

Essay

Early Modern Uncertainty: Reason, Conscience, and Belief in Post-Reformation Catholicism

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Abstract: This essay investigates the role of uncertainty in post-Reformation Catholicism. It argues that one of the reasons why uncertainty was so central to early modern Catholic discourse lies in the complex and multifaced relationship between believing—that is, the act of holding as true something that we are unable to verify as such by means of reason—and knowing—that is, the act of holding something as true on the basis of a reasonable and reasoned assessment. By providing a brief analysis of printed and manuscript sources, this essays shows how some of the theological, religious, and intellectual tensions in articulating the relationship between things that need to be believed by faith and things that need to be known by reason, both in the works of influential theologians such as Augustine and Francisco Suárez, and in the elaboration of a wider sector of the Catholic population.

Keywords: faith; reason; knowledge; belief; Augustine; Francisco Suárez; post-Reformation Catholicism

1. Introduction

Let me start with a broad but not entirely illegitimate generalization: according to the traditional narrative of the development of modern Western civilization, early modern Catholic culture was not supposed to express moral and epistemological uncertainty. As the confessional lines hardened after the Reformation, the post-Tridentine Catholic Church successfully solidified its doctrinal and theological boundaries. In parallel, the Roman Curia managed to strengthen and refine methods, tools, and institutions to monitor its flock, identify pockets of deviation, and punish the culprits. In this situation, the individual conscience, we are told, had little to no space. Rather, it was subjugated by the moral dictates of the Catholic religion, the increasingly more pressing demands of political obedience on the part of the temporal sovereign, and the dominant theological and epistemological framework imposed by the Church. Uncertainty had no room in this scenario. Indeed, the political, moral, and epistemological cage in which the early modern Catholic conscience was kept began to break down precisely when the seeds of uncertainty, doubt, and criticism began germinating in opposition to, and not in the context of, the theological, moral, and epistemological authority of the Church.

Again from the perspective of the traditional account, the germs of uncertainty that broke down the servitude to which the early modern Catholic conscience was subject were themselves destined to grow into yet another ironclad absolute certainty, this time not the certainty of faith, but the certainty of reason. In other words, those germs of uncertainty were really the birthpang of modern reason, which was trying to make way among the darkness of blind credulity and which was destined to fully shine once and for all in the modern secular world. At that point, the individual conscience would be liberated from the yoke of the authority of the Church and would be finally free to make decisions guided solely by the authority of the individual reason. Once again, the individual conscience would not experience any uncertainty: as long as it trusted the dictates of right reason, its actions would be both epistemologically correct and morally commendable.¹

As is always the case with every generalization, I realize that there are several nuances that I left out. Yet, by and large what I wrote corresponds to the substance of the traditional



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development of modern secular reason, which emerges at the expense of dogmatic religion and confessional conflicts. Of course, we know that this traditional account is deeply flawed, and its predictions have not turned out to be true. Relying on our own individual reason has not ended uncertainty, but instead it has increased it. In our generation, we have access to an unprecedented amount of data that in principle we are entirely free to subject to our own personal rational evaluation, but we do not seem to know quite what to do with this newfound abundance and freedom. Public platforms for sharing information have multiplied and, in parallel, the traditional modes of sifting, sorting, and evaluating information have been discredited without being replaced by equally authoritative institutions or people in charge of spelling out the criteria for believing or disbelieving. In this situation, we are all more or less lost in a maze of possible truths that we do not know how to judge. The danger of this is that we mistake confusion for freedom, and therefore our capacity to exercise our reason is more restricted. Paradoxically then, we are more, not less, liable to be at the mercy of the will of other people who are willing and able to exploit our unreasonable fears and hopes.

But quite aside from the shortcomings of the traditional account insofar as the present and the future of our society are concerned, the usual narrative has grossly misunderstood the past. As several scholars have noted in the last decades, early modern Catholicism was not the apex of blind faith and dogmatism, and uncertainty was central to the epistemological and moral concerns of Catholic theologians, censors, and leaders.²

2. Believing and Knowing in Premodern Catholic Theology

In this essay, I want to reflect on what I think is a nodal point both in understanding why uncertainty was so central to early modern Catholic religious discourse, and consequently why exactly the traditional account falls flat. That nodal point is the relationship between believing—that is, the act of holding as true something that we are unable to verify as such by means of reason—and knowing—that is, the act of holding something as true on the basis of a reasonable and reasoned assessment.³

The traditional account makes two claims concerning this relationship. First, the fact that knowing and believing are the result of a different, and indeed opposite, epistemological process makes them also morally different: knowing is reasonable and good; believing is unreasonable and dangerous. Secondly, and consequently, modern secular society progresses insofar as it is able to subsume the category of believing into that of knowing. As evidence of this, let us think for a moment of the different meanings that we today assign to two words: credulity and credibility.

While we normally attribute to credibility a positive quality, nobody today would consider credulity a virtue. Indeed, in some sense we take credulity and credibility to be opposite to one another. Considering a person or a fact credible means judging them trustworthy, and thus reassuring ourselves that believing them is reasonable and therefore appropriate. By contrast, calling somebody “credulous” means accusing them of failing to assess credibility properly, and consequently of being unable to base their beliefs on reasonable grounds.

This understanding of credulity as different from, and indeed opposite to, credibility is one of the legacies of the Enlightenment. It is true that the Romans already used the noun *credulitas*, and its cognate adjective *credulus* with a negative connotation, to mean giving credence too easily and in an excessively trusting manner. Nevertheless, whereas for the Romans credulity was “a mistake rather than a sin”, as Plancus put it in one of his letters to Cicero,⁴ for the Enlightenment philosophers it was the symptom of the worst kind of intellectual and moral corruption, or, as Denis Diderot put it in the *Encyclopédie*, a sin against “the most important prerogative of humanity”, which we commit when we effectively give up on using our reason and instead embrace a belief “without considering the evidence.”⁵

Undeniably, there is a long and illustrious intellectual tradition supporting the notion that credulity is the vice of believing what a reasonable person would not consider credible, and suggesting that early modern Catholicism was a prime venue for this vice to manifest.

