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Faith, Reason and Touch

The following is a brief overview of the Biblical meanings of “faith,” including a discussion of the philosophical concepts of faith that may have influenced early Christian spirituality. Then, I further characterize the distinctive Christian understanding of “faith” from several points of view. Finally, I draw a strong connection between “faith” and the metaphor of “touch,” which will lead to fundamental questions about Christian and Platonic mysticism.¹

I. FAITH AND THE BIBLE

The Greek noun *pistis*, together with the verb *pisteuein* in its various forms, appears in the Bible in the sense of faithfulness, faith, trust, vow, oath, approval, and truth. *Pistis* is one of the most important concepts in the New Testament, because it conveys the central message of revelation: Abraham trusted in God, believed in the promises and remained loyal to the one who made the promises, and this trust, faithfulness and faith, in other word *pistis*, is completed as faith in Christ and faithfulness and trust in Christ (see, Rm 4:3ff; Gal 3:6ff). This means that in the New Testament the concept of *pistis* undergoes a kind of natural transformation: initially it expresses the trust and faithfulness that serve as the basis of the covenant first made with Abraham, then with Moses, and subsequently confirmed repeatedly, until at last designating faith in the resurrection of Christ.

It is clear from the Old Testament that God is loyal (*pistos*) to the one he elected and to all the covenants he made (see e.g. Deut. 7:9). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are faithful servants of God (e.g., 2 Macc. 1:2), and their faithfulness

¹ This paper is largely based on the first chapter of my book, *Érintés: Szó és kép a korai keresztény misztikában* (*Touch: Word and Image in the early Christian Mysticism*). Kairosz, Budapest, 2011. I am greatly indebted to Gyöngyi Pisák and David Baer for the English translation, and to the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office for supporting my research (NKFI K-128321).

are an example to follow for everyone. But human beings are often unfaithful and lose sight of the covenant (e.g., Deut. 32:20; Jer. 7:28, Ps. 76 (77):8). Prophets often describe unfaithfulness through the example of infidelity and adultery. God's faithfulness toward human beings is constant and everlasting, while the faithfulness of the sons of man toward God is unsteady and inconstant. They tend to forget about the covenant and yield to their momentary desires and interests. Thus, they turn away from the one true God to false gods and idols, and become unfaithful and lustful. This is what the song of Moses refers to: "they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness. They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols." (Deut. 32:20 – 12; NRSV)

In early and emerging Christianity, *pistis* refers to the threefold "Credo" of the Baptismal Creed (i.e., in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and develops to designate a faith that can be increasingly and consistently expressed in tenets. What starts out as the "we believe" of creeds is followed by clear and dogmatic formulations resulting from centuries of heated debates, which delineate the object and contour of the professed creed. At the same time, the New Testament concept of *pistis* retains the sense of faithfulness, trust, steadfastness, vow, etc., given that develops naturally out of the Old Testament, and these meanings continue to guide and inform Christian usage.

According to the Bible, faith and trust are due not only to God, but also to those persons recognized by the community as authentic teachers, because they are God's true witnesses and prophets. Abraham was the first to receive the promises, Moses handed down the law, and a long line of prophets cautioned the children of Israel to be faithful to God. Jesus says that those who entrust themselves to the conveyors of the divine message will undoubtedly come to believe in him; "[Moses] wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (Jn 5:46–47; NRSV)

When the Latin-speaking West translated *pistis* as *fides*, it added to the concept of faithfulness and trust in God a concept taken from the Roman catalogue of virtues with multiple meanings: reliability, loyalty, trust, and credibility. Yet while "faithfulness" in the Biblical tradition is God-centered, the Roman *fides* is a human-centered concept. Faithfulness is a virtue beneficial not only to the faithful person, but also to the entire community.² Faithfulness is steadfastness and constancy in contracts, and as such, a safeguard of justice.³ Just as faithfulness constitutes the basis of justice, without justice there is no faithfulness, because we trust in the fact that we are being faithful to a person whom we believe to be just and who will not mislead us. In addition, faithfulness also requires a certain down-to-earth, practical understanding (*prudentia*), since "we have confi-

² Cicero, *De oratore* 2.343.

³ Cicero, *De officiis* 1.7.23.

dence in those who we think have more understanding than ourselves, who, we believe, have better insight into the future.”⁴ In fact, this faithfulness and trust keeps the commonwealth together.⁵

From the start, philosophers were appalled by the Christian effort to have their teaching recognized as a philosophy, what is more, as the only true and genuine philosophy, given that the cornerstone of their philosophy was the concept of faith, and they expected their followers to have faith.⁶ Irrationalism was a recurring charge made by philosophers against Christians. According to Celsus (mid-2nd century CE) Christians say to each other: “‘Do not examine, but believe!’ and ‘Your faith will save you!’;”⁷ they require immediate faith (*CCels.* 6.7), and a completely absurd faith at that: “Believe that the person of whom I am telling you is God’s Son, although he was most dishonourably arrested and punished to his utter disgrace, and though quite recently he wandered about most shamefully in the sight of all men. [...] This is all the more reason for believing.”⁸ The common denominator for Christians is therefore; “Believe, if you want to be saved, or else away with you.”⁹ Porphyry, the neo-Platonic philosopher (circa 233/34–305), willingly criticized Christians in his anti-Christian writings for being unable to corroborate their teachings in a reasonable manner, exhorting their followers to simply believe, teaching them as if they were mindless beasts, and calling them believers for having such mindless belief.¹⁰

II. PLATO AND FAITH

The *lack of faith* of Celsus, Porphyry and their companions is understandable, since they were all devoted to ancient gods and to Plato’s philosophy, and faith did not play an important role either in the practice of pagan cults or in Plato’s philosophy.

