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A Man Loses His Faith

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Abstract

'Losing one's faith' usually refers to ceasing to believe in God and in doctrines. But what changes—and losses—are experienced in the *moral* life when there is loss of faith? With reference to Aquinas, changes in moral understanding related to the loss of faith are discussed. Next, changes in the life of virtue and so in moral knowledge are examined, and finally changes in the inner moral life—particularly, the loss of moral certainty. The paper suggests that when they experience loss of faith Christian societies can suffer the same sorts of moral losses as Christian individuals. Such loss has inevitable effects upon identity, happiness and capacity to communicate with others.

A man called Peter is coming towards the end of his life. He is a good man. He has lived decently and cared about what is morally right and good. He has also believed in God and in Jesus Christ and has lived by Christian faith and in accordance with Christian morality.

Sometime before his death Peter reads a book by an eminent scientist and former theist. The book argues that contemporary physics and socio-evolutionary theory answer all the questions it is reasonable to ask. As a result, Peter becomes convinced there is overwhelming evidence that there is no God, Jesus is not divine and Christian faith is an illusion. He remains committed to morality, but as he no longer has faith he now regards his past observance of a Christian way of life as unnecessary. Perhaps he wants to remove (so far as he can) every specifically Christian moral consideration from his mind; or perhaps he will be happy to retain some of his old values and principles but now for reasons independent of religion. Whatever he decides here, just which moral opinions would it now make sense for him to set aside? Which moral beliefs should he now revoke? Which choices might he now make differently?

Religious believers will offer a number of different answers here. Four possibilities immediately suggest themselves, though there are

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certainly others. The first is: as Peter remains a morally good person none of his moral opinions and practices need change with loss of faith. Revelation simply confirms all that natural reason grasps of morality and adds nothing extra to it. Of course, Christianity adds some new language and thoughts with which to express moral principles, narratives with which to illustrate them, Scriptural passages which exhort and motivate us towards the moral life. But Christianity provides no additional or distinctive moral principles; hence, nothing should fundamentally change in Peter's moral life. According to this position—favoured by the sort of ethical naturalist for whom God has no intrinsic relation to moral content—basic moral principles can be fully known without conscious reference to God and so are the same for believers and nonbelievers alike.

The second possibility is that although revelation adds no new fundamental moral truths, it does explain moral truths in faith-specific ways and so may well imply some different choices. On this view, revelation does not just change moral terminology: it changes our moral understanding. For example, every good person accepts principles of justice and charity towards our needy brothers and sisters, but those who accept the teachings of Christ and the Church have a different view of just who are our brothers and sisters and so a much more demanding understanding of what the duties of justice and charity entail. Similarly, most people will accept the inadequacy of revenge as a moral response to injury, but Christians believe the only morally adequate response to injury is to love enemies more and to turn the other cheek. This position typifies a natural law approach according to which there are some moral choices intelligible only to those who believe in God. On this view, Peter is free to drop commitment to certain choices which faith (which Peter has lost) suggests are entailed by fundamental moral principles (which Peter still holds).

A third position—compatible with a Christian interpretation of Kant, Christian virtue ethics and consequentialism—holds that Christianity not only implies different choices but also adds some fundamental moral truths which natural reason alone could not grasp. These truths are to be integrated with the common morality that Christians share with non-Christians. For example, in the Spiritual Blessings or Beatitudes Jesus teaches that vitally important spiritual goods (the kingdom of heaven, the promised land, divine comfort, moral fulfillment, divine mercy, the beatific vision, adoption by God) are received by those who cultivate spiritual poverty, meekness, righteousness no matter the cost, mercy, purity, peace and acceptance of persecution.[1] Position three argues that the significance of these

[1] See *Matthew* 5: 3–10.

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promises of spiritual happiness and the changes in moral attitude that accompany comprehension of them can only be grasped by believers: they exceed our natural practical grasp. Thus Christians must absorb these additional moral truths and supplement with these the common morality that they share with non-Christians. On this view, Peter is free now to ignore the Beatitudes and any other religious ethical 'accretions' to natural morality and to revert to 'mainstream' Kantianism or whatever.