Yet, I do not believe that this account gives justice to the historical (let alone moral and epistemological) complexity of the early modern Catholic world, and for this reason I would like to propose a different view of the role that credulity and credibility played in post-Reformation Catholicism.

As a starting point, I would like to begin with a brief analysis of the Augustinian–Thomist tradition, which provided the basic vocabulary and categories that early modern Catholic theologians used in their own elaborations.

Of all the Fathers of the Church, Augustine was probably the most outspoken and influential champion of *credulitas*. He knew perfectly well that by *credulitas*, Roman pagans meant lending credence too easily or without discernment, and that they accused Christians of being “credulous” precisely because Christians believed doctrines that they could not fully comprehend or verify. Thus, in his *De utilitate credendi* Augustine set out to defend the Christians from this accusation by challenging the very meaning of the word *credulitas*. To say that *credulitas* was the *vitium*, or vice, of the credulous people, Augustine wrote, was not entirely correct. In fact, Augustine continued, *credulitas* is morally neutral: it is the capacity that human beings have to believe things they cannot know, and as such it can be both a virtue and a vice, depending on the matters to which it is applied.⁶

Seen from this angle, credulity is a fundamental function that we have at our disposal, because it is often impossible to evaluate facts and arguments with our own reasons and arrive at a full and certain knowledge of them. Of course, we cannot embrace the Christian faith unless we believe, which means that without *credulitas* we cannot hope for salvation, but religion is not the only instance in which the capability to believe without knowing is crucial. In fact, for Augustine *credulitas* lies at the foundation of all social and indeed political interactions from the very beginning of human life. Children love their parents out of “credulity”, for “it is not possible for us to know with certainty who our father is other than by believing our mother”. Indeed, children do not even know who their mother is because they cannot actually remember their birth; they just trust what they are told by other people. Sometimes we find out that the people we believed to be our mother and father were not our biological parents, and yet who could ever blame us for loving them as if they were? Augustine was writing well before DNA testing was available, but his argument still stands: “children’s love for their parents, which is the most sacred of all human bonds”, is based on believing what we cannot know.⁷

Yet, as Augustine already stated, not all manifestations of *credulitas* are equally commendable, and consequently it is absolutely necessary for us to learn how to distinguish between the *credulitas* of the believer and the *credulitas* of the credulous. Believers are those who use *credulitas* appropriately, both in the sense that they are able to summon their capability to believe in the right instance, and in the sense that they choose to believe in the right things. Credulous are those who do not make any distinction between instances in which they need to believe and instances in which they must try to exercise their reason, and consequently they are prey to all sorts of false or unnecessary beliefs. But how are we supposed to tell the difference between things that must be believed and things that must be known? Since matters of belief are, by definition, impossible to evaluate by means of a reasonable assessment, Augustine stated that the only reliable criterion we have is the authority of the Christian Church, insofar as it is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. As Augustine famously put it, “I would not have even believed in the Gospel unless the authority of the Catholic Church had convinced me”.⁸ Consequently, refusing to follow the authority of the Church is the root of all kinds of heresies, including unbelief, given that all these forms of error stem from our choice to follow our own personal opinions instead of letting ourselves be led to the true faith by the Church.

Even though Augustine thought that believing in the Christian faith could not come as a result of a reasonable assessment, nevertheless he did not deny that the intellect has a role to play. In fact, in his *De libero arbitrio*, he openly stated that the Christian God, far from condemning men’s impulse to know, encourages it. Only, for Augustine, intellectual knowledge comes after, not before, our will’s decision to believe. Quoting the verse in

the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus said to his audience “seek, and ye shall find”, Augustine commented that “what is believed without being known cannot be said to have been found, and nobody is able to find God unless he comes to know what he has first believed”.⁹

By the middle ages, Augustine’s teaching concerning the nature of religious *credulitas* and the moral, and indeed epistemological, centrality of obedience had become standard in Catholic theology, also thanks to the fact that Aquinas fully incorporated it into his own theological system. Naturally, Aquinas was not the only medieval theologian who grappled with the implications of Augustine’s understanding of belief. Rather, the late medieval times saw a vibrant theological debate on the nature (and limits) of human knowledge, the intelligibility of God, and the relationship between reason and revelation. Among the many voices in this debate, we might recall John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, important protagonists of what Heiko Oberman broadly called the “Franciscan alternative” to Thomist theology.¹⁰ Despite the long-lasting influence of these theological positions, however, I highlight the Augustinian–Thomist tradition because Augustine and Aquinas were undeniably the protagonists of post-Reformation theological debates, and the early modern Dominican and especially Jesuit theologians who discussed with particular urgency questions of credibility, demonstrability, and credulity were engaged profoundly and in consequential ways with Augustine and Aquinas, rather than with other theologians.

We can already appreciate the affinity that Aquinas felt toward the Augustinian view from his choice of using the word *credulitas* to mean not “credulity” in our modern sense, but to indicate the act of holding a belief, which Aquinas considered as a sort of natural disposition by which, by the grace of God, we are able to give assent to what we cannot know by reason.¹¹ Like Augustine, Aquinas also claimed that faith was not antithetical to knowledge and understanding. Rather, for Aquinas, the Christian faith (unlike other religions or systems of belief) was perfectly compatible with right reason, even though Aquinas admitted that there are aspects of the Christian doctrine that, albeit not unreasonable, nevertheless are impossible to fully understand by means of intellectual arguments, and that therefore we must believe by faith, such as the mystery of the Trinity.¹²

Finally, Aquinas, again similar to Augustine, clearly stated that belief was primarily an act of the will, not of the intellect. In other words, even though our intellect is tasked with assenting to the true faith, it is our will that directs the intellect to embrace faith (or reject it, as the case might be). In this sense, for Aquinas, just as for Augustine, heresy was ontologically, not simply etymologically, an act of choice, insofar as all heretics are by definition and by nature those who decide not to believe in the dogmas of the true Church.