In Plato’s epistemology *pistis*, which, from the point of view of the Biblical tradition, is translated as faith only for lack of a better word, corresponds to a lower, unreliable form of knowledge. Understanding, according to Plato, is a systematic process closely related to explanation, because one understands what one can explain and, vice versa, one can only explain what one understands. The unity of intellectual and linguistic formulation is especially apparent in di-

⁴ *ibid.* 2.9.33. English translation by Walter Miller.

⁵ *ibid.* 2.24.84.

⁶ On *Christian philosophy* and its close connection with philosophical schools of late antiquity, see Hadot 1995. 126–144.

⁷ Origen, *CCels* 1.9; see Chadwick 1980. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.* 6.10; see Chadwick 1980. 324.

⁹ *Ibid.* 6.11; see Chadwick 1980. 324.

¹⁰ Harnack frg. 73 = Eusebius *Demonstratio euangelica* 1.1.12, 1. and: Macarius Magnes *Apo-criticus* 3.17; 3.22; 4.9; 4.10.

alectics. Dialogic speech (*logos*) is an activity where the speakers discover and understand together an aspect of the nature of things. It is the intellect (*logos*) that understands, and the sense, meaning and essence of the given thing is what is being understood (*logos*). In other words, you can express in language anything that you can understand.¹¹

One more thing, however, is needed for understanding. This is what Plato calls the good, or the Form of the good, which is both the guarantee and the final object of understanding.¹² Plato mentions an important simile which says the Good makes understanding possible in the same way as the Sun makes it possible to see in the world of the senses. Just as additionally to vision and an object, the Sun is needed to see, so also, additionally to the one who apprehends an intelligible object, the Good is needed in order to understand. As concerns sensible and intellectual knowledge, there are four manners of knowing and four types of objects, which correspond to four capabilities in the soul. Knowledge of physical things transmitted by the senses is no more than conjecture (*eikasia*). Faith (*pistis*) is also related to physical things. Among things that can be captured by the mind, thinking (*dianoia*) operates with assumptions and images, and finally pure understanding (*noesis*) is grasping truth and reality. Conjecture and faith belong to the realm of belief (*doxa*), while understanding is the capacity of the mind (*nous*).¹³

Plato's Socrates approaches this idea from a different perspective in the famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic*.¹⁴ People are chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads, hearing only voices and seeing only the shadows of objects projected on the wall of the cave. Behind the chained persons, in the back of the cave, the light of a fire shines from above with a path stretching in front of it and a low screen-like wall. Mysterious persons carry different objects along the path, occasionally speaking to each other. This image represents our current condition. We are the chained prisoners who only see the physical images that are transmitted by our senses, giving them knowledge amounting to mere conjecture. The objects lit by the fire, or the visible sun, represent the things in a world that can be grasped by the senses, the objects of faith. However, a person can step out of the cave and into the sunshine, travel from the sensual to the intellectual by reasoning, even though reasoning still relies on assumptions, similes and physical images, although the object is a reality grasped by the mind. The person stepping out of the cave into the sunshine still needs to get used to the light, because he is incapable of looking at the Sun immediately. Eventually, he can glimpse the Sun, that is, through clear understanding he can grasp clear

¹¹ Plato, *The Sophist* 264a.

¹² See Plato, *The Republic* 505a.

¹³ *Ibid.* 508c–511e.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 514a–517a.

intelligible reality, the Form of the Good, without physical images, assumptions and conjectures.

Therefore, according to the extremely influential Platonic approach, faith is a form of conjecture aimed at things that can be perceived by the body and the senses. If man's most important goal is to capture eternal truth, he has to break away from faith and strive toward clear intellectual knowledge.

III. PROBABILITY AND FAITH

At one point in the history of the Plato's Academy, epistemological skepticism played a key role, providing useful arguments for Christian theologians engaged in polemical debate a few centuries later about the nature of faith.¹⁵ Arcesilaus (316, or 315, to 241, or 240, BCE) and Carneades (214, or 213, – 129, or 128, BCE) developed the basic tenets of philosophical skepticism, primarily against the Stoics. Today we would say that, according to the Stoics, there is a type of information which communicates its reality to the recipient without distortion, and this type of information can be clearly recognized. The founder of this school of thought, Zeno of Citium (turn of the 4th – 3rd century BCE), referred to this type of *information* as *kataleptic* impressions, which in his opinion communicated self-evident knowledge about the real object and which corresponds to it in a way that would not be possible for a non-real object. Such impressions provide a solid foundation for thought and action, because one can build a system of thought that corresponds to reality with the help of concepts, and this ensures that our actions and decisions are reasonable.

According to later sources Arcesilaus held,¹⁶ in contrast to the epistemological optimism of the Stoics, that it is impossible to differentiate between false and real sense impressions. One tends to accept false impressions just as much as true ones, as numerous examples indicate in the case of people who are sick, crazy, drunk, etc., There is no criterion that would help us differentiate with certainty between what is true and what is false. Therefore, it is best to suspend every kind of affirmation and refrain from claiming that something is true or false. It is even impossible to decide between completely contradictory philosophical tenets, because one can, and must, argue for a thing as well as for its opposite. However, a person has to make a number of decisions every day, and if there can be no certain criterion of truth for his decisions and actions, then,

¹⁵ Kendeffy (1999) published an excellent monograph on the subject. In respect of practical probability and diaphony (difference of opinion), I rely on the statements in his book and the patristic works it refers to.

¹⁶ Arcesilaus did not leave any written texts behind.

unless he resigns himself to complete inaction, he must follow what is probable in order to act wisely and correctly.