A fourth position, identified with command morality in the tradition of Ockham and his contemporary followers, holds that morality is our knowledge of acts of divine will or intent. All moral truths are revealed by God, either directly to the individuals obligated or indirectly through human structures or teaching. Where 'independent' moral reason generates moral knowledge it does so because we have grasped something of God's will. On this view, loss of faith will mean that Peter's moral thinking becomes at best fragmentary and disintegrated. It may take on a nostalgic or a sentimental quality. Peter himself is likely to be increasingly puzzled about how to answer moral questions and about how much morality matters at all. His personal ethics will now be renegotiated on a non-faith basis—perhaps as social consequentialism or individual hedonism which understand ethics as the negotiated achievement of pre-moral social/psychological goods. Any elements of morality that survive from Peter's believing days will do so either because of emotional attachment or because of new, independent justification in terms of natural consequences, personal pleasures, or whatever alternatives Peter now substitutes for God.

What would St Thomas Aquinas and his followers think about Peter's post-faith moral life? Perhaps Aquinas's thought comes closest to the second of the above positions: Peter need not change his mind about any fundamental moral truth, but his understanding of these same truths will change significantly and thus it will be rational (intelligible, logical) for some of his choices to change. Such major changes in his moral life mean that Peter himself will change in important ways. Just as people of faith undergo moral conversion and not just conversion to doctrine, so people who lose their faith go through a process of moral 'reversion' which will have effects on personality and thinking.

I want to consider the relationship between faith and moral reason, virtue and moral knowledge, and divine commandments and moral certainty, and to do so with reference to Aquinas. This may shed some light on the nature of specifically Christian moral life, but I also want to keep the specific example of Peter in mind. What might happen to the morality of one who has lost Christian faith? How might we expect such a person to change morally?

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Faith and Moral Reason

Reason for Aquinas is a broad topic, but it always involves the ability to relate one idea to another so as to recognize and understand truths.[2] Someone's reason may be more or less well-formed. Well-formed reason will not grasp just any old idea vaguely in the ballpark of the subject of enquiry but will look for principles that underlie the terrain and follow these so as to move efficiently through a chain of ideas to a good conclusion. Our adherence to the most basic principles is explained by a disposition of our minds—intelligence is naturally oriented towards the final ends of rational thought and rational choice and so disposed towards the most basic rational principles. We begin each fresh piece of reasoning with a new search from such basic principles for more complex and novel truths based upon proximate principles.[3]

Moral reason or practical reason is the ability to relate specifically moral ideas to each other and to one's circumstances and options so as to make worthwhile choices.[4] Again, sound moral reason will begin with basic practical principles our adherence to which is explained by a natural disposition of our intelligence towards final ends of choice and practice. Aquinas gives an account of these basic principles which emphasizes the universality of the ends of moral reason and their embeddedness within universal human experiences, or 'natural human inclinations'.[5] The mind grasps the objects of each of these final ends as good, worth choosing. Aquinas argues these ends include self-preservation, reproduction, knowledge and social life. From this understanding of what it is worth finally doing and being the practical mind can derive more specific and principled guidance about the actual choices we should make.

Aquinas is clear that there must be a single ultimate end.[6] Desiring creatures will desire an end that satisfies all desiring (even our desiring the several final ends). Furthermore, unified human nature implies a single ultimate end and not a plurality of final ends. Moreover, it is through their relationship to this single ultimate end that the several final ends receive their common nature of finality.[7] Aquinas spends many pages debating the nature of this ultimate end. He

[2] St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1, 79, 8.

[3] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 90, 3.

[4] Germain Grisez 'The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, 1–2, Question 94, Article 2' in *Natural Law Forum* 10, 1965, 168–201.

[5] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 94, 2.

[6] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 1, 4.

[7] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 1, 5.

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establishes[8] that it is happiness, that happiness consists in (a relationship with) God and that this relationship will be both perfective and delightful.[9]

Moral reasoning, then, proceeds from basic principles directing us to seek goods which constitute final ends of choice because of their relation to the ultimate human end of a relationship with God. Whether these goods are seen as actually constitutive of the ultimate end or subordinate to it is a lively scholarly question. My question in this section is: what is the relation between faith and this account of moral reason—and so what happens to moral reason when faith is lost?

Faith is belief in God.[10] Someone who loses faith no longer believes in God and therefore no longer has seeking God as his (chosen, accepted) personal purpose in life.[11] It could, however, be argued that there is a sense in which seeking God remains the ultimate end of Peter's life. For everyone seeks complete satisfaction of all desires and this is found only in union with God—something which would be so even if there were no God (which means it is so for Peter who believes there is no God). In this sense even people who die in firm rejection of God might have seeking God as their ultimate end if they have any purposes at all: purposes are an interest in ends and ends receive their finality through their relation to the ultimate end of union with God. It would be false of course that apostates are actually choosing to seek God (as personal end), but it may not be false that they seek God (as actual end).