3. Believing and Knowing in Post-Reformation Catholicism

To sum up what I have said so far, in the Augustinian–Thomist tradition, the word “*credulitas*” indicated our capacity to believe what we cannot know by reason, and in this sense *credulitas* is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Instead, the moral value of *credulitas* depends entirely on how we choose to use this faculty, or, in other words, on what we choose to believe. Among the choices of religious beliefs that we have, there is only one right alternative: believing in the Christian God. Since belief, by definition, cannot come as a result of intellectual judgment, we can never believe as a result of finding reasonable evidence of the existence of the Christian God. Rather, we believe in God because, aided by grace, we choose to trust the Church guided by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, even though our faith is not demonstrable, it is nevertheless more certain and firm than any possible kind of intellectual judgment.

By the early modern times, then, the word *credulitas* had come a long way from its Roman past, and it was no longer used simply as a synonym of mistaken belief or excessively hasty assent. Rather, for Catholic theologians *credulitas* meant the capacity or the act of holding a religious belief, and thus a disposition that God’s grace bestows upon us to help us embrace what we cannot understand by reason. Because of its liminal

position at the intersection between reason and will, however, theological *credulitas* was epistemologically complicated to manage. Even though the tenets of the true faith can never be incredible (in the sense that they cannot be antithetical to reason), and many of them are in fact eminently credible, nevertheless there remains a rather large gap between knowledge and faith that only God's grace can fill, which means that no belief within the Christian doctrine can ever be credible enough to be believed on the strength of reason alone. In fact, no matter how credible a belief appears to our intellect, the decision to believe or not to believe is ultimately an act of will that we must take freely and by faith. Consequently, the capacity to believe without understanding is the necessary condition for our will to embrace the true faith, but, by the same token, this capacity is also responsible for making us either credulous, or heretics and unbelievers.

In the early modern times, a few crucial changes exposed the complexity of the Augustinian–Thomist notion of *credulitas* to an unprecedented level. The Protestant Reformation made it both more necessary and more difficult than ever to mark the boundaries between heretic and believer; the Catholic effort to convert new souls on a global scale confronted European theologians with new forms of unbelief and thus forced them to find new strategies to come to grip with it; the development of more and more sophisticated ways to attest to the authenticity and veracity of documents in the context of an increasingly more pronounced historical consciousness gave birth to new and, from the Catholic point of view, insidious forms of skepticism, forcing Catholic intellectuals to present ever more solid evidence of the credibility of their faith; and finally, the recent new developments in natural philosophy put pressure on the traditional view of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. In this scenario, uncertainties and doubts multiplied, and many Catholic theologians realized that the traditional definitions of concepts such as belief, knowledge, and credulity were no longer suitable to the new challenges, and that some updates were needed. As they sought to accomplish this task, post-Reformation Catholic theologians decided to recenter the role of reason in the process of embracing faith, and began emphasizing that our will's ability to choose to embrace *credulitas* could be greatly strengthened by convincing our intellect of the credibility of Catholic beliefs.

As is abundantly well known, one of the most crucial consequences of the Reformation is having endowed the believers' conscience with a novel burden when it comes to faith, caused by the need to choose between different versions of the same Christian Church, or different historical, theological, and spiritual paths following from the same exact origin, Jesus Christ, but widely divergent to the point of being alternative to one another. For the Jesuit school of neo-Thomist theologians such as Gregorio de Valencia, Robert Bellarmine, and Francisco Suárez, in order to defend or assert the Catholic doctrine as effectively as possible against its post-Reformation enemies, it was especially important for theologians to concentrate on persuading Protestants and unbelievers that the Church of Rome was the one true Church of Christ. This is why those theologians gave an unprecedented primacy to theological controversies and disputations, which they considered to be the privileged venue where this effort to persuade the intellect takes place.

As a few historians of theology have already noted, this Jesuit understanding of the intellectual and theological significance of controversy hinges on a crucial theological novelty with respect to the Augustinian–Thomist tradition, which Suárez was the first to elaborate explicitly: the notion that not the will, but the intellect is primarily responsible for heresy. Whereas for Augustine and Aquinas the heretics are those who choose to put the love of themselves before the love of God and the Church, for Suárez and his fellow Jesuit theologians, the heretics are those who make a wrong evaluation concerning the truth of the faith. The job of controversialist theologians is therefore correcting the mistakes that heretics make and presenting the truth of the Catholic faith in such a way as to persuade them. Once Catholic theologians manage to persuade the heretics' intellect, then the heretics would be ready to receive God's grace, by means of which the heretics' will can finally decide to reject all errors and doubts and fully embrace the truth of God's revelation (See especially (Motta 2005)).

The root of this profound revision to the Augustinian–Thomist notion of heresy, I argue, lies in a novel understanding of the relationship between belief and credibility. The best place to investigate Suárez’s view on this topic are the lectures on faith that Suárez taught between the beginning of May, 1583, and the beginning of January, 1584, when he was a professor of theology at the Roman College. Right from the beginning of the course, Suárez advised his students that, contrary to what other Catholic theologians argued before him, he strongly believed that faith had a notable intellectual component, which was visible from the very etymological root of the word “faith”. Suárez explained that in Latin, the noun *fides* contained two different but complementary meanings. The first was common and uncontroversial, and in fact since the time of Augustine, Suárez explained, all Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, have always agreed that the word *fides* meant trust, or “the moral virtue by which we can keep promises” and, in the specific case of religion, “vows to God”.¹³ In addition to this meaning, Suárez added, the word “faith” also means “*credulitas intellectus*”, or the process of believing accomplished by the intellect. Suárez knew that this second meaning of the word “faith” was contested, and not only “the heretics, but even a few Catholics” like Valla or Erasmus denied that the Latin word *fides* was related to the intellectual operation of adopting a belief. Nevertheless, Suárez responded that equating faith with the kind of belief that the intellect adopts has a long and illustrious philosophical tradition, and in fact both Cicero and Aristotle used *fides* as a synonym of “assent” that the intellect gives to an “opinion” prior to “believing in it”.¹⁴