Consequently, Arcesilaus and his followers associated wisdom, cognition, knowledge, action and ethics with the realm of probability. They provided many examples of how in many life situations decision and action are based on probability, because we never foresee with certainty the results on our choices and the consequences of our actions. The farmer sows seeds because they will probably grow and bring fruit; we get married because we hope for happiness; we have children because we assume we will have healthy and smart offspring; we embark on a trip because we trust that the trip will be successful, and so on. In the footsteps of Arcesilaus, both Cicero (*Lucullus* 34.109) and Seneca (*De beneficiis* 4.33.2–3) provide further examples similar to those mentioned above as proof of the important role of probability in human life. And Christian writers trained in philosophy mention the same examples when defending “faith” before their philosophical opponents.

The skeptics’ practical probability corresponds to the Christians’ everyday *pistis* which in the eyes of the Christians fundamentally determines human life, that is, faith or trust. “But why do you disbelieve? Do you not know that faith leads the way in all actions?” – asks Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch, from his cultured pagan friend in the eighties of the second century. Then he continues:

What farmer can harvest unless he first entrusts the seed to the earth? Who can cross the sea unless he first entrusts himself to the ship and the pilot? What sick man can be cured unless he first entrusts himself to the physician? What art or science can anyone learn unless he first delivers and entrusts himself to the teacher? If, then, the farmer trusts the earth and the sailor the ship and the sick man the physician, do you not want to entrust yourself to God, when you have received so many pledges from him?¹⁷

Responding to the objection of Celsus, according to which Christians are satisfied by mere faith without examination, Origen (185–253), the excellent thinker of Alexandria, invokes the universality of faith.

Why is it not more reasonable, seeing that all human acts depend on faith, to believe in God rather than in them? Who goes on a voyage, or marries, or begets children, or casts seeds into the ground, unless he believes that things will turn out for the better, although it is possible that the opposite may happen – as it sometimes does? But nevertheless the faith that things will turn out for the better and as they wish makes all men take risks, even where the result is not certain and where things might turn

¹⁷ *Autol.* 1.8; see Grant 1970. 11–13.

out differently. Now if it is hope and the faith that the future will be better which maintain life in every action where the result is uncertain, is it not more reasonable for a man to trust in God than in the outcome of a sea voyage or of seed sown in the earth or of marriage to a wife or any other human activity? For he puts his faith in the God who created all these things, and in him who with exceptional greatness of mind and divine magnanimity ventured to commend this doctrine to people in all parts of the world, and who incurred great risks and a death supposed to be disgraceful, which he endured for the sake of mankind; and he taught those who were persuaded to obey his teaching at the beginning boldly to travel everywhere in the world for the salvation of men through all dangers and continual expectation of death.¹⁸

Defenders of the Christian faith such as Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 – ca. 215), Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 263–339), or Arnobius (284–305), Lactantius (ca. 250 – ca. 325) and Augustine (354–430) among the Latins, all appropriated, in varying degrees, two important arguments of the skeptics.¹⁹ They not only invoked the fact that faith is the basis of the everyday decisions of man who does not know the future, but they also argued that the process of learning and cognition are fundamentally faith-based, an argument which originates in the philosophy of the Skeptics. Commitment to a given school of philosophy cannot be the result of mere intellectual contemplation, because the novice thinker does not possess the knowledge required for making decisions based on a purely intellectual understanding. His decisions are influenced by a number of irrational factors: his upbringing, social status, personality, etc. When he makes a commitment to a given school of thought, he in fact makes a decision based on trust and faith, in which the reputation and authority of his teacher plays a key role. This is what Theophilus refers to in the quotation above: “What art or science can anyone learn unless he first delivers and entrusts himself to the teacher?” He then alerts us to the fact that the arguments for accepting the authority of God the Creator are much more reasonable than those for following any sort of human authority. Decades before Theophilus, Justin Martyr, the first Christian philosopher (died ca. 165) shared his personal experience when he told how searched for truth from various philosophers whom he considered worthy of following because of their reputation, and how eventually he discovered the divine authority of the prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit and the authority of the Scriptures themselves.²⁰ Origen also employs the example of choosing a school of thought and the argument from authority in his response to philosophers who rejected faith, and draws the following conclusion: “If, as my argument has shown, belief is inevitable in following a particular in-

¹⁸ *CCels.* 1.11; see Chadwick 1980. 14.

¹⁹ See the texts in Kendeffy (1999) under the discussion of individual authors.

²⁰ *Dial.* 2.3–6. and 7.1. ff.

dividual among those who have founded sects among the Greeks or the barbarians, why should we not far more believe in the supreme God...?”²¹

When the Church Fathers make use arguments from the Skeptics in support of accepting a faith that determines everyday action and an authority that serves as the basis of learning, they are only pointing to the initial steps everyone must take before acquiring more certain knowledge and true understanding. This faith is not the same as specific Christian faith, and this concept of authority does not fully overlap with what the young Augustine refers to when, not long after his conversion, he declares: “I, therefore, am resolved in nothing whatever to depart from the authority of Christ for I do not find a stronger.”²²

IV. THE HISTORICITY OF FAITH

At the center of Christian faith is the figure of the resurrected Christ, and two very important features differentiate it from all other faith; it is historical and connected to a collection of books. Faith is historical in several respects. The life, death and resurrection of Christ are historical events that fit into a series of preceding events and brings them to completion, and finally, the faith in these events is passed on by a community to each member of subsequent generations. The history of this faith is at the same time the history of the Holy Scripture and the church. The books report on the teachings of Christ and the most important events in his life, and they contain recurring references to the laws of Moses and the prophecies of the prophets. According to the New Testament, the prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus, and this is exactly what justifies the special place and authority of the holy books of the Jews when compared to any other book. Faith in the laws and the special inspiration of the prophets does not legitimate Christ, but rather it is the other way around; faith in Christ legitimates Moses and the prophets. Victorinus of Poetovio (died ca. 304) puts it concisely: “it makes the faith unquestionable that what happened later and was fulfilled was foretold.”²³ Origen says that everything which we have seen to come to pass, everything which we know from history, had already been written down in the holy books of the Jews. Therefore, although the divine origin of the laws of Moses and the books of the prophets used to be unverifiable, they have been proven after Christ, because we see them coming true.²⁴

Perhaps the most mature analysis of the historicity of faith among the apologists was provided by Tertullian (ca. 155–230). He is generally thought to have

²¹ *CCels.* 1.10; see Chadwick 1980. 14.