It is possible that since he no longer chooses God as his purpose Peter no longer chooses *any* ultimate end as his purpose. This may well be the condition of many non-religious and post-religious people. We said, however, that Peter is a good man: he is not likely to be satisfied with nihilism or randomly pursuing whichever norms happen to represent social currency or personal convenience. He will maintain a sense of purpose and so is likely to commit to an ultimate end of living a morally good life. But then, how can Peter seek God as ultimate (actual) end and also adopt as his own highest purpose a different ultimate (personal) end? Part of Aquinas's answer is that these ultimate ends are not in fact rivals.

Peter is most likely now to follow an ultimate end of 'imperfect happiness'.[12] This is not a second-rate version of the perfect

[8] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 2, 8.

[9] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 4, 1–8.

[10] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 1, 1.

[11] Here, consider Rahner on the 'anonymous Christian': the one who believes and lives much of the Gospel without realising it. See Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* Vol. 14, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 283.

[12] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 5, 5.

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happiness of knowing God, but nor is it identical to the happiness of knowing God. Rather, seeking imperfect happiness is seeking the ultimate end of happiness with God so far as a morally good and virtuous person can bring this about by his own natural efforts. It is therefore the happiness which a non-believer can actively seek. Peter's personal purpose is not the perfect happiness of the beatific vision but the attainment of such great happiness so far as that is possible through personal efforts of virtue. He may not choose union with God but what he seeks in seeking to lead a morally good life is whatever of the happiness of union with God is available to one who practises virtue without the aid of religion. In this sense seeking God and seeking a different ultimate end may be compatible.

Nevertheless, Peter's personal ethics will change in various important ways. First, Aquinas thinks that God establishes a moral law whose dictates bind us all.[13] People of faith understand adherence to this law as participation in the divine wisdom (the 'eternal law'). But of course with loss of faith, Peter will no longer understand moral law in this way. He may well continue to experience the binding force of moral law and he may still follow all the natural law precepts he formerly thought established by God,[14] but these moral standards will no longer be accepted and advocated by him as commands of divine wisdom. Morality will no longer 'order' him in the sense of placing him within a hierarchy of reason: eternal law, natural moral law, moral norms and rules, civil law and customs. This will certainly make a difference to how Peter regards fundamental morality.

Secondly, as well as denying moral law as a participation in eternal law and divine order, Peter will also renounce divine law, the law of the Scriptures and the Church; or at least he will retain only those precepts for which he can now find independent, non-religious grounding.

Aquinas teaches that divine law is necessary because human finitude means even people of good will and intelligence may fail to draw important conclusions from purely natural law, and in any case cannot draw conclusions concerning their eternal destiny. Natural practical reason only attains truth with difficulty and mixture of error. But the divine law found in Old and New Testaments contains clear and certain moral teachings that direct people towards all manner of good ends, help us to foster good inner qualities and give assurance that ultimate justice will be done to those who seem to get off scot-free on earth or to suffer undeservedly.[15] This law is founded

[13] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 91, 1.

[14] The habit of understanding the most basic practical principles, synderesis, is natural (*Summa* 1, 79, 12) and inextinguishable (*De Veritate* 16).

[15] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 91, 4; 99, 2 *ad* 2.

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on the Decalogue which confirms moral principles self-evident to human reason and provides a moral foundation from which human wisdom can draw up conclusions about necessary social practices.[16] For believers, the Decalogue is literally indispensable:[17] in this, God responds directly to the sinfulness and fallibility which hinder natural reason from sufficient moral understanding.

For Peter, presumably, the First Tablet of the Decalogue—the 'religious' Commandments—is now abandoned, while the precepts of the Second will no longer possess the authority and coherence which only the full set can give. We cannot remove the 'religious' Tablet and retain the 'social' tablet at no moral cost. The belief that God has commanded this integrated structure of piety and justice runs deep in Judeo-Christian thought and practice. To lose belief in the true God, in the duty to avoid blasphemy and idols, observe the Sabbath and show reverence to parents and elders means a huge gap in the moral life for Peter (a gap probably now part-filled with lesser gods and reverences). But it also means taking a different approach towards the ethics of violence, sexuality, property, truth-telling and justice—the ethics of the Second Tablet. As Peter's life is no longer ordered towards holiness, transcendent understanding of self and others, and the duties of reverence towards God, parents and others we must now ask: *why* do you frown on homicide, promiscuity, theft, lying and injustice? And however Peter answers, he will now struggle to find coherence and authority in his responses.

