

Infideles et Philosophi:
Re-Reading ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3

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He who thinks about things otherwise than as they are, is
wrong.

—Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ¹

IN 1967, VICTOR PRELLER published his “reformulation” of Thomas Aquinas’s account of God and religious language in his *Divine Science and the Science of God*.² In it, he pushed back against many of the more traditional interpretations of Aquinas regarding, for instance, the *quinque viae* and divine naming. One of Preller’s more significant emphases, and the primary concern of the present article, is his suggestion that Aquinas, rather than defending natural theology apart from the grace of faith, denied its effectiveness, going so far as to deny that pre-Christian pagan philosophers can be said to know that God exists at all. He states, “The proposition, ‘God exists,’ . . . takes on such utterly new significance for faith that Aquinas is willing to say that the pagans . . . cannot be said to believe in God.”³

¹ *Metaphysics* 9. 1051b3–4, taken from Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), 626. All citations from the *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* in English are taken from Rowan.

² Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005). The book was originally published by Princeton University Press, 1967.

³ Preller, *Divine Science*, 228. For his close reading of *Summa Theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3, see *Divine Science*, 226–71; see especially 226–37, in which he

In support of such an interpretation, Preller and others direct us to the *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3. This particular passage seems to function, for Preller and others, as a smoking gun (if not *the* smoking gun) showing that Aquinas did not hold that Pre-Christian pagan philosophers, such as Plato or Aristotle, could be said to know that God exists. Bruce Marshall maintains that this passage “was the point of departure for my analysis of Aquinas.”⁴ The impact of this reading of Aquinas is far reaching. It is present—explicitly and implicitly—in the writings of, to name a few, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, Marshall, Eugene Rogers, and D. Stephen Long.⁵

One might get the impression, given the list of scholars above, that the acceptance and appropriation of Preller’s interpretation of Aquinas here is a largely Protestant and/or Barthian phenomenon.⁶ Yet, this interpretation is utilized—with and without reference to Preller—by Roman Catholic Thomists as well. Fergus Kerr states, “The interesting point for us . . . is that Thomas clearly thinks that the proposition ‘God exists,’ held as true by a non-Christian, on the basis of theistic proofs, does not mean the same as the proposition ‘God exists’ held by a believer.”⁷ With respect to this *ST* passage and Preller’s influ-

gives a more detailed account of the threefold distinction within the one act of faith, between *credere Deum*, *credere Deo*, and *credere in Deum*.

⁴ Bruce Marshall, “Thomas, Thomisms, and Truth,” *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 499–524.

⁵ See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 48; see also 70n3, in which Lindbeck cites *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Hauerwas, “Connections Created and Contingent: Aquinas, Preller, Wittgenstein, and Hopkins,” in *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein*, ed. Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (London: SCM Press, 2004), 76; Bruce Marshall, “Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian,” *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 353–402; Marshall, “Thomas, Thomisms, and Truth”; Marshall, “Faith and Reason Reconsidered: Aquinas and Luther on Deciding What is True,” *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 1–48; Eugene Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); and D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁶ Note that Marshall has since become Roman Catholic.

⁷ Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 67. In his discussion of Preller and Aquinas here, Kerr notes, “Pagans, or methodologically atheist philosophers, may believe on rational grounds that ‘God exists’; but this would not be believing truly that ‘God exists,’ since they do not hold this belief *sub his conditionibus quae fides determi-*

ence, Kerr observes, “Victor Preller brought this remark to the fore.”⁸ More recently, John P. O’Callaghan marshalled this same passage in order to argue that the existence of *the* “God” (proper name) of faith cannot be philosophically demonstrated.⁹ The claim by these and other scholars is quite strong. As Frederick Crosson observed, “It’s not just that [the philosopher, e.g., Aristotle] in fact failed to [know God to exist], but that he couldn’t have done so.”¹⁰ Apart from faith, one does not and cannot know that God exists; insofar as one assents to the proposition “God exists,” as Preller and others have argued, apart from faith, it means something “radically different.”¹¹

Given the work that this *ST* passage does for those who—like Preller, Marshall, Kerr, and others—argue that Aquinas denies that the pagan philosophers believed that God exists, it is crucial to have interpreted Aquinas rightly here. But have they done so? In this article, I will argue that, in fact, Preller and the others have misinter-

nat,” and, “[Thomas’s] point is . . . that even the proposition ‘God exists’ means something radically different when held on the basis of philosophy and ‘under the conditions that faith determines.’”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ O’Callaghan, without any reference to Preller, makes use of the same kind of reading of *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3. His remarks were offered in “Can We Prove the Existence of God? A Problem About Names,” presented on July 19, 2014, at *A Dominican Colloquium: What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology in the 21st Century*, July 16–20, 2014, which appears in *Nova et Vetera* (English) 14.2 (2016). O’Callaghan’s essay was a wonderful consideration of the role of names in Aquinas’s discussions of knowledge of God. More specifically, he drew attention to the distinction between common and proper names and especially how the name “God” sometimes functions as a common name, while at other points it is a proper name. Ultimately, the pagan philosopher, if I understand O’Callaghan correctly, can be said to have proven the existence of “a god” (common name) but not the “God” (proper name) of Christian faith. Although I have some concerns regarding the analysis offered by O’Callaghan, a discussion of this sort is beyond the scope of the present essay. Here, I am primarily interested in his—and others’—interpretation and utilization of *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3, to lend support to the claim that pre-Christian pagan philosophers did not and could not have known of the existence of the God of Christian faith. Much more is required in order to address O’Callaghan’s full presentation.

¹⁰ Frederick J. Crosson, “Reconsidering Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian,” *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 481–98. In this essay, Crosson is responding in particular to the interpretation of Aquinas offered by Marshall. For another response specifically to Marshall, see also Louis Roy, “Bruce Marshall’s Reading of Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 473–80.

¹¹ Preller, *Divine Science*, 226.

preted the *ST* passage. Aquinas does not have pagan philosophers in mind at all. They are not even on the radar. Rather, the infidels in question are simply heretics and the like: those who are said to hold that God exists, otherwise than by faith, while also holding other *false* opinions about God and matters of faith. Furthermore, I will argue that the common interpretation of the passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in which deficient cognition of a simple thing is said to be ignorance of that thing has also been misinterpreted and mis-utilized to buttress the broader misinterpretations about pre-Christian pagan philosophers.