²² *Acad.* 3.20.43; see O’Meara 1950. 150.

²³ *Apoc.* 4.5.

²⁴ *Princ.* 4.1.6.

written the statement “I believe because it is absurd” (*credo quia absurdum*), although we cannot find it in this form either in his writings or in the extant works of any other church father. His arguments for the Christian faith are logical, consistent and historical.

Although the statement “*credo quia absurdum*” is a misunderstanding, Tertullian did use a rhetorical proof based on impossibility. “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible (*certum est quia impossibile*).”²⁵

Here Tertullian, who received an excellent philosophical training, in fact uses an argument that was also mentioned by Aristotle. Aristotle explains under enthymemes, rhetorical proofs, that the more unlikely an event is, the less likely it is that anyone will believe that it has actually taken place, unless you have a peculiar proof for it.

Another is derived from things that are thought to have taken place but yet are implausible, [using the argument] that they would not seem true unless they were facts or close to being facts. And [one can argue] that they are all the more true [for that reason]; for people accept facts or probabilities as true; if, then, something were implausible and not probable, it would be true; for it is not because of probability and plausibility that it seems true [but because it is a fact].²⁶

Tertullian says that the resurrection of Christ was this kind of a completely improbable event. However, the fact that the apostles report on this improbable event as if it had in fact occurred, makes it believable.²⁷

The final objective of intellectual inquiry is to reach faith, and this is what Christ commands: *Seek and you shall find*.²⁸ One must preserve the faith that one found in order to obtain salvation. Therefore, the correct order is the following: understanding, faith, salvation. However, inquiry is often motivated by curiosity and vanity (*Praescr.* 14), and the purity of faith is often threatened by heresies. Just as inquiry has its own rules, faith has its own rules as well, the so called *regula fidei*, the rule of faith or confession (*Praescr.* 13). The rule of faith must be preserved in its own unity, faith in its own purity. The protection of the confession is at the same time the protection of the faith. Tertullian lists historical arguments for the rules of faith (*Praescr.* 16–44). First one must clarify “With whom lies that very faith to which the Scriptures belong. From what and through whom, and when, and to whom, has been handed down that rule by

²⁵ *De carne Christi* 5.4; see Evans 1956. 19.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.23. 1400a; see Aristotle 2007. 181.

²⁷ Lindberg 1983. 516–517.

²⁸ Mt 7,7; cf. *Praescr.* 8-10; English translation: “The Prescription Against Heretics”, translated by Peter Holmes. See Tertullian 2018.

which men become Christians?” (*ibid.* 19.1).²⁹ Jesus Christ is a historical person who lived, taught, worked and assembled disciples in a specific period, at a specific place. He charged the apostles with the task of proclaiming the faith to all people, to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost (*Praescr.* 20). Accordingly, the disciples proclaimed the faith everywhere, witnessed to Jesus Christ, and based on this faith, built churches.

[They] founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches [...]. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity.³⁰

We know Christ’s teachings from the apostolic proclamation that the apostolic churches, which constitute a unified church, preserve and pass on as a rule of faith.

If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree manifest that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches – those moulds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God.³¹

After the historical argument, all that remains to prove is which church, from among the churches that claim to have apostolic legacy, kept the pure apostolic teaching. With this the dispute shifts from an external apologetic perspective to the analysis of Holy Scripture and the examination of questions related to liturgical traditions and lifestyle, which are an internal matter for Christian communities.³²

The teaching of Tertullian, Origen, and the other Church Fathers about the historical and communal nature of faith actually follows the logic of the apostle Paul, who says in his letter to the Romans:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is

²⁹ *Praescr.* 19.1.

³⁰ *Praescr.* 20.3.

³¹ *Ibid.* 21.3.

³² *Ibid.* 36–44.

justified, and on confesses with the mouth and so is saved [...] For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? [...] So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:9–10, 13–15, 17. NRSV)

Faith in the resurrected Christ brings salvation through the following steps: 1. the resurrection of Christ; 2. the sending away of the apostles; 3. the proclamation of the apostles; 4. personal faith in Christ based on the teaching of the apostles; 5. calling to Christ for help and confessing Him – which is a reference to the apostolic confession.

V. PERSONAL FAITH

But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too early nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the road. During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith – that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time. Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago (Kierkegaard 1983. 35–36).

After the imperative “Let us go further,” Kierkegaard almost faithfully summarizes the rich Christian exegetic tradition of the “Akedah” (“Binding”). He says that Abraham believed, *by virtue of the absurd*, that Isaac will be resurrected. His faith supersedes the general ethical imperative of “you must not kill.” He is not a murderer because he believes. Yet an important thought is nevertheless completely missing from *Fear and Trembling*: the fact that faith has an object and a history. In the final analysis, Kierkegaard denies both. He understands faith to be an utterly subjective “leap” to what is intellectually incomprehensible, which is completely different from the place from which one approaches God. Abraham, who is getting ready to sacrifice his son upon God’s command, made this leap, but if we truly contemplate the impossibility of his position and deci-

sion, we understand Kierkegaard's resignation: "I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd; it is for me an impossibility, but I do not praise myself for that."³³ So how should we interpret the observation, according to which Abraham believed that "he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed." Did he really believe it by force of the absurd as the Danish philosopher claims?

