



## Faith and Understanding in Medieval Thought George Bosworth Burch

**A**ugustine's maxim *believe in order to understand* (*crede ut intelligas*) was adopted by Anselm with a different emphasis. Augustine, brought up as a philosopher, sought as a matter of course to understand; the question was, how? He found the answer to this question when he was converted to Christianity. Do not rely on reason alone but first *believe* in order to understand afterwards. Anselm, brought up as a Christian, believed as a matter of course; the question was, why? He insisted that belief is not enough but is only a first step. Believe not as an end in itself but *in order to understand*. To understand by reason the doctrines which we already believe by faith became an ideal of philosophy, but as the Middle Ages progressed philosophers found this ideal more and more unattainable.

**John Scotus Erigena**...relied on reason alone. He sought to understand nature by "reason and authority," but by "authority" he meant the authority of reason, not any non-rational faith either in the Fathers or in the Bible. The Bible may be interpreted, if reason so requires, in a sense the opposite of its superficially apparent meaning. The writings of the Fathers and of the philosophers are authoritative in the way that books on mathematics are authoritative; in them we expect to find truths we would not be able to discover ourselves, but only because the writers are more skillful than we, not because they have any superrational revelation, and any doctrines which are not confirmed by our own reason should not be accepted. If we cannot all agree, *let each abound in his own sense*, concludes Erigena most unCatholicly.

For **Anselm** faith, which means belief on the authority of revelation, is a source of knowledge independent of reason and coordinate with it. Objectively they are of equal value, since both teach the same truths. But understanding is better, while faith is easier. Faith is given complete and infallible to all believers, while understanding is very difficult to achieve. But as rational beings we seek as our highest good in this life to understand by reason the truths we believe by faith, and the purpose of theology is to replace belief by understanding. If they seem to conflict, we should not, like Berengar, conclude that the faith is in error but should attribute the conflict to the fallibility of reason — not reason as such, but the individual's own reason, which may be incapable of understanding many things. Consequently, Anselm taught that whoever cannot understand any dogma must simply accept it on faith, although he was never forced to that extremity himself.

**Peter Abelard**...agreed with Anselm that faith and reason teach many of the same truths independently, but with him the emphasis is the opposite. Faith is better, while understanding is easier. Belief is more meritorious than understanding, and nobody who possesses the faith has any need to understand it rationally. Rational understanding is necessary only for those who do not have faith or for theologians who are obliged to defend the rationality of the dogma against the sophisticated pseudo-rationalists who deny it. To them Abelard might say, understand in order to believe; but never would he say, believe in order to understand.

For **Bernard of Clairvaux** also faith and reason are independent and equally valid sources of knowledge, but not of the same knowledge. Some of the doctrines of Christianity

are understood by reason, and to believe them is unnecessary or rather meaningless. But other essential doctrines are unintelligible for our finite minds. A Christian must believe them; an infidel has no reason to accept them at all. To call understanding a fruit of faith means that mystical vision results from a living faith in Christ, not that the rational understanding of any doctrine replaces belief in that doctrine.

**Thomas Aquinas**, in the thirteenth century, developed the implications of the distinction between the domain of understanding and the domain of faith by distinguishing the two sciences which are concerned with them. “Philosophy” is the science of that which is known through reason and experience — for example, the existence of God — and it is the same for Christians and infidels. “Theology” is the science which draws conclusions from truths given by revelation — for example, the Trinity of God — and it is possible only for those to whom its premises have been revealed. Theology understands its revealed doctrines in the sense of showing their logical tenability and deducing their consequences but not in the sense of demonstrating the doctrines themselves. Reason alone can accomplish nothing in the science of theology, and an attempt to demonstrate its doctrines only exposes the faith to derision.

**Duns Scotus** criticized Aquinas for overemphasizing the possibilities of a non-Christian philosophy based on reason alone. The truths knowledge of which are essential for salvation are not logically necessary but contingent on God’s will. Therefore they are not known by natural reason but only by revelation. The pagan philosopher ignorant of them inevitably erects a philosophical system in which man’s final goal is found in purely natural goods, and he has every reason to suppose that this false philosophy is true. Faith not only supplements but also corrects this philosophy by revealing the supernatural good which is our true goal.

**William of Occam**, the last great philosopher of the Middle Ages, maintained that we know by reason only that which is immediately obvious or that which can be logically deduced from what is obvious. We know by reason, therefore, only the empirical world of individual things. Even the most elementary truths of Christianity, such as the existence of God, are neither obvious nor demonstrable by rigorous logic; the alleged proofs are fallacious. These truths are known by faith, but they can never be understood by reason.

Thus we see how, while the content of faith remained substantially the same throughout the Middle Ages, its intelligibility varied radically. *Faith seeding understanding (fides quaerens intellectum)* was Anselm’s definition of Christian philosophy. As standards of logical rigor became more strict, the domain in which this ideal could be fulfilled became correspondingly smaller. The history of medieval philosophy is the history of the failure and gradual abandonment of faith’s search for understanding.

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