Suárez realized that using this etymological argument to highlight the intellect’s role in assenting to a tenet of faith, and consequently to establish a connection between faith and opinion, was somewhat risky. For this reason, Suárez reminded his students that “this *credulitas* or faith can be based either on human authority, and in this case it is called human *fides*, or on the divine authority, and in this case it simply called *fides*, in Scripture or in God”. While in the first case *credulitas* could be shaky, because it was based on grounds that could not guarantee certainty in each and every instance, the second kind of *credulitas* was absolutely firm, based as it was on the absolute certainty of God’s revelation.¹⁵ Suárez also knew that other Catholic theologians, and especially Dominicans, followed Aquinas more closely and preferred to highlight the moral, rather than the intellectual, aspect of faith as a virtue. Nevertheless, Suárez remained committed to his own definition of faith as a virtue “pertaining to the intellect, signifying assent and *credulitas*” to the tenets of doctrine revealed by God.¹⁶

Right from the outset, then, Suárez proposed to his student a radical revision to the Augustinian–Thomist tradition, giving to the intellect, rather than to the will, the preeminent role in the process of believing. Indeed, Suárez’s terminological choices betray the extent of the novelty of his thought: whereas Augustine and Aquinas used the word *credulitas* to indicate the act, performed by our will, of choosing to believe in what cannot be known, for Suárez *credulitas* meant the act of believing as a result of the intellect’s assent.

Suárez was perfectly aware that his doctrine was in tension with the traditional definition of faith, and spent a significant portion of his lectures justifying his view. First, he stated that understanding faith simply as a *motio voluntatis*, or a “movement of the will”, was not entirely correct, because “the will by itself cannot move the intellect to believe just because it wants to, but rather it is necessary for any belief to both contain and manifest some inherent reason” for its own credibility, without which it is not possible “to believe with certainty”. Secondly, Suárez stated that insisting on the will’s role in the act of believing has the dangerous consequence of allowing people to believe on the basis not only of “divine authority” but also “their own personal judgment”, which is precisely what heretics do.¹⁷

Despite this justification, Suárez still anticipated some pushback on the part of more traditional followers of Aquinas, who would oppose the much-quoted passage from the *Summa* in which Aquinas stated that faith cannot concern “things seen either by the senses or by the intellect”, and therefore believing in the true faith cannot be the result of reasonable understanding, but it is rather “an act of choice” done by the will.¹⁸ Suárez, however, was

not afraid to propose his own interpretation of that passage, stating that what Aquinas meant to say was that the kind of assent generated by faith had to be absolutely firm and certain, much more so than the kind of assent generated by knowledge. Nevertheless, Suárez added, for faith to be so firm and certain, it was necessary, albeit not sufficient, that all tenets of faith “be presented in such a way that men can hold them as evident”. Consequently, in order for us to feel compelled to believe specific tenets of faith, we need to judge them to be “credible by right and prudent reason”.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the potentially thorny theological implications of his doctrine, Suárez was convinced that stressing the role of the intellect was polemically, and therefore historically, necessary. As Suárez told his student, his revision to the traditional account, as radical and controversial as it was, was nevertheless the only alternative available to simultaneously “combat two errors”, both of which were rooted in antiquity, but which had recently been embraced with a renewed vigor by the heretics of his own time. The first error used to be common among the ancient pagans, but was now revived by the skeptic currents agitating early modern Europe, claiming “that nothing must be believed unless it can be understood by human reason”. The second error was the core tenet of the Protestants, who accused the Catholic religion of being “based largely on visible and human testimonies” as opposed to the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit.²⁰ For all these reasons, Suárez concluded, it is “evident” that the Christian and Catholic faith is not just true, but first and foremost credible.²¹

To summarize what we have seen so far, even though Suárez’s lectures on faith looked like one of the countless more or less standard early modern commentaries on Aquinas, nevertheless they indicated that Suárez had parted ways with the Augustinian–Thomist tradition in a significant manner. While Augustine and Aquinas assigned to the will the preeminent role in the process of believing, Suárez instead proposed that in order for the will to choose to embrace true faith, the intellect must first be convinced of its credibility. In other words, whereas Augustine and Aquinas thought that the fact that Christianity appeared credible to the intellect was a consequence of the choice, made by the will, to embrace faith, for Suárez, convincing the intellect of the credibility of Catholicism was a necessary (albeit not sufficient) step for the will to embrace faith. Suárez did not ignore the fact that his novel understanding of the relationship between credibility and belief was in tension with traditional Catholic theology, and fully expected the more traditional followers of Aquinas to attack him. Nevertheless, he also believed that highlighting the role of credibility would offer an immense payoff, insofar as it strengthened immensely the polemical capital that Catholic theologians could use in their fight against both Protestants and unbelievers.