Kierkegaard, however, keeps some of his cards close to his chest. He does not let on that the source of his comment is the letter to the Hebrews;

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promise was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead – and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:17–19; NRSV).

The author of the letter also follows a tradition of interpretation, the traces of which can be found in the letter to the Romans: "[Abraham believed in the God] who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.'" (Rom 4:17–18; NRSV).

We could claim based on the two letters that Abraham believed by force of the absurd, if we considered the belief in resurrection absurd. In any case, this would resonate with the "I believe because it's absurd" concept mistakenly attributed to Tertullian, which was extremely important for Kierkegaard (see Bühler 2008. 137–138). However, "impossibility" for Tertullian, as we have seen, was a historical concept with a rational basis. By contrast Kierkegaard had a non-historical, non-rational concept of the absurd. Abraham's faith was not absurd in the Kierkegaardian sense according either to Tertullian or to other Church Fathers. At the same time, the Church Fathers did not wish to add rational explanations to this story like those offered by historical-critical exegesis of the Bible or comparative mythological research, the effect of which is to banish the Akedah to the realm of the bizarre and classify it as an astral myth, an allegory, or a document from the history of religions which records the prohibition of human sacrifice. Maybe at the deepest level the story originates in the fear experienced by nomadic people of the night sky once the sun set. Maybe this psychological experience led followers of Yahweh to engage in religious polemics against gods that demanded human sacrifice, and the story might have complex historical connections to certain Greek or Sumerian mythologies as

³³ *Ibid.* 34.

well (see e.g. Goldziher 2011. 57–60 and 250; Graves – Patai 1969. 173–178). We could unravel this complex story and trace its components to probable causes. However, if one is to embark on such a project, as Socrates says, “he’ll need a great deal of leisure. I myself have no leisure at all for such business, and the reason for that, my friend, is this: I’m not yet able, in accordance with the Delphic inscription, to know myself, and it seems ridiculous to me to investigate things that don’t concern me while still lacking that knowledge.”³⁴

Rational explanations take the weight off the shoulders of the reader of John’s Gospel which were placed there by the words of Jesus: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did” (Jn 8:39; NRSV). How could Abraham be the knight of faith (Kierkegaard), the father of nations (Apostle Paul, cf. Rom 4:16, Gal 3:7), if the Biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac is mere literary fiction? The Church Fathers and Kierkegaard believed that the Akedah actually occurred, which has grave consequences for the life and personal faith of the individual. But while Kierkegaard excludes all rationality and historicity from the concept of faith, the Church Fathers do not consider Abraham’s faith either absurd or rational. Faith cannot be understood in terms of rationality or irrationality.

Origen adds a surprising comment, but still one based on Scripture, to the idea expressed in the letter to the Hebrews: “Abraham knew himself to prefigure the image of future truth; he knew the Christ was to be born from his seed, who also was to be offered as a truer victim for the whole world and was to be raised from the dead.”³⁵ How is it possible? Did Abraham know that everything he does in any given moment prefigures a future chain of events? Did he know that his actions mirror God’s redemption? Yes, that’s exactly what Origen means. He is convinced that Abraham saw something in his mind and that’s why he responded as follows to Isaac’s question: “God himself will provide the lamb.”³⁶ St. John Chrysostom quotes an important verse of the Gospel of John in order to shed light on the above: “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56; NRSV). The “day” of Jesus which filled Abraham with jubilation was the day when Jesus died and was resurrected, the fulfilment of salvation history, of which Abraham’s story is a part and which it prefigures.³⁷ The astonishment of the Jews who argue with Jesus is apparent in the narrative of the Gospel of John: “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” They did not understand what he said, because, according to Jesus, it was the other way round; Abraham saw Jesus. “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and

³⁴ Plato *Phaedrus* 229e–230a; see Cobb 1993. 89.

³⁵ Origen, *HomGen.* 8.1; see Heine 1981. 137–8.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 8.6.

³⁷ See John Chrysostom, *HomGen.* 47.3.

went out of the temple.” (Jn 8:57–59; NRSV) They considered this statement blasphemous. Yet based on John’s theology, the Jesus’ words point to the fact that almost two thousand years before the incarnation Abraham could see him, because he is the everlasting Word. (cf. Jn 1:1). If Abraham saw him, he did not lie to Isaac when he said “God himself will provide the lamb,” because he saw the future as a prophet. Abraham embarked on the road to sacrifice his son with faith in the resurrection. He believed that after he kills his child, God will bring him back to life, that he will receive his son again in this earthly life, because he knew that this sacrifice prefigured the universal sacrifice of Christ. The “movement” of faith is truly “terrifying” when Abraham gives up everything to win back everything (cf. Kierkegaard 1983. 36–37). He answered God’s personal call when he started on the road to the peak of Moriah. He believed because he received a revelation from God’s Word. But if there is no resurrection, Abraham’s faith is madness.

Plato considered faith a form of conjecture, an inferior form of sensory knowledge. Christian faith originates in sensory knowledge insofar as it originates from hearing and is handed down in a given community from Christ to each individual. Faith is therefore the *assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Heb 11:1). This faith has a preeminent object: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All other doctrines originate from this. Because the object of faith is a person who is resurrected, who lives, faith in the resurrection of Christ is a personal relationship with the One who was resurrected. What does this mean?