The discussion will be fivefold: (1) I will present a brief discussion of the act of faith as it is articulated by Aquinas; (2) I will present the "Prellerian" interpretation of the relevant text; (3) I will offer my own exegesis of the relevant texts in order to identify more clearly the "unbelievers" (*infideles*) to which Aquinas refers; (4) I will briefly consider the meaning of *defectus cognitionis* as it is discussed in Aquinas's commentary on *Metaphysics* 9; and lastly, (5) I will offer some concluding remarks that intend to state more compactly the position presented here.¹²

Actus Fidei: Belief according to Thomas Aquinas

In his considerations of the act of faith and its object, Aquinas makes the well-known threefold distinction between "to believe in a God" (*credere Deum*), "to believe God" (*credere Deo*), and "to believe unto God" (*credere in Deum*). The first of these pertains to the intellect's assent, by command of the will, to the material object of faith (*materiale obiectum fidei*): God or anything referred to God (*ad Deum pertinent*). The second—*credere Deo*—pertains to the formal aspect of the object of faith (*formale obiectum fidei*) in relation to the intellect: God as the First Truth (*veritas prima*); as Preller observes, "The believer submits to the teaching authority of God himself."¹³ And lastly, the third aspect

¹² It is important to acknowledge that a wholly adequate interpretation of *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3 would require a great deal more than I am able to present in this article. For instance, it would be important to engage with several other works of Aquinas, most notably his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, especially the lectures on chapters 1, 4, and 17. Also, a consideration of *De veritate* 14, as well as a more thorough discussion of his commentaries on Romans and Hebrews, sheds further light on the character of unbelief and the situation of the pagan or Gentile philosopher. Such a discussion must be left for another day.

¹³ Preller, *Divine Science*, 229.

pertains to the will's adherence to the object of faith as the good (*bonum*) or end (*finis*) of human existence: God as beatitude.¹⁴ Aquinas states, "[F]or since to believe is an act of the intellect assenting to the truth at the command of the will, two things are required that this act may be perfect: one of which is that the intellect should infallibly tend to its object, which is the true; while the other is that the will should be infallibly directed to the last end, on account of which it assents to the true. And both of these are to be found in the act of living faith."¹⁵

As we can see, then, the perfect act of faith has distinct aspects involving both the intellect and the will. The will moves the intellect to assent to the truths of faith as to an end based on the authority of God as the First Truth. Although both the intellect and the will are involved, Aquinas reminds us that the faith primarily pertains to the intellect. He notes, "Now since faith is a perfection of the intellect [*perfectio intellectus*], that pertains directly to faith, which pertains to the intellect."¹⁶

Furthermore, because the act of faith—that is, belief in the relevant sense—has the intellect as its subject, only what is true can fall under its material object. Aquinas maintains, "For it belongs to the very essence of faith that the intellect should ever tend to the true, since nothing false can be the object of faith [*fidei non potest subesse*

¹⁴ For his discussion of this distinction, see *ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 2, resp.; see also *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.; q. 1, a. 6, ad 2; and q. 2, a. 1, ad 3. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the *Summa theologiae* in English are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger, 1948). See also *Super Rom* 4, lec. 1 (Marietti no. 327), and *Super Heb* 11, lec. 1 (Marietti no. 553). For his remarks concerning the broader notion of *credere* or faith—i.e., belief or assent based on authority—see, *Super Heb* 11, lec. 1: "oportet credere cum sibi traduntur a magistro" (Marietti no. 557); "fide communiter" (Marietti no. 559).

¹⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 5, resp.: "Cum enim credere sit actus intellectus assentientis vero ex imperio voluntatis, ad hoc quod iste actus sit perfectus duo requiruntur. Quorum unum est ut infallibiliter intellectus tendat in suum bonum, quod est verum, aliud autem est ut infallibiliter ordinatur ad ultimum finem, propter quem voluntas assentit vero. Et utrumque invenitur in actu fidei formatae."

¹⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 4, resp.: "Cum autem fides sit perfectio intellectus, illud per se ad fidem pertinent quod pertinent ad intellectum." See also *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 2, sc: "Things which are contrary to one another are in the same subject. Now faith, to which unbelief is opposed, resides in the intellect. Therefore unbelief also is in the intellect [contraria sunt in eodem subiecto. Sed fides, cui contrariatur infidelitas, est in intellectus sicut in subiecto. Ergo et infidelitas in intellectus est]."

falsum].”¹⁷ Additionally, because the formal aspect of the object of faith is the First Truth, only truth to the exclusion of that which is false falls under faith. Aquinas observes, “The faith of which we are speaking is based on the Divine Truth, which is infallible, and consequently its object cannot be anything false.”¹⁸ Both materially and formally, then, the act of faith pertains to what is true, to the exclusion of any and all falsehood.

Insofar as the act of faith involves the assent of the intellect, moved by command of the will, the believer is one who believes and is willing to believe all that faith entails. Disbelief in any one article of faith, if due to obstinacy of the will, indicates the complete absence of the formal aspect of the object of faith and, consequently, the lack of faith. Aquinas states, “Just as mortal sin is contrary to charity, so is disbelief in one article of faith contrary to faith. Now charity does not remain in a man after one mortal sin. Therefore neither does faith after a man disbelieves one article.”¹⁹ As Bruce Marshall nicely remarks, “[E]pistemically, the articles of Christian faith are for Thomas strictly a package deal.”²⁰

Thus far, then, we have noted that, for Aquinas: (1) the act of Christian faith or belief primarily and directly pertains to the intellect, with an appropriate willingness to believe what is true; (2) insofar as faith is grounded in God as the First Truth, it pertains to nothing false, but only what is true; and (3) truths or articles of faith are a “packaged deal,” so to speak. In short, belief in the strict sense is a perfection of the intellect that is concerned only with truth and must be maintained in its entirety—or at least, there must be a willingness to assent to all that faith teaches. Given this account, who might count as an “unbeliever” (*infidelis*)? In the next section, we will

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 5, resp.: “Nam ex ratione ipsius fidei est quod intellectus semper feratur in verum, quia fidei non potest subesse falsum.” See *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 3, resp.: “Nothing false can come under faith [fidei non potest subesse aliquod falsum].”

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 2: “fides de qua loquimur innititur veritati divinae quae est infallibilis, et ita non potest ei subesse falsum.”

