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 36.

⁴⁸Augustine, “Letters 82.3”, in Geisler, *Augustine*, 37.

⁴⁹Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon 11.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 37.

of every faithful and pious mind.”⁵⁰ The Church is the guardian of the Scriptures, and as such is the authoritative guardian of truth itself: “Hold fast whatever truth you have been able to grasp, and attribute it to the Catholic Church.”⁵¹ Augustine seemed particularly determined to demonstrate the authority of the Church in contradistinction to the Manichaeans: “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church. . . . Wherefore, if no clear proof of the apostleship of Manichaeus is found in the gospel, I will believe the Catholics rather than you.”⁵² In *The Value of Believing*, he remarked: “It is then my purpose to prove to you, if I can, that the Manichees profanely and rashly inveigh against those who following the authority of the Catholic Faith, before they are able to gaze upon that Truth, which the pure mind beholds, are by believing forearmed, and prepared for God Who is about to give them light.”⁵³ In sum, the Church and the Scriptures, once discovered to be divinely authoritative, demand faith apart from reason. But far from disparaging reason, Augustine clearly explained that it is reason itself that discovers true authority. But faith is not merely a requirement once Divine authority is recognized; it yields the indispensable benefit of opening the door to true understanding.

⁵⁰ Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaean 11.5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 37.

⁵¹ Augustine, “Of True Religion 10,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 29.

⁵² Augustine, “Against the Epistle of Manichaeus 5,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 13.

⁵³ Augustine, “The Value of Believing 2,” in *The Works of Aurelius Augustinus*, ed. Marcus Dods, 15 vols., (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark Co., 1871-1876). Quoted in Vernon J. Bourke, ed., *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 28.

Faith Rewards With Understanding

Perhaps the most distinguishable aspect of the Augustinian view of faith and reason is the conviction that “understanding is faith’s reward.”⁵⁴ William Craig observes: “[Augustine] asserts that one must first believe before he can know. He was fond of quoting Isaiah 7:9 in the Septuagint version: ‘Unless you believe you shall not understand.’ The fundamental principle of the Augustinian tradition throughout the Middle Ages was *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding.”⁵⁵ This favorite text of Augustine is better translated “If you will not believe, you will not be established,” or “you will not continue.” But, as Vernon Rourke comments, “this is a case of a fortunate error, more influential than the truth. From this misreading there developed a whole program of Christian intellectualism among the Latin Fathers of the Church and the theologians of the middle ages.”⁵⁶ Most notable among the theologians of the middle ages who propagated the Augustinian tradition was Saint Anselm. Gilson remarks that Anselm’s “only ambition was to restate what his master Augustine had already stated. And that is exactly what he did. Moreover, Anselm was so fully convinced of the validity of Augustine’s method that its most perfect definitions are to be looked for in the writings of Anselm rather than in those of Augustine.”⁵⁷ As a matter of historical fact, Anselm, not

⁵⁴Augustine, “Sermons on New Testament Lessons 126.1,3, in Geisler, *Augustine*, 15.

⁵⁵Craig, 18.

⁵⁶Bourke, *The Essential Augustine*, 19.

⁵⁷Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 23-24.

Augustine, is responsible for the formula *credo ut intelligam*, “I believe in order to understand.”⁵⁸

Nevertheless, while Anselm might have harvested the formula, Augustine is responsible for planting the seed. Augustine wrote, “We believe that we might know; for if we wished to know and then believe, we should not be able either to know or believe.”⁵⁹ Unaided reason, though having a role to play in apologetics, is weak and unreliable, requiring authority to guide it: “But because the minds of men are obscured by familiarity with darkness, which covers them in a night of sins and evil habits, and cannot perceive in a way proper to the clarity and purity of reason, there is most wholesome provision for bringing the faltering eye into the light of truth under the kindly shade of authority.”⁶⁰ This “kindly shade of authority,” bowed to in faith and submission, rewards with the knowledge and love of God: “He therefore who is not known, but yet is believed, can be loved. . . . Faith, therefore, avails to the knowledge and to the love of God, not as though of one wholly unknown or not loved at all, but to the end that He may be known more clearly and loved more steadfastly.”⁶¹

Many other similar quotations could be cited as this feature is central to Augustinian thought. Bernard Ramm provides this helpful summary of Augustine’s formula of faith: “It is impossible in unbelief to see the truthfulness of any system. Acidic skepticism can so eat away a man’s mind so that nothing can be taught him. A friendly

⁵⁸Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹Augustine, “Gospel of John 27.9,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 16.