This was by no means the only instance in which Suárez proposed a novel and controversial doctrine, and we should also keep in mind that Suárez first proposed his novel take on the centrality of credibility while on the faculty of the Roman College, where he had the luxury of being inside the bastion of Catholic learning, surrounded by some of the best students and colleagues in the Catholic world.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that not all seventeenth century Catholic theologians, and not even all of Suárez’s fellow Jesuits, were willing to follow him in his profound rethinking of the role that credibility played in the process of belief. At the same time, however, we should not confuse specificity with unicity: while it is undeniable that Suárez expressed his novel theory in much more radical terms than other post-Reformation Jesuit theologians, it would be misleading to believe that he was unique. In fact, we should think of Suárez’s theory not as a singularity, but rather as the tip of an iceberg. Below the surface, there was a massive aggregation of intellectual, spiritual, social, and cultural forces all converging on the very same point that Suárez had so clearly made: in post-Reformation Europe, the role of the intellect had acquired an unprecedented primacy over the role of the will when it came to matters of faith, and post-Reformation Catholic theologians had to come to terms with the fact that converting infidels, rebuking Protestants, convincing skeptics, and firming up the belief of lukewarm Catholics required judgment. This is

why the Catholic hierarchy encouraged theological controversy as the privileged mode of apologetics, to the point of actually creating an academic chair of *Controversiae* at the Roman College, first occupied by Robert Bellarmine. This is why the Catholic leadership promoted the research of Cesare Baronio and other ecclesiastical historians. This is why the Roman Curia (at least until the eighteenth century) sponsored and defended the new missionary style of the Jesuits, centered on the need to engage with the infidels and to accommodate the Catholic doctrine to their epistemological and cultural categories, rather than the traditional style of the forced baptisms practiced by Dominicans and Franciscans in the early sixteenth century in the Spanish empire. In this context, it is clear that rather than going astray, Suárez was simply opening a path which several others theologians followed, albeit more hesitantly and less decisively.

However, Jesuit theologians and missionaries were not the only people affected by this novel sensibility concerning the centrality of credibility, and consequently the necessity of intellectual judgment, in the process of embracing the true faith. In fact, the newfound emphasis on judgment had important consequences on the religious, spiritual, and cultural life of a much wider sector of European Catholics. Earlier, I used the metaphor of the iceberg to indicate that the tight link between belief and credibility, and consequently the necessity to foreground intellectual persuasion, appeared more and more frequently in seventeenth century religious discourse, provoking consequences that theologians like Suárez might not have fully anticipated.

Suárez and his fellow Jesuit theologians stressed the credibility of the Catholic faith because they thought that doing so would provide stronger arguments against Protestants and unbelievers. Yet, as this new attention to credibility spread far and wide within post-Reformation Catholic Europe, it also created a non-negligible amount of confusion among both clergymen and laymen concerning the role that intellectual judgment played in religious belief. Just how credible does any individual Catholic tenet need to be in order to justify the claim that the Catholic faith is not only the one true doctrine, but also the most credible one? At what point exactly must the intellect stop evaluating the credibility of a belief and leave space to the authority of the Church? How does the renewed emphasis on credibility change the responsibility that humans have as moral actors endowed with free will? Over the course of the seventeenth century, these questions started to be asked and discussed not simply in the rarified atmosphere of the Roman College or inside the ivory towers of Jesuit colleges, but also in a much wider setting.

The emergence of intellectual judgment as the standard for belief sits at a critical juncture in the development of Western secular modernity. Several scholars have already noted how arguments concerning the credibility (or lack thereof) of the Catholic doctrines were instrumental for articulating a range of skeptical and atheistic views both among the intellectual elite and at the level of popular religion. Yet, today I am not interested in further exploring the development of atheism and skepticism, either among the intellectuals or among the common people. Instead, I seek to show that the newfound primacy given to intellectual judgment caused quite a bit of doubt and confusion, even among people who never questioned the immortality of the soul, the divinity of Jesus, or the existence of God. In fact, this new sensibility was present even among “good” Catholics who did not end up among the unbelievers, but rather remained well within the boundaries of orthodoxy, and yet could not help but feel a tension between what they knew and what they wanted to believe.

Recovering the effect that this novelty had on otherwise pious and orthodox Catholics is not easy for historians. In the case of learned atheists, unbelievers, and skeptics, of course, we can learn what they thought from their writings and from the controversies they provoked. As far as the lower classes were concerned, the only non-elite unbelievers we know of were the ones who ended up investigated by the Holy Office and put on trial, which gave to them the opportunity to state, explain, or defend their thoughts in front of their accusers, and to us the opportunity to learn about them. Usually, pious Catholics who struggled to reconcile reason and faith but never crossed the boundaries of orthodoxy flew

completely under the radar of the Inquisitors, and therefore do not provide the historian with an easy way to access their thoughts. But even though these people might not be easy to track down, at the same time it is important that we try, not only in order to understand better what it meant to believe in early modern Europe, but also in order to understand what it means to believe now. Our society might very well be secularized, but this does not mean that unbelief has triumphed. To the contrary, while we might not believe in God in the same way in which early modern Catholics did, we definitely believe in many things, and while sometimes we believe because we know, other times we believe things we cannot reasonably verify or justify entirely. Thus, if we want to understand how we believe today, understanding how early modern people struggled to come to terms with the tension between knowing and believing seems especially relevant.

Luckily for us, some of those struggling Catholics did leave some trace of their dilemmas for us to find: as they tried to use their own reason to make judgments in matters of faith, they came across hurdles that were too difficult for them to overcome on their own, and thus asked the Catholic authorities for help. The case of Muzio Antonatii allows us a glimpse into this world.

Muzio was a relatively highly educated layman (the records present him as a doctor of law), living in the small town of Castelnuovo di Porto, close to the city of Rome. In the spring of 1653, when he was twenty-nine years old, Muzio decided to turn himself in to the Holy Office, because he had something to confess. In a handwritten letter that Muzio personally delivered to the Inquisitors when he presented himself in the tribunal, Muzio explained that he considered himself a devout Catholic and loyal member of the Church, and in fact he was “more than ready to believe whatever our Holy Mother Catholic and Roman Church believes”, even to the point of being willing to “sacrifice my own life” for this belief.²² Nevertheless, Muzio was tormented by scruples, and he did not know how to calm his unsettled conscience.