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 5, a. 3, sc: “Peccatum mortale contrariatur caritati, ita discredere unum articulum contrariatur fidei. Sed caritas non remanet in homine post unum peccatum mortale. Ergo neque fides postquam discredet unum articulum fidei.” See *ST* II-II, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

²⁰ Marshall, “Faith and Reason Reconsidered,” 9. Marshall also maintains that “the beliefs that God is and is one are true on Thomas’s account, it seems, only when they are held true together with the rest of the articles of faith (‘under the conditions faith defines,’ as Thomas puts it)” (*ibid.*, 10).

consider one prominent interpretation, as well as some of its broader implications for the pre-Christian pagan philosophers.

The Ignorance of Pre-Christian Pagan Philosophers

As noted above, for Preller and others, the pre-Christian pagan philosophers cannot be said to truly believe that God exists. And again, much of the heavy lifting in support of this interpretation is provided by ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3. There, Aquinas considers and responds to the following objection: “That which can be said of unbelievers [*non fidelibus*], cannot be called an act of faith [*actus fidei*]. Now unbelievers [*infidelibus*] can be said to believe in a God [*credere Deum*]. Therefore it should not be reckoned an act of faith.”²¹

How can something that an unbeliever does also be said to be an aspect of the Christian act of faith? Because they are said “to believe” that God exists, do they, then, have the theological virtue of faith? Aquinas responds, “Unbelievers cannot be said ‘to believe in a God’ [*credere Deum*] as we understand it in relation to the act of faith [*actus fidei*]. For they do not believe that God exists under the conditions that faith determines [*sub his conditionibus quas fides determinat*]; hence they do not truly believe in a God [*nec vere Deum credunt*], since, as the Philosopher observes (*Metaph. ix*, text. 22) ‘to know simple things defectively is not to know them at all [*in simplicibus defectus cognitionis est solum in non attingendo totaliter*].’”²²

It seems rather straightforward. The unbeliever, who is said to believe that God exists, has a deficiency of cognition with respect to the metaphysically simple God and, therefore, by virtue of the relevant Aristotelian maxim, cannot be said to truly believe that God exists. The believer, on the other hand, has no such deficiency and, thus, can be said to truly believe that God exists (*credere Deum*).

For Preller and others, the proposition “God exists” and the assent to its truth mean something “radically different” when held by Christians and non-Christians.²³ Because the conditions for the act of

²¹ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, obj. 3: “Illud quod convenit etiam non fidelibus non potest poni fidei actus. Sed credere Deum esse convenit etiam infidelibus. Ergo non debet poni inter actus fidei.”

²² ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3: “Quod credere Deum non convenit infidelibus sub ea ratione qua ponitur actus fidei. Non enim credunt Deum esse sub his conditionibus quas fides determinat. Et ideo nec vere Deum credunt, quia, ut philosophus dicit, IX Metaphys., *in simplicibus defectus cognitionis est solum in non attingendo totaliter*.”

²³ Preller, *Divine Science*, 226. See also Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 67.

Christian faith do not obtain in the pre-Christian pagan philosopher, they must be counted among those unbelievers who do not truly believe that God exists. Although the pagan might be said to have attained to the material object of faith—namely, God’s existence²⁴—because they believe neither by virtue of the authority of God as the First Truth nor by the command of the will, the pagan cannot be said to believe in the God of Christian faith. In fact, due to this deficiency with respect to belief in the metaphysically simple God, the pagan, by virtue of the Aristotelian maxim, is said to be entirely ignorant.

The nature of the deficiency with respect to the conditions of faith is not uniformly identified by our interpreters. Preller suggests, “It is not a question of how many ‘facts’ we know about God,”²⁵ while Marshall appears less concerned with the specificity of the deficiency, suggesting, “The degree or type of *defectus* seems not to affect the outcome; error even *in minimo* precludes the knowledge of God *totaliter*.”²⁶ Long argues, “Because any defect in cognition of things perverts altogether understanding them, the defect in any knowledge of God that lacks the formal object and the will’s movement, finally lacks true knowledge of God altogether.”²⁷ Although such differences appear, the interpretations at issue seem to agree among themselves that, if nothing else, the lack of the formal aspect of the object of faith contributes to—or is—the *defectus cognitionis* named by Aquinas. Without the grace of Christian faith, the pre-Christian pagan philosopher has neither the capacity nor the categories to attain to true knowledge of God.

Again, the claims are rather strong. As quoted in the introduction, Frederick Crosson observed, “It’s not just that [the philosopher, e.g.,

²⁴ See Long, *Speaking of God*, 139. As far as I can tell, Aquinas does not hold that the philosopher who has demonstratively proven the existence of God “believes” in the relevant sense. That is to say, I do not think that the philosophers who know God exists through demonstration attain to the first aspect of the act of faith—namely, the material object. They do not “believe” that God exists (*credere Deum*); rather, insofar as they have demonstrated the truth of the proposition “God exists,” they “know” that God exists (*scire Deum*), at least in a qualified sense by *quia*-demonstration. More might be said, but for the sake of brevity I will leave that to another day.

²⁵ Preller, *Divine Science*, 230. Of course, Preller proceeds to deny that we know anything properly about God. Rather, we speak of God by means of what he calls “appropriate equivocation” (*ibid.*, 243).

²⁶ Marshall, “Thomas, Thomisms, and Truth,” 503.

²⁷ Long, *Speaking of God*, 141.

Aristotle] in fact failed to [know God to exist], but that he couldn't have done so."²⁸ Are such claims consistent with the rest of Aquinas's corpus? Does this interpretation render Aquinas incoherent? What are we to make of the following three passages? In the *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG), he writes, "There are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason."²⁹ In his Roman commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, he states, "What is per se known is not demonstrable, but the philosophers demonstrated that God exists."³⁰ And in the commentary on Hebrews, he says, "We believe that there is one God, a fact which is demonstrated by philosophers."³¹

²⁸ Crosson, "Reconsidering Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," 484.