VI. FAITH AS TOUCH

Christine Mohrmann, a philologist-theologian, and perhaps the most significant linguist to research Latin Christian literature, demonstrated in a masterful study how Latin-speaking Christians transformed the traditional usage of the verb *credo* to express their own specific understanding of faith.³⁸ Classical authors often used the verb *credere* with the accusative or dative case (i.e., to believe someone or to believe in/on someone) to express faith in God. Seneca, for example, says the following: “the first way to worship the gods is to believe in the gods.” Somewhere else he says the following: “there is no people so far beyond the reach of laws and customs that it does not believe at least in gods of some sort.”³⁹ The usage of *credere* with the preposition *in* (followed by the accusative or dative case) was influenced by biblical Greek, and it started to denote the act of specifically Christian faith in God. The difference between *credere in* + *accusative* and

³⁸ Mohrmann 1951. I briefly summarize below the ideas of this excellent study and quote its most important examples.

³⁹ Seneca, *Ep.* 95.50. and *Ep.* 117.6; see Gummere 1925. 89. and 341.

credere in + ablativae is difficult to express, but perhaps we could say that the first denotes believing God while the other means faith in God. The two, however, basically overlap.

Augustine and, following him, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas made a careful distinction between the three meanings of *credere Deo*, *credere Deum* and *credere in Deum*: “to trust in God,” “to believe God” and “to believe in God.” *Credere Deo* expresses trust in and faithfulness to God, but it does not indicate as strong a commitment as *credere in deum*:

This is believing in God, and it is a great deal more than believing what God says. We may often believe what some human being says, yet know that such a person is not to be believed in. To believe in God is to cling by faith to God who effects the good works in such a way that we collaborate well with him.⁴⁰

However, we must believe in the person that God sent, in other words, Christ. What does it mean to say we must believe in Christ rather than trust Christ?

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” “That you believe in him,” not, that you believe him. For if you believe in him, you believe him; but he who believes does not as an immediate consequence believe in him. For even the demons believe him, but they did not believe in him. Again we can also say about his Apostles, “We believe Paul,” but not, “We believe in Paul”, “We believe Peter”, but not, “We believe in Peter.” For, “to him who believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as justice.” What, then, is it to believe in him? By believing to love, by believing to cherish, by believing to go to him, and to be embodied in his members. Therefore, it is faith itself that God demands of us.⁴¹

Believing in Christ means loving Christ in contrast to the belief of demons, who also believed him but did not believe *in him*, that is, they had nothing to do with the son of God. The one who believes Christ but does not believe in him does not share community with Him, and is not tied to Him through hope or love. Love unites a person to Christ through which one becomes part of His body.⁴² The manner in which we are united with Christ through faith is illustrated by the story of the healing of the bleeding woman, and the patristic explanations of it.⁴³

Jairus, an official of a synagogue implored Jesus to heal his only daughter, twelve years old, who was dying. As Jesus and his disciples made their way

⁴⁰ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 77.8; see Boulding 2002. 98.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Tract. Jn.* 29.6; see Rettig 1993. 18.

⁴² Augustine *Sermon* 144.2.2.

⁴³ Mohrmann (1951. 283–284) quotes examples for St. Augustine: *Sermons* 244.3. and 95.5. See also *Sermon* 375/C.

to his house, traveling through a big crowd, a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for twelve years and had spent all her money on doctors, secretly touched the hem of Jesus's cloak and was healed right away. Jesus asked who touched him. The disciples did not understand the question, because anyone in the crowd could have touched him. However, Jesus had a specific touch in mind, one which had caused the power to go out of him, as he put it. The woman knelt at his feet and trembling, admitted what she had done. She had reason to be afraid because the law considered her unclean and strictly prohibited touching her and everything else that she touched (cf. Lv 15: 25–27). Jesus, however, reassured her, and stated that her faith had made her well. After this he reached the house and brought back to life the little girl who had died.⁴⁴

Origen provides us with one of the earliest summarized comprehensive interpretations of the story told by the synoptic gospels.⁴⁵ Jesus first started out to visit the daughter of the synagogue official, who is the symbol of the synagogue. The synagogue was sick, and then died because of the sins of Israel. But before Jesus reached the official's house and brought the girl back to life, he healed the bleeding woman who represents the church of converted pagans. If the church of the pagans is fully healed, then synagogue will also be healed. (cf. Rom 11:25 ff). The woman's sickness started twelve years before, just as the girl was born. This means that pagans had lived without faith since the synagogue was built. The woman spent all her money on doctors but was not healed, because the doctors of pagans, the philosophers, are unable to heal anyone. Jesus is the sole healer of body and soul. We touch the hem of his cloak with fervently burning faith. Therefore, our touch is faith itself, just as Jesus tells the woman that her faith has healed her: *Daughter, your faith has made you well* (Lk 8:48). Through faith the divine power flows into a person, because Jesus feels his strength leaving him. *Someone touched me; for I noticed that power has gone out of me* (Lk 8:46).

This sentence has great importance for the Church Fathers. Origen even draws a physical parallel to demonstrate the strong bond between the power of Jesus and the faith of human beings. Faith attracts divine power just as a magnet attracts iron and oil attracts fire. "And perhaps, as in the case of material things there exists in some things a natural attraction towards some other thing, as in a magnet for iron, and in what is called naphtha for fire, so there is an attraction in such faith towards the divine power."⁴⁶ This is the divine touch (*theia haphé*), through which the human soul touches the divine nature of Christ.

⁴⁴ See. Mt 9:18–26; Lk 8:40–56; Mk 5:25–34.