It all began two years before, in the summer of 1651, when Muzio started to notice some inconsistencies between the Biblical account of the Flood and his knowledge of history, geography, and biology. More specifically, Muzio knew that according to the Bible, the Flood had happened about “four thousand years” before, but given the average rate at which Muzio knew humans reproduce, “how could the human race multiply so much” in such a relatively short amount of time? Moreover, according to the Bible, after the Flood, Noah’s ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, “on the Armenian mountains”, but how could “hares and even smaller animals reach our lands” from so far away? The last blow to Muzio’s confidence in the credibility of the Biblical account came from the discovery of the New World and of its inhabitants, which “were unknown in the past”: why was there no record of these people in the Bible? Could it be that the author of the Bible did not know of the existence of the New World and its inhabitants? Where did these people come from, and how did they make it from Armenia to the Americas without anybody knowing about it?²³

Unable to find a satisfactory answer to these questions, Muzio decided to confess his confusion to his parents, but once they heard their son’s predicaments, they were terrified that Muzio might be falling into heresy. In fact, one time Muzio’s father explicitly asked his son: “don’t you believe what our Holy Mother Church believes?”. Muzio responded that “for sure I believe”, and yet “the devil instils doubts in my head”: “how come that things are the way they are” and not the way the Bible says they are? Why were what Muzio believed and what Muzio knew not in accord? Did all of this mean that “perhaps the Bible and the faith are not true”?²⁴

After two years of internal conflict, Muzio was devastated: “my mind is drowning in a sea of doubts that torture me, and I have a Babylon in my head that makes it impossible for me to remember exactly what happened”. Muzio knew that there was a possibility that he might have manifested his doubts “outwardly” in some kind of public actions or by directly “talking about them with other people” in addition to his parents, even though he could not remember exactly if, when, and with whom he had spoken about his confusion.

Muzio of course knew that discussing these matters was a sin, and even though he was not sure he had committed it, nevertheless he had decided to confess it to the Inquisitors, hoping that they might “absolve” him of any crime he might have committed.²⁵

As is evident from this touching letter, Muzio felt genuinely guilty, but of what exactly? Obviously, both Muzio and the Inquisitors knew that pointing and discussing inconsistencies in the Bible was tantamount to publicizing unbelief, which was a grave sin. Muzio did not know for certain that he had in fact committed such sin, but he thought that being proactive in asking the Holy Office for absolution was better than being formally accused of heresy or unbelief, because it would have brought more lenient penalties and possibly spared him from a trial. In addition to the sin of potentially spreading heresy, however, it is evident that Muzio felt guilty for another reason: he could not help but realize that what he believed and what he knew did not accord, which he thought was a serious fault that he seemed unable to remedy despite his best efforts. While there was a well-established theological roadmap for both Muzio and the Inquisitors to define, identify, classify, judge, and punish the sin of spreading heresy, the lack of concordance between belief and knowledge was a much more murky affair because the sheer act of perceiving such lack of concordance as a vice was a novel experience, which early modern Catholics had only recently come to confront.

To be sure, the tension between what can be known by reason and what has to be believed by faith has always been present since the very beginning of Christianity, and all Catholic theologians from any school admit a gap between knowledge and faith. But while the Augustinian–Thomist view of the relationship between reason and faith took this gap as a physiological, and even necessary, manifestation of doctrine, the early modern emphasis on the credibility of faith and the centrality of the judgment of the human intellect highlighted continuities over discrepancies. Of course, no early modern theologian ever suggested that the gap could be entirely bridged; nevertheless, several post-Reformation theologians clearly believed that efforts should be made to reduce it, which put a tremendous amount of pressure on people who, like Muzio, found themselves hopelessly unable to find concordance.

The Roman Inquisitors immediately addressed Muzio’s confession. He turned himself in to the Holy Office on March 18th, 1653; the next day, the Inquisitors discussed his case and came to their resolution: Muzio was to be “discharged after a formal abjuration and the appropriate spiritual punishment”.²⁶ While the Inquisitors evidently believed that Muzio was to be punished for his unorthodox views concerning the authenticity of the Biblical account as well as for the probability that he might in fact have uttered some heretical phrases, they also realized that Muzio did turn himself in, which was evidence that he had no intention of harboring heretical beliefs and thus, *ipso facto*, had committed no heresy.

While the sentence might have taken care of Muzio’s outward crime, it did not address its underlying cause. The reason why Muzio developed, and might have communicated with others, potentially heretical beliefs was that he could not find a way to accommodate knowledge and belief in the new, post-Reformation, cultural and intellectual regime foregrounding the role of intellectual judgment. Muzio was not shy in explaining the root of his predicament, and did not give to the Inquisitors any indication that he had managed to extirpate it. It is striking, in fact, the extent to which Muzio let the Inquisitors know that the torments and doubts he suffered from had not gone away, but they had rather intensified to the point of forcing him to the extreme step of denouncing himself for a sin he was not even sure to have committed.

It is true that the Roman Inquisitors were not tasked with providing philosophical or theological tips on how to deal with the difficulties that ordinary Catholics might run into as they tried to harmonize reason and faith, because the Inquisitors’ duty was only to judge and punish any doctrinal deviation possibly resulting from these difficulties. Therefore, we can certainly understand that addressing in depth the cause for Muzio’s concern was outside of the Inquisitors’ purview. Nevertheless, another reason why they might not have wanted to even acknowledge Muzio’s predicament was that they also were struggling with

the balance between *credulitas* and credibility and between judgment and obedience, and even they had not found a satisfactory solution yet.

Given that we do not seem to be any closer to finding an effective balance between knowing and believing, I do not think we should blame our early modern predecessors for it. Rather, we might want to take some inspirations from them and realize that the relationship between knowing and believing is complex, and cannot be artificially simplified by the advent of a semi-mythical “modern secular reason”. I believe that learning how early modern moral theology addressed such complexity might not necessarily help us to address our own uncertainties. However, it might at least reassure us that having uncertainties is not a pathology, but an inherent part of being human.

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Notes

¹ I provide a more sophisticated version of this argument in Tutino (2013).