²⁹ *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 3, no. 2: "Quaedam vero sunt ad quae etiam ratio naturalis pertingere potest, sicut est Deum esse, Deum esse unum, et alia huiusmodi; quae etiam philosophi demonstrative de Deo probaverunt, ducti naturalis lumine rationis." See SCG I, ch. 9, no. 3 ; III, ch. 39, nos. 1 and 39, 6. All citations from the *Summa contra gentiles* in English are taken from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bks. I (trans. Anton C. Pegis) and III (trans. Vernon J. Bourke) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

³⁰ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Revised Text*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, sc: "Illud quod est per se notum non est demonstrabile. Sed philosophi demonstraverunt Deum esse" (English translation is my own). This is quoted in Anna Bonta Moreland, *Known by Nature: Thomas Aquinas on Natural Knowledge of God* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2010), 186n3. See also *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Revised Text*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, sc 2: "Whatever is the conclusion of a demonstration is not self-evident. But God's existence is demonstrated by the philosophers too [Quidquid est conclusio demonstrationis non est per se notum. Sed Deum esse demonstratur etiam a philosophis]."

³¹ *Super Heb* 11, lec. 1 (Marietti no. 560): "Credimus esse Deum unum, quod tamen demonstratur a philosophis." All citations from the *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews* in English are taken from the translation prepared by Fabian Richard Larcher (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012). Later in this section, Aquinas has the opportunity to reject philosophical knowledge of this kind, but instead, simply notes, "To the objection [regarding philosophers knowledge that God exists] based on demonstration, the answer is that nothing prohibits one thing being seen by one person and believed by another [Ad istud de demonstration, dicendum est quod nihil prohibet aliquid esse visum uni quod est creditum alteri]"; see *Super Rom* 1, lec. 7 (Marietti no. 123): "The truth of God was known by the gentiles [veritatem Dei fuisse a gentibus cognitum]." See, also, *Super Rom* 1, lec. 7 (Marietti no. 127), which seems to take for granted such affirmations of gentile knowledge of God,

In light of the interpretation of the *ST* II-II passage offered by Preller, Long, Marshall, Kerr, and others, how are we to take such explicit statements affirming the demonstrative knowledge of God by the philosophers seriously? Can we? Should we interpret Aquinas to be saying, “The philosophers knew that God exists . . . but not really?” Is this satisfactory? I do not think that it is. In fact, the above reading of the *secunda secundae* passage does not seem to be the more obvious interpretation at all. What follows, then, will be a closer look at certain components of the relevant passage, which leads to an interpretation involving fewer difficulties and underwrites a more consistent understanding of Aquinas’s position with respect to pre-Christian pagan philosophical knowledge of God.

Infideles: Defining Our Terms and Re-Reading Our Text

To determine the extent to which Preller, Long, Marshall, Kerr, and the others have or have not interpreted ad 3 of article 2 in question 2 accurately, it is paramount that we clarify the meaning of two terms in particular: (1) “unbelievers” and (2) “deficiency.” In this section, we will consider the former, while the latter is left for the next section. First, given his overall analysis of faith, it is clear that “unbelievers” (*infideles*) is not a general term, but a specific, technical term. Furthermore, in this context, Aquinas distinguishes between unbelief as a mere absence of faith and unbelief as opposition to faith. The latter is, according to Aquinas, unbelief in its primary sense—it is the sin of unbelief. He states, “Unbelief may be taken in two ways: first, by way of pure negation [*puram negationem*], so that a man be called an unbeliever, merely because he has not the faith [*ex hoc solo quod non habet fidem*]. Secondly, unbelief may be taken by way of opposition to the faith [*contrarietatem ad fidem*]; in which sense a man refuses to hear the faith, or despises it. . . . It is this [latter unbelief] that completes the notion of unbelief, and it is in this sense that unbelief is a sin.”³² He clarifies further, suggesting

although noting the subsequent perverse forms of worship that follow. All citations from the *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans* in English are taken from the translation prepared by Fabian Richard Larcher (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012).

³² *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 1, resp.: “Infidelitas dupliciter accipi potest. Uno modo, secundum puram negationem, ut dicatur infidelis ex hoc solo quod non habet fidem. Alio modo potest intelligi secundum contrarietatem ad fidem, quia scilicet aliquis repugnat auditui fidei, vel etiam contemnit ipsam. . . . Et in hoc proprie perficitur ratio infidelitas. Et secundum hoc infidelitas est peccatum.”

that “dissent” is “the act proper to unbelief.”³³ Unbelief in the relevant sense is not simply lacking faith, but resistance or opposition to the truths of faith.

Also, insofar as the act of faith—that is, belief—pertains primarily and directly to the intellect as its subject and truth as its good, so too unbelief pertains primarily and directly to the intellect and opposition to truth as its terminus. Aquinas observes, “Things which are contrary to one another are in the same subject. Now faith, to which unbelief is opposed, resides in the intellect. Therefore unbelief also is in the intellect [*infidelitas in intellectu est*].”³⁴ Recall, furthermore, that assent in the act of belief has the character of assent to what is true. As Aquinas maintains, “No virtue that perfects the intellect is related to the false. . . . Now faith is a virtue that perfects the intellect. . . . Therefore nothing false can come under it,”³⁵ and also, “It belongs to the very essence of faith that the intellect should ever tend to the true, since nothing false can be the object of faith.”³⁶ Unbelief, then, in the relevant sense, is to intellectually dissent from the truths of faith, which is nothing else than intellectually assenting to what is false. It is not simply a lack of knowledge, a lack of “enough” bits of information, but rather the explicit and willful resistance to the truth.

The question remains, then, about who can be said to “unbelieve” in this sense. Who has opposed the truth of the faith, holding to what is false with respect to the simple God and matters of faith? Aquinas’s account presents us with numerous possibilities. At various points within the “treatise on faith” in the *secunda secundae*, he mentions, for instance, those with lifeless faith (*fides informis*), heretics (*haereticus*), those in error (*error*), apostates (*apostata*), demons (*daemonum*), and philosophers (*philosophi*).³⁷ In this section, we will briefly discuss each.

First, consider the situation of those with lifeless faith. Aquinas suggests, “Lifeless faith, though it is not simply perfect with the

³³ *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 2, resp.: “Dissentire . . . est proprius actus infidelitatis.”

³⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 2, resp.: “Contraria sunt in eodem subiecto. Sed fides, cui contrariatur infidelitas, est in intellectu sicut in subiecto. Ergo et infidelitas in intellectu est.”

³⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 3, sc: “Nulla virtus perficiens intellectum se habet ad falsum. . . . Sed fides est quaedam virtus perficiens intellectum, ut infra patebit. Ergo ei non potest subesse falsum.”

³⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 5, resp.: “Nam ex ratione ipsius fidei est quod intellectus semper feratur in verum, quia fidei non potest falsum.”

³⁷ Strictly speaking, in the treatise on faith, Aquinas does not include a discussion of the *philosophi* as unbelievers. This, in itself, seems to speak against their inclusion among the *infideles* of *ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3.

perfection of a virtue, is, nevertheless, perfect with a perfection that suffices for the essential notion of faith [i.e., the assent of the intellect].”³⁸ Most helpfully in this regard, he explicitly maintains that “he who receives faith from God without charity [i.e., lifeless faith], is healed from unbelief [*sanatur ab infidelitate*], not entirely (because the sin of his previous unbelief is not removed) but in part, namely, in the point of ceasing from committing such and such a sin.”³⁹ That he qualifies the character of this healing from unbelief might give us pause, but it need not. It is true, insofar as the fault or blame (*culpa*) of previous unbelief remains, the healing is partial. With respect to the present assent of the intellect, however, those with lifeless faith are healed of unbelief. It is clear, given his descriptions of them, that Aquinas does not count those with lifeless faith (*fides informis*) among the unbelievers who cannot be said to believe that God exists. Rather, as he remarks, those with lifeless faith, though imperfect with respect to the perfection of the virtue, are nonetheless perfect with respect to the intellect, having been “healed from unbelief.” They quite simply are not, according to Aquinas, unbelievers in the strict sense.

The heretic (*haereticus*), however, is one who has rejected some aspect of the faith. By opposing the truths of the faith, then, that one assents to certain falsehoods. Further, the heretic holds to such falsehoods obstinately, betraying a will that lacks the formality of faith. Aquinas states, “[The heretic] holds what he chooses to hold, and rejects what he chooses to reject, . . . [he] no longer adheres to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule, but to his own will.”⁴⁰ Moreover, their dissent from the truths of faith, which is assent to that which is false, has the character of corruption: “[Heretics] resist

³⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 6, a. 2, ad 1: “Fides informis, etsi non sit perfecta simpliciter perfectione virtutis, est tamen perfecta quadam perfectione aquam sufficit ad fidei rationem.” See, also *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 4, resp.: “[W]hat pertains to the will, does not pertain directly to faith... But the distinction of living from lifeless faith is in respect of something pertaining to the will, i.e., charity, and not in respect of something pertaining to the intellect [Quod autem pertinent ad voluntatem non per se pertinent ad fidem. . . . Distinctio autem fidei formatae et informis est secundum id quod pertinent ad voluntatem, idest secundum caritatem, non autem secundum illud quod pertinent ad intellectum].” See also *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 5, resp.

³⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 6, a. 2, ad 3: “Ille qui accipit a Deo fidem absque caritate non simpliciter sanatur ab infidelitate, quia non removetur culpa praecedentis infidelitatis, sed sanatur secundum quid, ut scilicet cesset a tali peccato.”

⁴⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 5, a. 3, resp.: “[Haereticus] quae vult tenet et quae vult non tenet, non iam inhaeret Ecclesiae doctrinae sicut infallibili regulae, sed propriae voluntati.” See also *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 1, ad 2.

that faith by corrupting it.”⁴¹ To the extent that a heretic does affirm certain truths of the faith (e.g., God exists, God is one, God became incarnate), that person’s intellectual assent is not based on the authority of God as the First Truth or moved by the will informed by grace. Rather, as Aquinas notes, such a one holds to those articles of faith “otherwise than by faith,” and “by his own will and judgment,” and moreover, with “many false opinions.”⁴² And note, again, “unbelief” in the relevant sense is not “pure negation” or “mere absence,”⁴³ but rather involves resistance to and rejection of that which is true, which are nothing but the acceptance of that which is false. Heretics, then, are to be counted among the unbelievers in the proper sense.

The unbelief that characterizes heresy is, for Aquinas, distinct from what he simply considers “error.” He recognizes that those who dissent from this or that article of faith but do so because they are unaware that such dissent is against the faith are different from those who dissent obstinately, from heretics. Aquinas states, “It is evident that a heretic who obstinately disbelieves one article of faith, is not prepared to follow the teaching of the Church in all things; but if he is not obstinate, he is no longer in heresy, but only in error [*solum errans*].”⁴⁴ The volitional component of unbelief is further highlighted when Aquinas notes that explicit belief in all articles is not necessary for the habit of faith, but rather the willingness to believe. He observes, “A man who obstinately disbelieves a thing that is of faith, has not the habit of faith, and yet he who does not explicitly believe all, while he is prepared to believe all, has the habit.”⁴⁵ According to Aquinas, those simply in error are those who assent to what is in fact false, but through ignorance or poor formation and not by virtue of willful dissent. As such, then, they are not, in the technical sense, counted among those *infideles* who are guilty of the sin of unbelief.

In his treatment of belief and unbelief, Aquinas also discusses the situation of both apostates (*apostata*) and the demons (*daemonum*).

⁴¹ *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 6, resp.: “ei renituntur corrumpentes ipsam.”

⁴² Respectively: *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.: “aliomodo . . . quam per fidem” (note also *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 1 and ad 2); *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 1: “propria voluntate et iudicio”; and *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 5, ad 1: “diversas falsas sententias.”

⁴³ See *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 1, resp., and *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 6, resp.

⁴⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.: “Et sic manifestum est quod haereticus qui pertinaciter discredet unum articulum non est paratus sequi in omnibus doctrinam Ecclesiae (si enim non pertinaciter, iam non est haereticus, sed solum errans).”

⁴⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1: “Quod ille qui pertinaciter discredet aliquid eorum quae sub fide continentur non habet habitum fidei, quem tamen habet ille qui non explicate omnia credit, sed paratus est omnia credere.”