Remove the First Tablet of the Law and the whole confused and uncertain debate of modern ethics is revealed. This is not just the position of Peter; it is the position of (at least) the West. Confusion and uncertainty is apparent in social policy and political debate which is based only on intuitions about social justice. 'Do not kill' may now permit abortion or assisted suicide because of lack of reverence for the divine image; 'do not commit adultery' may permit contraception, unchastity, non-marital or same-sex relations because of loss of the notion of reverence for marriage, generation and the traditional family pattern; 'do not steal' can now become individualist protection of private property in a hungry world where affluent people feel free to make an idol of what they own or the status they have attained.

And this is not yet to consider the moral loss Peter sustains in abandoning the *New* Law. The New Law is 'chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Spirit, given through faith in Christ'—not so much a moral code or text but God the Holy Spirit communicated directly to those who believe in Jesus.[18] The New Law is the 'law of love' which promises an eternity of love for those who seek moral ends

[16] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 100, 3.
[17] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 100, 8
[18] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 106, 1.

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on earth from the motive of love of God and human persons (and not simply from lesser desires for rewards or conformity or fear of punishment).[19]

The fine details of the New Law are worked out in Christ's preaching and teaching, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount which tells us how to perform actions that promote and do not contradict inner grace and the spirit of love. Aquinas describes Christ's explanation of the moral formation of the Christian through learning to focus on goodness itself and not on externals and developing a focus on right motives and charitable thoughts, prayerful habits and commitment to the divine commandments. None of the Old Law is changed by Christ (who repeatedly confirms the Decalogue) but its full meaning is now revealed in his words and deeds.[20] The Old Testament tells us to love God and love our neighbour as our self.[21] Christ now reveals to us more fully the God we must love and reveals that our neighbour is not the one who is like us but all persons. More, Christ pushes beyond *Leviticus* and suggests a yet greater love: laying down one's life for others.[22]

Much of this Christian New Law became the 'higher' morality of the world generally speaking; morality that focuses on the inner life, the highest ideals and a sacrificial love. And of course Peter might still believe some of this New Law. You do not have to believe that Christ is divine to believe he is a uniquely wise moral teacher. Also, the time Peter spent believing in Christian morality will have enabled him to see that parts of that morality are well validated by natural moral reasons. Yet this belief will be different from believing in the New Law as the teaching of God.

A non-divine Jesus cannot draw people morally in the way those who believe he is the Son of God are drawn. However inspiring, even the best ethics teacher cannot bring about complete moral transformation of the person, or call people from sin and into repentance. Christ's ethic may be adopted as an important set of values—but this is different from dropping fishing nets, leaving family and country and following someone unconditionally all the way to martyrdom. With other moralities the words give authority to the speaker; for those who believe in Christ it is the speaker who give authority to the words. In the last analysis ethics based upon charity, purity of inner motives and the in-dwelling Holy Spirit—ethics of grace—cannot survive in a Godless world, or a Godless heart such as Peter now possesses.

[19] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 107, 1 *ad* 2.
[20] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 107, 2.
[21] *Leviticus*, 19: 18.
[22] *John*, 15: 13.

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Peter's knowledge of the most basic moral principles will not change. Furthermore, he may be searching still for the ultimate end of God, though his personally chosen purpose in life will look no higher than a life of virtue. Peter will no longer experience the obligation of the moral law as transcendent of nature and flowing from God's will. He will no longer accept the content of the Decalogue as a revealed life-ethic or the content of the New Law as divinely-given teaching on self-transformation and sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom. The operations of moral reason will continue despite loss of faith, and hopefully personal happiness will be achieved, but the moral life will be different. Reason will now be the sole source of 'commands' (to itself) and the necessary judge of all Testaments.

Virtue and Moral Knowledge

Peter's character and the quality of his mind will also undergo some changes. According to Aquinas character and mental quality are matters of grace and virtue. Ethics concerns the search for perfect happiness and grace is a divine act by which the human will is directed towards this happiness.[23] None of us is capable by our own sin-weakened efforts alone of doing even what our natures equip us for, hence the need for divine help or grace. Grace unlocks our freedom to live morally: it is by divine gift that we act freely and do not simply respond to outer and inner stimuli. Ironically, then, even a free rejection of God relies on God's goodness. God moves people towards himself touching their minds by grace but he does not drag them against their free minds. People remain free to reject God and so to lose sanctifying grace, the grace that makes the person God-worthy.