² Gallagher (2019) is of course a wonderful example of the scholarly benefits of recentring uncertainty in the history of post-Reformation Catholicism. On the religious, theological, intellectual, and cultural role of doubt in the Christian Church see also Andrews et al. (2016) and Boillet and Faini (2022).

³ For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Tutino (2022).

⁴ Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*, 414 (X.23), 4–5.

⁵ See the entry “croire”, in vol.4, Paris 1754, 502, and the entry “crédulité”, in Ibid., 451–2.

⁶ See Augustine, *De utilitate credendi*, 9 (22).

⁷ Quapropter enim, si quod nescitur, credendum non est, quomodo serviant parentibus liberi, eosque mutua pietate diligant, quos parentes suos esse non credant. Non enim ratione ullo pacto sciri potest: sed interposita matris auctoritate de patre creditur; de ipsa vero matre plerumque nec matri, sed obstetricibus, nutricibus, famulis. Nam cui furari filius potest, aliusque supponi, nonne potest decepta decipere? Credimus tamen, et sine ulla dubitatione credimus, quod scire non posse confitemur. Quis enim non videat pietatem, nisi ita sit, sanctissimum generis humani vinculum, superbissimo scelere violari? Nam quis vel insanus eum culpandum putet, qui eis officia debita impenderit quos parentes esse crediderit, etiamsi non essent? Quis contra non exterminandum iudicaverit, qui veros fortasse parentes minime dilexerit, dum ne falsos diligat metuit? Multa possunt afferri, quibus ostendatur nihil omnino humanae societatis incolume remanere, si nihil credere statuerimus, quod non possumus tenere perceptum. Ibid., 12 (26).

⁸ Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas. *Contra Epistolam Manichaei*, 5 (6). For a discussion of the implications of Augustine’s distinction between believing and believing see Shagan (2018), pp. 48–55.

⁹ nam neque inventum dici potest, quod incognitum creditur; neque quisquam inveniendi Deo fit idoneus, nisi ante crediderit quod est postea cogniturus. Quapropter Domini praeceptis obtemperantes quaeramus instanter. *De libero arbitrio*, II 2 (6).

¹⁰ See Oberman (1992), quot. at p.6, as well as Grellard (2005, 2014) on the nominalist debates concerning questions of certainty and belief.

¹¹ See, e.g., Ila Ilae, q.12, a.1: “ad fidem pertinet non solum *credulitas* cordis, sed etiam protestatio interioris fidei per exteriora verba et facta”. Aquinas also used *credulitas* as a synonym of “belief” in q.11, a.1 “In credendis autem voluntas assentit alicui vero tanquam proprio bono . . . Quia vero quicumque credit alicuius dicto assentit, principale videtur esse, et quasi finis, in unaquaque *credulitate* ille cuius dicto assentitur, quasi autem secundaria sunt ea quae quis tenendo vult alicui assentire. Sic igitur qui recte fidem Christianam habet sua voluntate assentit Christo in his quae vere ad eius doctrinam pertinent” (my emphasis).

¹² See especially Ila Ilae, q.8 a.2, and q.9 ar.1.

¹³ ut Aug. lib. de mendacio c.20 notavit . . . fidei nomen primo omnium significare eam virtutem moralem qua servamus promissa et fidelitas . . . promissionem non solum hominibus sed etiam Deo fiunt translatus est nomen fidei significandam eam virtutem qua deo vota reddimus. I am quoting from a manuscript of Suárez’s lecture notes that was produced by a student who attended his lectures in person and that can be found in A(archivo della) P(ontificia) U(niversità) G(regoriana), FC 452, fos.2-3. A printed edition of Suárez’s lectures has been published in Deuringer (1967), which is based on a manuscript version (in two copies), found in the Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe. As Deuringer explains in the introduction, the Karlsruhe manuscript also seems to have been produced by a student who was in attendance during the lectures. While both manuscripts report the same content, there

are some differences between them, which depend on the different authors. The author of the APUG manuscript transcribed the lectures *verbatim*, and in fact his notes present a series of typographical and grammatical idiosyncrasies that suggest that the student was writing down what Suárez was actually saying without any attempt to edit it (e.g., some Latin words and expressions appear “Hispanicized”, thus reflecting how Suárez might have actually pronounced them, and here and there the manuscript contains some expressions that would be typical of an oral communion but that would not appear in a written text). The author of the Karlsruhe manuscript, by contrast, actually put some effort into editing his own notes, and in fact he omitted the colloquial expressions that the APUG author transcribed, and took care to render everything in perfect Latin. All my quotations come from the APUG manuscript, but I will refer to the Karlsruhe manuscript whenever relevant.