Apostasy can be understood in different ways: (a) with respect to the religious life or holy orders, (b) with respect to the commandments of God, and (c) with respect to the faith itself. Aquinas maintains, “Though man may apostatize in both the [first and second], he may still remain united to God by faith.”⁴⁶ That is to say, one can remain “healed of unbelief”⁴⁷ with respect to faith even though that one has given up the religious life or “[rebelled] in his mind against the Divine commandments.”⁴⁸ The apostate, on the other hand, has forsaken the faith completely. Aquinas remarks, “Apostasy simply and absolutely is that whereby a man withdraws from the faith, and is called ‘apostasy of perfidy.’ In this way apostasy, simply so called, pertains to unbelief.”⁴⁹ Unlike heresy, however, apostasy is not the rejection of this or that article of faith while maintaining others, but rather the complete rejection of the faith as such. Aquinas argues, “Now apostasy regards unbelief as the term ‘whereto’ of the movement of withdrawal from the faith, wherefore apostasy does not imply a special kind of unbelief, but an aggravating circumstance thereof.”⁵⁰ Both heretics and apostates represent, strictly speaking, what Aquinas intends by the term *infideles*.⁵¹

Concerning demons (*daemonum*), Aquinas states, “Now, that the will moves the intellect to assent, may be due to two causes. First, through the will being directed to the good, and in this way to believe is a praiseworthy action. Secondly, because the intellect is convinced that it ought to believe what is said, though that conviction is not based on objective evidence.”⁵² Demons are said

⁴⁶ ST II-II, q. 12, a. 1, resp.: “Quibus duabus apostasies existentibus, ad hoc potest remanere homo Deo coniunctus per fidem.”

⁴⁷ See ST II-II, q. 6, a. 2, ad 3.

⁴⁸ ST II-II, q. 12, a. 1, resp.: “per mentem repugnantem.”

⁴⁹ ST II-II, q. 12, a. 1, resp.: “Et ideo simpliciter et absolute est apostasia per quam aliquis discredet a fide, quae vocatur *apostasia perfidae*. Et per hunc modum apostasia simpliciter dicta ad infidelitatem pertinet.”

⁵⁰ ST II-II, q. 12, a. 1, ad 3: “Apostasia autem respicit infidelitatem ut terminum *ad quem* est motus recedentis a fide. Unde apostasia non importat determinatam speciem infidelitatis, sed quondam circumstantiam aggravantem.”

⁵¹ See ST II-II, q. 10, a. 9, resp.: “those unbelievers who have forsaken the faith they once received, either by corrupting the faith, as heretics, or by entirely renouncing the faith, as apostates [illorum infidelium qui a fide suscepta deviant, vel corrumpendo fidem, sicut haeretici, vel etiam totaliter a fide recedendo, sicut apostatae].”

⁵² ST II-II, q. 5, a. 2, resp.: “Quod autem voluntas movent intellectum ad assentiendum potest contingere ex duobus. Uno modo, ex ordine voluntatis ad bonum, et sic credere est actus laudabilis. Alio modo, quia intellectus

to believe in the second sense. Further, he observes, “[Demons] see many evident signs, whereby they recognize that the teaching of the Church is from God, although they do not see the things themselves that the Church teaches, for instance that there are three Persons in God, and so forth.”⁵³ Like the faithful believer’s intellect, the demon’s “intellect assents to that which he believes, not because he sees it either in itself, or by resolving it to first self-evident principles, but because his will commands the intellect to assent.” Unlike the faithful believers, however, the demons are compelled to recognize the divine reality that lay behind the Church, not because of “having a certain affection for the good” but by “evidence of signs.”⁵⁴ The demons are said “to believe” and “to have faith,”⁵⁵ being compelled to believe by signs that God is speaking through the Church. They attain to the articles of faith (material objects) based on the authority of God in the Church (formal aspect of the object)—that is to say, not out of love for God, but by compulsion brought by signs. This faith is neither “praiseworthy” nor given through grace,⁵⁶ yet it is described by Aquinas as a kind of faith or belief.

Lastly, let us now consider the *philosophi* as they appear in the treatise on faith. Ironically, given the Prellerian interpretation of the *ST II-II* passage (q. 2, a. 2, ad 3), one of the only mentions of the philosophers occurs in the *sed contra* of article 4 of the same question. Without later negating what is stated, Aquinas there observes, “It is necessary to believe that God is one and incorporeal: which things philosophers prove by natural reason [*quae naturali ratione a philosophi probantur*].”⁵⁷ Such statements fit well with the other affirmations of pagan philosophical knowledge of God found elsewhere in the corpus. For instance, in his *Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews*,

convincitur ad hoc quod iudicet esse credendum his quae dicuntur, licet non convincatur per evidentiam rei.”

⁵³ *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 2, resp.: “Vident enim multa manifesta indicia ex quibus percipient doctrinam Ecclesiae esse a Deo; quamvis ipsi res ipsas quas Ecclesia docet non vident, puta Deum esse trinum et unum, vela liquid huiusmodi.”

⁵⁴ Respectively: *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2: “aliquem affectum boni”; *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 1: “signorum evidentia.”

⁵⁵ Respectively: *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.; *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2: “fides quae est in daemonibus”

⁵⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1: “non pertinent ad laudem voluntatis ipsorum quod credunt”; *ST II-II*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2: “fides quae est in daemonibus non est donum gratiae.”

⁵⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 4, sc: “Est quia necesse est Deum credere esse unum et incorporeum, quae naturali ratione a philosophi probantur.”

Aquinas remarks, “We believe that there is one God, a fact which is demonstrated by philosophers [*philosophis*].”⁵⁸ Here, as well as in the treatise on faith in *ST* II-II, the philosophers seem of little or no concern to Aquinas in his treatment of belief and unbelief. Further, in the strict sense, the pre-Christian pagan philosophers as such are not in principle guilty of the sin of unbelief. According to Aquinas, an “unbeliever” in the strict sense is not simply a non-believer; unbelief is neither “pure negation” nor “mere absence”⁵⁹ of faith. Aquinas explicitly argues that unbelief in the relevant sense is not the same thing as non-belief.

Against what has been put forth, Preller, Long, and company seem to presuppose that the designation “unbelievers” in *ST* II-II passage under consideration is at least inclusive of pre-Christian pagan philosophers. Yet, is this plausible given the definitions and distinctions made by Aquinas? I do not think it is. I do not doubt that individual pagan philosophers since the time of the Incarnation can be said to have heard and opposed the faith, and consequently, dissenting from its truth, such can be counted among the unbelievers who assent to that which is false. Pre-Christian pagan philosophers, however, are entirely different. As suggested above, at no point in the treatise on faith does Aquinas consider the pre-Christian pagan philosophers as unbelievers. In fact, he explicitly denies that unbelief in the relevant sense was even obtained prior to the Incarnation. In his discussion of whether unbelievers may have dominion over Christians, he responds to an objection by noting that “the authority of Caesar preceded the distinction of faithful from unbelievers.”⁶⁰ This seemingly unrelated remark clearly limits the notion of unbelief to those persons who could have even potentially encountered and rejected the faith. Pre-Christian pagan philosophers, then, by definition, “preceded the distinction of faithful from unbelievers.” There was no possibility of unbelief understood as intellectual dissent from the faith.