As well as receiving grace, Aquinas also believes that through the good fortune of upbringing or by our own personal efforts we can develop (cardinal) qualities of mind and character which dispose us to make wise choices for the good.[24] Not only do these cardinal virtues dispose us towards good choices: they are in themselves good states to enjoy for creatures with our complex rational-moral-emotional nature. Experiencing steady and prudent inclination towards important human goods is reassuring and enjoyable.[25] Specifically, the virtue of prudence protects our powers of reason and directs us in the extension of rationality throughout all parts of our practical lives. Meantime, justice[26] helps create, sustain and develop our relationships,

[23] Aquinas *Summa,* 1–2, 109, 5.
[24] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 61, 1–2.
[25] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 59, 2.
[26] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 58.

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and courage[27] and temperance[28] make us less likely to fear what is harmless and desire what is harmful.

Human diversity has unity through the single end to which our nature is ultimately summoned. Thus the cardinal virtues too must form a unity. Within that unity prudence has primacy as it is required for the exercise of each virtue. Virtuous life and choice mean exercising each virtue prudently, with an eye to its (and our) overall rationality and our ultimate happiness.[29] Since happiness (albeit imperfect) is Peter's ultimate end, Peter can and should continue to act prudently and thus to live virtuously.

But as well as these 'natural' cardinal virtues, Peter formerly possessed and exercised certain 'infused' virtues. For Christians possess virtues not only by their own temperaments, upbringing and efforts but also as in-flowing divine gifts.[30] For those who enjoy a personal relationship with Christ living and choosing well requires an *extension* of each cardinal virtue that cannot be developed by personal effort alone. The forms of self-sacrifice, bravery, selflessness and insight necessary for Christian life and eventual salvation have their sources squarely in God. Hence, God infuses divine levels of courage, temperance, justice and prudence in the Christian.

But not even these God-given infused virtues are sufficient to guarantee to the Christian wisdom in seeking supernatural happiness. This also requires the practise of specific virtues which are not only God-given but also God-focussed. Thus the virtues of the Christian include the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and charity.[31] With these God pours into moral personality and intelligence qualities that exceed anything we could bring about for ourselves; qualities that lead people to build a life on God (faith), to plan this life as their eternal destiny (hope) and to spread this message to others for the sake of the God who has revealed it (charity). Receiving these virtues requires no effort, but their practice requires choice and intent, though this effort of will is lessened once we begin to reap the benefits of the virtues we acquire.

Peter has lost his faith and even if this is a firm resolve on his part, it will take time for the basic cast of his mind to alter. Religious faith involves believing in God and freely assenting to this belief for the sake of God alone (and not because we have been drugged, duped, misled into believing in God). God exceeds all human comprehension, so free assent will require supernatural grace.[32]

[27] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 123.
[28] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 141.
[29] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 47, 4.
[30] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 63, 4.
[31] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 62, 3.
[32] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 6, 1.

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Peter now refuses this assent: the grace to assent is available to him but he has chosen to dissent. Faith may vanish fast, yet beliefs in some aspects of the person and message of Jesus may linger and the effects of having believed for a significant length of time will certainly persist. The position is similar with hope and charity. Hope places the believer in direct relationship with God here and now, a relationship based on willing a fuller relationship in the future. Peter has rejected union with God as a possibility for present life, so theological hope for a fuller, future version of this life will vanish, though again elements of the habit may linger.[33] And together with this loss of hope will occur loss of theological charity—the love of this hoped-for future and so the desire to communicate and share its promise with others[34] Again, natural love for some religious positions and traditions might still endure and certain habits of charity persist.

In his Encyclical Letter on Charity *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI does not discuss Aquinas. But distinguishing charity from lesser loves he writes: 'it is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love.'[35] And again: 'love of neighbour is thus shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ.'[36] Peter now has an increased risk of sentimentalizing his relationships and limiting his love to his intimates and those he likes. Natural virtue disposes us for justice and natural love but not for charity, and so not for the layers of infused and heroic love and virtue that mark out saints. Yet, as the Pope argues, where natural love or *eros* is strong and increases, the element of charity, *agape*, will re-enter this love ('*agape* enters with this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature'). Our atheist may no longer assent to or consciously observe theological charity, yet habits of charity are within his history, and his practice and experience of love will not be immune even now to his former love of God.[37]

[33] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 17, 7.