⁴⁵ Origen, *Frg. Lc.* 125. For a similar analysis see Ambrose: *Exp. Lc.* 6.57–59.

⁴⁶ Origen, *ComMt.* 10.19. English translation: <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf09/anf09.xvi.ii.iii.xix.html> Additional references in Origen: *ComCant.* 3.13.48; *ComMt.* 11,7; *HomLcv.* 3.3 és 4.8; *HomIud.* 5.5.

The outer human being has the faculty of taste, and the inner human being has the spiritual faculty of which it is said: *Taste and see that the Lord is good* (Ps. 34[33].8; cf. 1 Peter 2.3). The outer human being has the sensible faculty of touch, and the inner human being also has touch, that touch with which the woman with a hemorrhage touched the hem of Jesus' garment (cf. Mark 5.25-34 *parr*). She touched it, as He testified who said: *Who touched me?* (Mark 5.30). Yet just before, Peter said to Him: *The multitudes are pressing upon you and you ask, 'Who touched me?'* (Luke 9.45 *par*). Peter thinks that those touching are touching in a bodily, not a spiritual manner. Thus, those pressing in on Jesus were not touching Him, for they were not touching Him in faith. Only the woman, having a certain divine touch, touched Jesus and by this was healed. And because she touched Him with a divine touch, this caused power to go forth from Jesus in response to her holy touch. Hence He says: *Someone touched me: for I perceive that power has gone forth from me* (Luke 8.46). It is about this healing touch that John says: *Which we have touched with our hands concerning the word of life* (1 John 1.1).⁴⁷

Origen calls attention to an important distinction. The inner man touches the Word with all his existence, which means that faith is an act of the innermost essence of man. It is not about emotions and intellectual comprehension. Through the movement of faith the entire human personality is unified with Christ so that it partakes of the divine *dynamis* of Christ.

The above quotes are imbedded in a fairly long anthropological reflection.⁴⁸ Origen refutes the thesis that the internal man is identical with blood. Man, in fact, is identical with the internal man that was created by God in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:26) as opposed to the outer man that was taken from dust (Gen 2:7). But at the same time, there is a fundamental analogy between the capabilities of the created likeness of God and the senses of the body. The vision, hearing, touch, sense of taste and all capabilities of the inner man are directed to God in all their original purity. They sense God in a spiritual way and they gain their strength from Him. Sins may soil, but cannot destroy them. The inner man can regain his original purity and can be continually regenerated in the image of his Creator (cf. Col 3:9–10). Finally, after the death of the body, he can be with Christ. St. Augustine identifies this inner man with the heart, which, unlike in the romantic poetry of later ages, represents the seed of personality, an emotional and intellectual center, the organ of faith: "to touch with heart is to believe."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Dial.* 19; see Daly. 1992. 72.

⁴⁸ *Dial.* 14–24.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Sermo Guelferbitanus* 14.2.

VII. TOUCHING WHAT IS REAL

The idea of a spiritual touching of God played an important role not only in Christianity, but in the Platonic tradition as well. In Plato's *Symposium* Socrates remembers a conversation with Diotima who taught him about true love. Toward the end of Diotima's speech, when this woman from Mantinea talks like a priestess who initiates her pupil into final knowledge, she admonishes them to touch what is real rather than contemplate copies of the real (210a–212a). She says that the spirit must gradually be elevated to the ultimate object of its love. First it focuses on a single beautiful body, then it notices beauty in every beautiful body. Afterwards the spirit moves on because it realizes that the bodies owe their beauty to the spirit, and this extrasensory beauty is reflected also in beautiful actions and laws. The beauty of sciences is of even higher order, but that is surpassed by unified beauty, the sight of "the sea of beauty" and "the science of beauty" (*episteme mia kalou*). It is a kind of beauty that can be defined better with negative rather than affirmative statements. After Diotima explains what cannot be said about it, she defines it as what is homogeneous in and by itself (*monoeides*) and eternal (*aei on*). All other representations of beauty share its beauty, but in such a way that beauty does not diminish while it is shared and it does not grow if those that share it decay (211b). In other words, true beauty is perfectly uniform, and it is not corporal but purely intellectual. Diotima adds to this that only those who see this pure beauty live a life that is worthy of man.

"Do you think," she continued, "it would be a worthless life for a human being to look at that, to study it in the required way, and to be together with it? Aren't you aware," she said, "that only there with it, when a person sees the beautiful in the only way it can be seen, will he ever be able to give birth, not to imitations of virtue, since he would not be reaching out toward an imitation, but to true virtue, because he would be taking hold of what is true [or *he would touch that what is true* –Gy. H.]. By giving birth to true virtue and nourishing it, he would be able to become a friend of the gods, and if any human being could become immortal, he would."⁵⁰

Those who are led by the inferior manifestations of beauty to the source of beauty touch what is real. They are impregnated by this touch; they bear and nourish real virtues, and eventually become immortal. I do not think that Plato, or Diotima, speak of some type of transcendent beauty which can be touched by the duly prepared person in a mystical, religious trance. Translators are prone to reformulate and spiritualize the passage – perhaps under the influence of its later interpretations – so as to interpret metaphors related to sight and seeing, etc. as contemplation and perception. However, the verb *theasasthai* was used by

⁵⁰ Plato, *Symposium* 211e–212a; see Cobb 1993. 49.