Because they preceded the very distinction between the believer and unbeliever, the pre-Christian pagan philosophers cannot be counted among those “unbelievers” discussed in the *ST* II-II passage. As Crosson observes, I think rightly, “It is possible to classify the pre-Christian philosophers as ‘unbelievers’ only if the term is taken in a large and improper sense, i.e., as meaning simply non-believ-

⁵⁸ *Super Heb.* 11, lec. 1 (Marietti no. 560).

⁵⁹ See *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 1, resp.; q. 10, a. 6, resp.

⁶⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 10, ad 2.

ers.”⁶¹ But, as we have seen, Aquinas has a much more specific sense of “unbeliever,” one that involves not simply the absence of faith, but also *opposition* to faith in the form of assent to *falsehoods*. The “unbelievers” who are said to believe that “God exists,” then, are not pre-Christian pagan philosophers, but rather, they are heretics, apostates, and the like. Individual pre-Christian pagan philosophers could and, more than likely, did assent to falsehoods with respect to God. In this sense (and this sense only), then, one might argue that the pre-Christian pagan philosopher did not know that God exists. This lack of knowledge is not due to the absence of the formal aspect of the object of faith, but due to their assent to what is false materially. They are not “unbelievers” in some loose sense on account of being pre-Christian pagan philosophers without the grace of faith, but rather because they held what is true to be false or what is false to be true.

What has been shown adequately specifies the meaning of *infideles* as it appears in the *ST II-II* passage. Yet, even if one is able to adequately determine the referent of “unbelievers,” a discussion of the deficiency from which they suffer requires further specification and will offer further support to the interpretation being offered. To this end, we turn to Aquinas’s commentary on the relevant sections of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

Defectus Cognitionis: Aquinas’s Commentary on Metaphysics Θ

In his lectio 11 of book 9⁶² of the *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Aquinas offers us his interpretation of the maxim utilized in the *ST II-II* passage (q. 2, a. 2, ad 3): “to know simple things defectively is not to know them at all.” In this context, the primary concern is to relate truth and falsity to act and potency. Aquinas notes, first of all, that “truth follows being . . . the structure of things in being and truth is the same.”⁶³ Consequently, composition in being grounds the possibility of composition in thought and speech. Importantly, however, the composition in question pertains to the composition of act and potency. But, as Aquinas observes, “in the case of [simple things] . . . such as immaterial substances, truth or falsity is not present in them as a result of any combination or separation which occurs in reality, but arises because

⁶¹ Crosson, “Reconsidering Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian,” 448.

⁶² Often cited as book Θ, as well.

⁶³ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1903: “Verum autem consequitur ens . . . eadem est disposition rerum in esse et in veritate.”

their quiddity is known or not known.”⁶⁴ He maintains further that “all simple substances are actual beings and are never potential ones” and that “[simple beings] do not contain falsity, but only truth.”⁶⁵

With respect to what is metaphysically simple, containing no potency but only actuality, the question does not concern “how much” one does or does not know about that being, but rather whether what is said to be known is actual, whether it attains to the being as it is. Aquinas observes, “Not to come in contact [*attingere*] with them [i.e., simple beings] is not to know them.”⁶⁶ To come in contact with a simple being is what it means for the intellect to be true. There is no potency about which the intellect could at one time be false and another time true,⁶⁷ but rather, the intellect, if it has attained to the simple being, says of the simple being what is always the case, that is to say, the intellect attains to the actuality that the simple being is. Aquinas notes, “To come in contact with a simple thing through the intellect, in such a way as to apprehend what it is ‘and to express it,’ that is, to signify this simple thing by a word [*voce*], constitutes the truth present in simple things.”⁶⁸

To attain to the quiddity of a thing is not about comprehensively knowing its entire quiddity, but rather, it pertains to holding in thought and speech what is in act in reality. According to Aquinas, “[I]t is unfitting that there should be error or falsity in all those things

⁶⁴ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1901: “Dicen, quod circa incompositio et simplicia, cuiusmodi sunt substantiae immateriales, non est verum vel falsum per compositionem aut divisionem quae fit in rebus, sed per hoc quod cognoscitur quod quid est, aut non cognoscitur.” See also *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1902: “there is no composition in simple things by reason of which, when we express affirmatively that it is so, its composition is signified [Non est in simplicibus compositio, ita quod cum dicitur de eo affirmative quod sit, significetur eius compositio].” See also *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1909: “[Simple quiddities are] not composed of many parts in the combining and separating of which falsity can arise [non enim eorum quod quid est, est compositum ex pluribus, circa quorum compositionem vel divisionem possit accidere falsum].”

⁶⁵ Respectively: *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1911: “Omnes substantiae simplices sunt actu entes, et nunquam entes in potential”; and *ibid.*, no. 1910: “In substantiis vero simplicibus ex eo quod non est in eis falsum, sed tantum verum.”

⁶⁶ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1906: “Non attingere est ignorare.”

⁶⁷ This is to say that simple things are not subject to generation and/or corruption, through which there might be a potency that is at some time actualized and at another not so.

⁶⁸ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1904: “Attingere enim mente ad ipsum simplex, ut scilicet apprehendatur quid est, et dicere idest significare voce ipsum simplex, hoc est verum, quod est in simplicibus.”

which are actual only . . . they must either be understood if they are grasped [*atingantur*] by the intellect, or not be understood at all if they are not grasped [*non atingantur*] by the intellect.”⁶⁹ This is stated differently shortly after: “Truth exists . . . if ‘what is truly a being,’ that is, the quiddity or substance of a simple thing, is as it is understood to be; but if it is not as it is understood to be, no truth exists in the intellect. Thus truth consists in understanding these things; but concerning them there is neither falsity nor error in the intellect, . . . but ignorance; for if one does not grasp [*atingere*] the quiddity of a thing, one does not know that thing in any way at all.”⁷⁰ And here we have the application of the Aristotelian maxim under discussion.