⁶⁰Augustine, “On the Morals of the Catholic Church 2,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 18.

⁶¹Augustine, “On the Trinity 8.4,9,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 19.

disposition is essential to learn anything from anybody. No hypothesis is ever verified without provisional acceptance of its possible truthfulness. In the spiritual domain the necessity here stated is greatly increased. The intellect needs the aid, the illumination, the insight, the guidance of faith. It is Augustine's firm conviction that for philosophy or religion faith is prerequisite."⁶²

Reason Helps Explain Faith

Augustine's primacy of faith does not eliminate the need for reason after one comes to faith. As Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley point out, "Augustine does not see how anyone could be content with authority alone. The liberal arts help us to arrive at a deeper understanding of revelation."⁶³ While faith is the provisional acceptance of unexamined propositions, reason examines those propositions to understand and explicate them. Augustine, far from being a total fideist, gave reason an exalted position: "God forbid that He should hate in us that faculty by which He made us superior to all other living beings. Therefore, we must refuse so to believe as not to receive or seek a reason for our belief, since we could not believe at all if we did not have rational souls."⁶⁴ Augustine strongly exhorted believers to understand their beliefs: "Arouse the reason of the heart, awaken the interior inhabitant of thy interior eyes, let it take to its windows, let it examine God's Creation. . . . Believe on Him whom thou seest not because of those

⁶²Ramm, 178.

⁶³Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, 195.

⁶⁴Augustine, "Letters 120.1," in Geisler, *Augustine*, 14.

things which thou seest.”⁶⁵ One must not be content to simply come to faith in Christ and not grow in understanding of that faith. Understanding is the reward of faith. Thus, once we have come to faith, we must seek our reward. It is this understanding, after all, that had eluded the pagans and now was available to all who sought it by faith in Divine revelation. Gilson summarizes:

It thus appears from Augustine’s explicit statement, first that we are invited by Revelation itself to believe, that unless we believe we shall not understand; next that far from inviting us to do away with reason, the Gospel itself has promised to all those who seek truth in the revealed word the reward of understanding. . . . What the greatest among the Pagans, such as Plato and Plotinus, had always been hoping for, was now at hand. For the Greek philosophers had passionately loved wisdom, but grasp it they could not; and there it now was, offered by God Himself to all men as a means of salvation by faith, and, to the philosophers, as an unerring guide towards rational understanding.⁶⁶

Augustine was an apologetic giant in his day. The evidence of that is found not only in the doctrinal battles that he waged and won in behalf of orthodoxy, but perhaps even more profoundly in the impact he continues to have on Christian theology 1600 years after his death. Perhaps the most important battle Augustine waged was in the early 410's against Pelagius, “who exaggerated the role of human volition in man’s salvation and minimised that of grace, denying original sin.”⁶⁷ J. Gresham Machen provides this account of the Pelagian heresy: “Pelagius said that every man, far from being born with a corrupt nature, begins life practically where Adam began it, being able to choose either good or evil. Indeed, said he, if a man has not that ability to choose either good or evil, he

⁶⁵Augustine, “Sermons on New Testament Lessons 126.1,3,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 15.

⁶⁶Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 20-21.

⁶⁷Copleston, 45.

cannot be held responsible for his acts.”⁶⁸ Denying original sin, Pelagius taught that “sin is just a matter of individual acts; it appears only in those cases where a man has ability to choose either good or evil and where as a matter of fact he chooses evil instead of good.”⁶⁹ Machen says this, however, about this great debate: “The opponent of Pelagius was one of the greatest men in the whole history of the Christian Church. His name was Augustine. The controversy between Augustine and Pelagius is one of the most famous controversies ever known in human history. Its fame is quite just. In that Pelagian controversy an issue was fought out that is at the very vitals of the Christian Church.”⁷⁰