Plato a couple of lines before in the sense of *seeing* the beauty in actions and in laws (210 c). This seeing is not at all mystical contemplation; instead, it is careful observation.⁵¹ It is advisable to interpret the metaphors related to seeing in the speech of Diotima in relation to the basic theme of the dialogue and the circumstances situations of the persons talking with each other, rather than in relation to the sun analogy in the *Republic*, or the comments of the *Seventh Letter* about sudden, inexpressible and ultimate understanding (341c–d).⁵² According the multiplied story within a story, the banquet guests had assembled to celebrate the theatrical success of their host, Agathon, who the night before had won the tragedy contest. The “star” of the theater, of the spectacle, of the *theatron* who triumphed before thirty thousand people (175e, 194a), wishes to be celebrated and be recognized ostentatiously, but in the company of Socrates his superficiality and stupidity are exposed.⁵³

Diotima frequently uses verbs of seeing in her speech, because she in fact teaches us how to see correctly. One condition of correct seeing is a carefully selected object. For example, instead of looking at beautiful bodies one must recognize the source of their beauty. Another closely related requirement is purity of the intention for the person who wants to see. He should desire the presence of virtue and pure intellectual beauty (*synousia*) instead of coveting sensual pleasure, riches, luxury, or the company of pretty boys to look at. The quote above follows closely from the one below:

“Here is the life, Socrates, my friend,” said the Mantinean visitor, “that a human being should live – studying the beautiful itself. Should you ever see it, it will not seem to you to be on the level of gold, clothing, and beautiful boys and youths, who so astound you now when you look at them that you and many others are eager to gaze upon your darlings and be together with them all the time. You would cease eating and drinking, if that were possible, and instead just look at them and be with them.”⁵⁴

It seems that the Platonic-Socratic Diotima does not talk about a mystical contemplation which removes us from everyday existence, or touching a transcendent reality, but about an ethical and ascetic life that is worthy of a philosopher, which is based on the acceptance that the beauty of the world of the multitudes is only a reflection of a reality which is beauty itself.

⁵¹ See Cobb, 1993. 80–81.

⁵² Such as Louth 1983. 10–14.

⁵³ Plato, *Symposium* 194c–d and 201b. A nice analysis is provided by Emlyn-Jones 2004.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 211d; see Cobb 1993. 48–49.

VIII. TOUCHING THE ONE

Nevertheless, the later followers of Plato did not understand Diotima's teaching in such a prosaic manner. This is what Porphyry says about his master, Plotinus, "who often raised himself in thought, according to the ways Plato teaches in the *Banquet*, to the First and Transcendent God." And this God, who appeared several times to Plotinus, is characterized specifically with the affirmative-negative method used in the *Symposium* "who has neither shape, nor any intelligible form, but is throned above intellect and all the intelligible."⁵⁵ How can rise up to this God existing above everything if he cannot be grasped as a form, and therefore he cannot be contemplated as beauty? Plotinus responds that this God can only be touched. "One is not absent from any and absent from all, so that in its presence it is not present except to those who are able and prepared to receive it, so as to be in accord with it, and as if grasp it and touch it in their likeness."⁵⁶

How to make sense of the One being and yet not being present? It is simple: "it is always present to anyone who is able to touch it, but is not present to the one who is unable."⁵⁷ The One is at the center of the human being, therefore those who touch Him touch their own centers, and will become more than themselves. But those who do not touch Him, leave themselves behind. "For a god is what is linked to that centre, but that which stands far from it is a multiple human being or a beast."⁵⁸ Plotinus understands the comment of Diotima, according to which a person bears and nourishes real virtues and becomes immortal through touch, to mean that only the soul that touches the One leads a real life:

and its true life is there; for our present life, the life without God, is a trace of life imitating that life. But life in that realm is the active actuality of Intellect; and the active actuality generates gods in quit contact with that Good, and generates beauty, and generates righteousness, and generates virtue.⁵⁹

And because the One is beyond existence, those who touch Him rise above existence.⁶⁰ Therefore, in Plotinus' understanding, the eternal, monadic form being in the *Symposium* (*monoeides*) changes into the One without form, beyond existence. The One is above everything that can be comprehended. The intellect may, therefore, long for it with loving desire, but will never be able to reach

⁵⁵ *Vita Plotini* 23; see Armstrong 1969. 69.

⁵⁶ *Enn.* 6.9.4; see Armstrong 1988. 317.

⁵⁷ *Enn.* 6.9.7; see Armstrong 1988. 327.

⁵⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.8; see Armstrong 1988. 331.

⁵⁹ *Enn.* 6.9.9; see Armstrong 1988. 335.

⁶⁰ See *Enn.* 6.9.11.

it (see Perczel 1997. 223–264). The encounter with the One is a quiet touch, in which the intellect surpasses its own capacity, that is, understanding.

From Plotinus' point of view, Plato is in fact a mystic. As St. Augustine puts it, Plato has come to life in Plotinus, to which we may add, yes, the mystical Plato.⁶¹ Perhaps more than two centuries after the birth of Christianity, this was bound to happen. Or is it the other way round, and without a mystical Plato no Christian mysticism would exist? Whatever the case may be, there are numerous similarities between the two traditions, Christianity and Platonism, but the differences between the two traditions are also significant. I did not intend to address questions of philological, historical, or the history of religion here. I have only highlighted shared concepts in the spiritual teaching of two contemporaries, the Christian philosopher Origen who studied in Alexandria and the Platonic Plotinus. The analysis of the concept of "faith" through the metaphor of "touch" led me to the central issues of Christian and Neo-Platonic mysticism. Undeniably, the two approaches share many similarities. According to the Church Fathers, faith surpasses intellectual activity because in faith we do not understand Christ, we touch him internally: we unite with Him in love and we receive divine power as a result of this inner touching. According to Plotinus, the desiring and loving intellect may touch, but cannot grasp, the One who is above all reason. If this happens, the human being becomes a divine, and the intellect bears beauty, justice, and virtue.

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⁶¹ Augustine, *Acad.* 3.18.41.

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