To think that what is in act-being-truth is in potency-nonbeing-falsity is to be in error; it is to assent to falsity. With respect to a simple being, it is not a matter of one’s having comprehensively grasped the quiddity, and under a certain formal aspect; in fact, the formal aspect of cognition is not even mentioned in Aquinas’s discussion of *Metaphysics* 9. Rather, the deficiency pertains to holding what is false to be true or what is true to be false, which is, with respect to a simple being, an indication of one’s complete ignorance of the being in question. That is to say, the deficiency of cognition is not, for instance, the absence of the proper formal aspect,⁷¹ and nor is it a materially incomplete grasp of the being, such as knowing that God is and that God is one without also knowing God as triune. Rather, the deficiency of cognition with respect to their cognition of the simple

⁶⁹ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1912: “Quaecumque sunt talia, quae sunt solum in actu, et sunt id quod vere aliquid est, quia sunt quidditates et formae, circa ea non convenit decipi, aut esse falsum. Sed oportet ut intelligantur si mente atingantur, vel penitus non intelligantur si mente non atingantur.”

⁷⁰ *Sent. meta.* 9, lec. 11, no. 1915: “Verum est . . . si id quod est vere ens, idest quod est ipsum quod quid est, idest substantio rei simplex, sic est sicut intelligitur. Si vero non est ita sicut intelligitur, non est verum in intellectu. Et sic est verum intelligere ipsa, sed falsum non est ibi, neque deceptio, ut expositum est, sed ignorantia. Quia si non attingit ad quod quid est, penitus ignorat rem illam.”

⁷¹ Interestingly, in his response to John O’Callaghan’s paper, Michael Sherwin notes that the presence or absence of a particular formal aspect by which some material content is known is not determinative. That is to say, the same material object can in principle be known by means of two distinct formal objects, e.g., by sight or by testimony; see Sherwin’s response published in the same issue—14.2 (2016)—of *Nova et Vetera* (English). O’Callaghan notes, however, and I think rightly, that this discussion does not bear directly on the main thrust of his paper (see his response to Sherwin and others in the same issue). Nonetheless, Sherwin’s is a crucial observation, one that does a great deal of work in the debate concerning how to interpret *ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3*.

God and simple faith is intellectual assent to what is false as true and/or what is true as false with respect to a simple being.

This interpretation of *defectus cognitionis* is confirmed, it seems to me, by the *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG), where, in chapter 118 of book III, Aquinas notes that it pertains to divine law “to exclude false opinions about God and matters concerned with God.”⁷² Further, he states, “[the believer] is subject to God as far as intellect is concerned through believing; not, of course, by believing anything that is false. . . . he who believes something false does not believe in God.”⁷³ Consequently, for Aquinas, holding to what is false as though it were true “cannot happen in reference to simple beings; instead, any error at all completely excludes knowledge of the being. Now, God is most simple. So, whoever is in error concerning God does not know God, just as the man who thinks that God is a body does not know God at all, but grasps something else in place of God.”⁷⁴ As we see, Aquinas again utilizes—at least, by allusion—the Aristotelian maxim regarding knowledge and ignorance of simple beings. The deficiency, much like it is for the heretic or the apostate, is that of holding to be true what is false and/or holding to be false what is true.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have argued that pre-Christian pagan philosophers, specifically those who, according to Aquinas, have demonstratively proven that God exists, are not the unbelievers in ad 3 of the second article of question two of *ST* II-II. “Unbelief” in that context is the technical term for the act by which one resists or rejects the truths of faith, corrupting or renouncing them and assenting to what is false. Among the “unbelievers,” Aquinas lists primarily heretics and apostates. His only mention of the *philosophi* is his affirmation that they have demonstrated that God exists and the like. Moreover, Aquinas explicitly notes that “unbelief” in the relevant sense is not the “pure negation” or “mere absence” of faith. Rather, it is the willful dissent from the truths

⁷² SCG III, ch. 118, no. 5: “Ergo ad eam pertinent falsas opiniones de Deo, et de his quae sunt Dei, excludere.”

⁷³ SCG III, ch. 118, no. 3: “Ita subditur Deo credendo quantum ad intellectum. Non autem credendo aliquid falsum . . . unde qui credit aliquod falsum, non credit Deo.”

⁷⁴ SCG III, ch. 118, no. 4: “In simplicibus autem hoc non potest accidere, sed quilibet error totaliter excludit cognitionem rei. Deus autem est maxime simplex. Ergo quicumque errat circa Deum, sed apprehendit aliquid aliud loco Dei.”

of faith. None of this requires one in principle to count the pre-Christian pagan philosophers among those whom Aquinas would consider “unbelievers” who do not truly know that God exists.⁷⁵

Furthermore, I have maintained that the *defectus cognitionis* of the *ST II-II* passage is not the absence of the formal aspect of the object of faith or an incomplete or non-comprehensive knowledge of the metaphysically simple God. Rather, it is the more general deficiency in which one holds what is false to be true or what is true to be false of the purely actual and simple God. That is to say, the deficiency with respect to knowledge of simple things is not a lack of enough knowledge or the appropriate formal aspect, but rather to think of what is in act-being-truth as if it were potency-nonbeing-falsity. Such assent does not somehow negate a knowledge that was had or lead to ignorance. Rather, to assent to what is non-actual with respect to a simple being is to betray one’s ignorance; it is to show that that one does not and did not know that the simple being—that is, God—exists *totaliter*.

Insofar, then, as the pre-Christian pagan philosophers had truly and demonstratively proven the existence of God by the light of natural reason (which is to think about God what is true and actual in reality), they have judged rightly; they have truly attained to God. To hold what is actual—namely, what is true—is to have knowledge of the simple being in whom there is no potency, no falsity, and in whom no non-being is found. On the other hand, to the extent that pre-Christian pagan philosophers did assent to that which is false with respect to God, they must be said to be entirely ignorant, for one cannot be in error regarding a simple being who is pure actuality, pure truth. Yet, this is not because they are pre-Christian pagan philosophers without the grace of faith and the relevant formal aspect of the object of that very act of faith, but because they are wrong. N&V

⁷⁵ Though much more would need to be said, even the mention of *Gentiles* in *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 6, does not automatically implicate the *philosophi*. Such a distinction matters, and it has implications here, as well as in the *Commentary on John*, among other places.