- 14 Secundus usus huius nominis quod significat credulitatem intellectus quamvis enim heretici istum usum huiusmodi voces apud latinos negant et quidem Catholici illis faventes ut Laure. Valla . . . tamen sine dubio hae vox est propria et usurpata apud Latinos Cic. lib.2 de divinitate fides non adhibenda est somniantium viris, et saepe aliter. Idem Aristoteles . . . opinionem inquit sequitur fides nam qui opinatur credit. Ibid., f.3.
- 15 hac enim credulitas niti potest auctoritate humana et sic dicitur humana fides, vel auctoritate divina et haec dicitur simpliciter fides in Scriptura. Ibid. To gauge the radical novelty of Suárez’s argument, cf., for example, the entry on “credulitas” in the *Summa Sylvestrina* (I am using the two-volume edition printed in Venice in 1581), in which “credulitas” is defined as the capacity of the intellect to believe in the strength of human testimonies, and as such can never attain the certainty of faith but can only result, at best, in an “opinio”: vol. I p. 166. See also the entry on “fides”, Ibid., pp. 328–31 at p. 328, in which Sylvester stated that “fides”, generally speaking, is a “pactio”. As far as the Christian faith is concerned, Sylvester simply resorted to the Pauline definition (Heb. 11:1): “substantia sperandarum rerum”.
- 16 sed in hoc non multum immorandum est dummodo illud sit certum fidem illam de qua Scripturae precipue loquuntur . . . esse rem ad intellectum pertinens et significare assensionem et credulitatem. APUG, FC 452, f.4.
- 17 Sed contra: nam actus fidei est ex motione voluntatis. Credo enim, quia volo . . . Resp. primo non posse voluntatem movere intellectum ut credat solum quare vult, sed necesse est aliquam rationem proprii obiecti esse et apparere in re credenda, unde si nulla apparet ad certo credendum, non poterit voluntas movere intellectum ad talem assensum. 2.o si contingat aliquem ex levi causa ve. ex passione ita apprehendere re vera non vellet credere ex divina auctoritate sed ex proprio iudicio quare gratis et sine causa iudicat ibi esse divinam auctoritatem interpositam. Ibid., f.52.
- 18 Illa Ilae, q.1, art.4.
- 19 Dico 2. propositio obiecti fidei ad credendum necessaria talis esse debet, ut per eas homini evidenter constet res omnes quae proponuntur ullo modo esse credibiles et tum rectam prudentiam credendas ita sensit D.Thom. hic art.4 ad 2um in illo solo non crederet nisi videret esse credendum . . . fundamentum est quia assensus fidei debet esse omnino firmus et immobilis . . . sed hoc fieri non potest prudenter sine dicta evidentia, ergo. APUG, FC 452, f.52.
- 20 Ex hac conclusio excludunt duo errores, v. dicendum nihil esse credendum nisi quod humana ratione convinci potest . . . secundus error est eorum qui dicebant nostram fidem precipue niti testimonio humano et visibili. Ibid., f.7
- 21 evidens est catholicam fidem esse credibilem. Non est de fide, sed est mihi certa, Ibid., f.56. Interestingly enough, the APUG ms. does not include the qualification “non est de fide”, unlike the Karlsruhe manuscript. Since the APUG ms. was recorded by a student who was present at Suárez’s actual lectures and reported them *verbatim*, it is possible that the author of the APUG ms. might have missed this part as he was taking his notes, but it is also possible that Suárez did not actually feel the need to specify that his opinion was not *de fide* orally, and that this phrase was added by the author of the Karlsruhe manuscript, who thought he had interpreted what Suárez actually meant.
- 22 Io Muzio Antonatii da Castel Novo dove di porto dichiarandomi prima prontissimo in credere quel tanto crede S.Madre Chiesa Catholica Romana et di voler spargere per cio il mio sangue conforme e anco per il passato stata mia intentione vengo a deporre a piedi di questo tribunale della sacra inquisizione. A(rchivio della) C(ongregazione per la) D(ottrina della) F(ede), St St 0 1-e, folder n.4, f.363r.
- 23 ero travagliato sopra di essa circa il diluvio come in quattromila et più anni che si contano da quello in qua sia il genere humano potuto moltiplicarsi un sì gran numero, stante che fosse poco a zanza moltiplicato, et come li animali piccioli come lepri et al.tri assai minori siano potuti venire in queste nostre parti essendosi l’archa ferma ne’ monti del Armenia et l’homini come andati nell’Indie non conosciute per il passato, et al.tre cose simili. Ibid.
- 24 Una volta specialmente mi disse [mio padre] non credete voi quello che crede S.Madre Chiesa et io li risposi signorsi che lo credo benché internamente havessi qualche dubbio incalzato dalla tentazione dicendoli anco il diavolo mi mette per la testa come possi essere et che non sii et consequentemente non vera la scrittura et la fede, et in questo modo mi travaglia et tiene inquieto . . . Hora sto anco dubitando se discorrendo come ho detto intendesse indurre anco loro a non credere cio, et che si come pareva a me, non fosse et andavo nella mia mente dubitando tentato come ho detto, anco loro havessero così tenuto et in particolare la mia madre come donna, più facile a credenza, non posso però sopra di ciò descriminare poiché se bene nel impeto de pensieri et tentationi mi veniva tal pensiero tal volta in testa, et che vedendo loro non stimare quello che a me daria fastidio conforme ho detto, ne sentivo in me . . . un certo rammarico, non posso però affermare haver havuto tale intentione almeno deliberata, et spontaneamente che per esser cosa molto iniqua non posso darmi a credere esser pronto arrivare a tanta iniquità . . . Diverse altre volte poi per il passato ho . . . havute diverse inquietudini in diverse cose della fede et verità di esse et fermatomi alle volte a

pensare mi venivano suggerite nella mente cose contrarie a essa quali io . . . con poca avvertenza proferite con la bocca anco poi oppugnarle con novamente pensare cose a quelle contrarie, favorevoli pro fide, non mi ricordo però quali siino stati et non vi era alcuno presente. Ibid., fos.363r-v.

25 Et perche del continuo la mia mente è stata agitata in un mare di diverse difficoltà della fede che mi travagliavano et hora ho una babilonia di varii pensieri mi si rende impossibile poter ricordarmi di quanto mi sii occorso, et se habbi fatto atti esteriori o conferito con altri che con li sopradetti de quali mi ricordo et che cosa io debbia [sic] veramente deporre, ritrovandomi confuso et travagliato dal humor malinconico senza poter deliberar d'avantaggio per questa mia dispositione. Quindi che in qualsivoglia altro modo habbi io provai fare e fatti atti esteriori, discorso di questo ho detto con altri et in qualsivoglia modo con qualsisia animo . . . vengo a deporli a piedi di questo sacro Tribunale supplicando per le viscere di Giesù Christo la facoltà che possi in qualsivoglia modo io fosse incorso esserne assoluto. Ibid., f.364r.

26 Die 19 Martii 1653 Decret. quod expediatur cum abjuratione de formali et poenitentiis salutaribus. Ibid., f.362r.

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