The reason for presently and briefly recounting the Pelagian controversy is to demonstrate the practical efforts of Augustine in using reason to explain and defend the faith. To get an idea of the polemical effort Augustine put into this great struggle, I quote Copleston at length:

Pelagius had tried to use texts from Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio* in support of his own heresy, but the bishop made his position quite clear in his *De peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum, ad Marcellinum*, following it up in the same year (412) by the *De spiritu et littera*, and later by the *De fide et operibus* (413), the *De natura et gratia contra Pelagium* (415) and the *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* (415). . . . and in the course of further anti-Pelagian polemic the *De Gestis Pelagii* (417) and the *De Gratia Christi et peccato originali* (418).

In 418 Pelagianism was condemned, first by a Council of African bishops, then by the Emperor Honorius, and finally by Pope Zosimus, but the controversy was not yet over, and when Augustine was accused by Julian, heretical Bishop of Eclanum, of having invented the concept of original sin, the Saint replied in the work *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (419-420), while in 420 he addressed two books, *Contrad duas epistolas Pelagianorum ad Bonifatium Papam*, to the Pope, and

⁶⁸J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947), 274-275.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 275.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 273.

followed them up by his *Contra Iulianum haeresis Pelagianae defensorem* (six books) in 421.

As evidenced by that impressive resume of writings, Augustine was tireless in his defense of the historic Christian faith. As reason led him to accept the true authority of the Scriptures and the Church, he now used the reason that he gained by his submission to that authority to intelligently answer the heresies, like Pelagianism, that threatened the doctrinal integrity of the Church.

Further General Observations and Epilogue

Though Augustine's view of faith and reason is not nearly as systematized or highly developed as the philosophy that would come from Thomas Aquinas eight hundred years later, it still serves as a simple model for exploring the broad roles that each assumes in apologetics. In addition to what has already been demonstrated about the Augustinian view, it should also be noted that Augustine 1) distinguished faith and reason; 2) saw faith and reason as complementary; and 3) believed faith and reason could never contradict one another. First, Augustine distinguished between faith and reason, noting that "what then we understand, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority; what we have an opinion on, to error."⁷¹ But while Augustine distinguished the roles of faith and reason, he saw them as complementary avenues to truth: "The explanation, then, of the goodness of creation is the goodness of God. It is a reasonable and sufficient explanation whether considered in the light of philosophy or of faith."⁷² And finally, faith and reason are not only complementary, but they also can never contradict one another:

⁷¹Augustine, "On the Profit of Believing 25," in Geisler, *Augustine*, 28.

⁷²Augustine, "City of God 11.22," in Geisler, *Augustine*, 30.

“For if reason be found contradicting the authority of Divine Scriptures, it only deceives by a semblance of truth, however acute it be, for its deductions cannot in that case be true.”⁷³

Considering he was an incomparable systematizer who defended Christianity in the context of the Latin Averroism that struck right at the core of the faith and reason controversy, Thomas Aquinas contributed a more philosophically satisfying treatment of the subject at hand. His distinctions are finer and he tended to distinguish man’s natural and supernatural vocations to the end that he also finely distinguished natural science from dogmatic theology.⁷⁴ In many regards, especially in carefully defending Christian apologetics against detractors, the thomist philosophy is highly superior to Augustinianism. But as Copleston writes, “the Augustinian attitude on the other hand enjoys this advantage, that it contemplates always man *as he is*, man in the concrete, for *de facto* man has only one final end, a supernatural end, and, as far as actual existence is concerned, there is but man fallen and redeemed: there never has been, is not, and never will be a purely ‘natural man’ without a supernatural vocation and end.”⁷⁵ Because he treated man with one final vocation, Augustine did not as finely distinguish between theology and philosophy, or faith and reason as Aquinas later would. Therefore, his philosophical views must be culled from various theological writings that he penned in hopes of advancing the supernatural vocation of man. But though his view is

⁷³Augustine, “Letters 143.7,” in Geisler, *Augustine*, 30.

⁷⁴Copleston, 49.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

unsystematized and underdeveloped, it is nevertheless a great achievement that still informs Christian thinkers even 1600 years after his death.