[34] Aquinas *Summa*, 2–2, 23, 1–5.

[35] *Deus Caritas Est* Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI (Sydney: St Paul's Publications, 2006), 17.

[36] *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

[37] *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

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Concerning the infused moral virtues, Peter will not have these torn out of him by God. But the forms of insight and sacrifice that made sense to him and helped him to live as a Christian will no longer interest and motivate him in the same way. The infused virtues help us to think about and choose union with God. Now, having renounced God as his final purpose, these thoughts and choices will no longer inspire Peter and these forms of virtue will soon begin to break down. Aquinas agrees with St Paul[38] that all of the infused virtues depend upon charity. It is charity that deepens and enlivens all other virtue, equipping agents for infused, supernatural ends.[39] With loss of this greatest theological virtue the non-believer will soon experience loss of such specifically Christian virtues as heroism, selflessness, perseverance and wisdom.

In Socratic tradition virtue is knowledge and vice ignorance. This seems directly relevant to the case of the theist: the virtuous Christian claims to know God, to know his will, and to possess the truth, including many truths about the moral life. One who loses faith and related virtues thus loses some knowledge. He is now blind to what was seen; he will still has the concept of divine truth but can no longer accept it. The person who loses faith no longer knows something he once knew. It is not that there is a change in the way of things or that what he had previously *believed* he knew is in fact not knowledge. The change is in him, and the change represents a genuine loss of knowledge. As with forgetting, truth remains but the knowledge has been lost. With charity, we know that universal love is possible (because God loves everyone) and that virtuous sacrifice is good (because God sacrificed his Son for us); without charity, we no longer entertain these pieces of knowledge. Losing infused virtue is not just loss of belief or change of perspective or opinion: it includes loss of some pieces of moral knowledge.

Possessors of infused virtue know that martyrdom and self-denial, alms-giving and prayer are good. When non-believers deny this is genuine knowledge and claim it is just another set of opinions how can believers respond? They can first indicate that you do not have to believe in God to have the concept of acts that are good only when understood to be based on God and not on opinion. This is a coherent philosophical option. Secondly, they can point out that the knowledge given by infused virtue is not piecemeal or random: it is part of a whole explanation of life and value. To claim that any such is 'just opinion' is just wrong. Any serious metaphysics of life is going to share at least some of the truth with whichever metaphysical story about the world turns out to be the correct one. Refuting the specifically Christian metaphysical stance is something

[38] *1 Corinthians* 13: 8–13.
[39] Aquinas *Summa*, 1–2, 65, 3–4.

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so far unthinkable, far less achieved. Believers might also point to the empirical fact that ex-believers are unlikely to say flatly that moral knowledge claims they made under infused virtue are false. They are more likely to continue to recognize good in self-denial, sacrifice, alms-giving, prayer etc—indeed, who does not? They will explain these claims differently now but that is different from believing they were plain wrong to claim knowledge here in the first place.

In more apologetic mode, it could be pointed out that (almost) all recognize Christ's life as uniquely good precisely because it is structured by these sorts of extraordinary good acts. Hence, (almost) everyone, since they acknowledge Christ's life as uniquely good, should acknowledge the virtue of these sorts of extraordinarily good acts that structure his life. Of course, even universal acknowledgement of Christian virtue would be no argument for moral knowledge, but it does decrease the likelihood that Christian positions are just another opinion. A logically compelling case for moral knowledge is a major task; but there is certainly no proof that it is impossible or mere pious hope. Peter, through his apostasy, does seem to lack some moral knowledge he formerly possessed. This is precisely how the case is described by the former believer: losing something, not gaining something.

Commandments and Moral Certainty

One thing that will definitely change for Peter is the nature of his personal moral experience. The importance of the element of command for our inner experience is a question moral theory rarely engages. Most commands—and certainly all moral commands—are rational utterances: obedience includes judging for oneself the rightness within the command, not just the fact of the command. But commands do not just appeal to our reason, for recognising a command is also recognising that the commander will not entertain or tolerate unreasonableness here. Thus commands engage the will in a way that other practical reasons do not. This can make commands irksome. But it also ensures that morality is effective and helps to clarify where we stand morally. Commands provide a measure of certainty.

Certainty too does not often get treatment in ethics today. Nevertheless, many people are intrigued by moral certainty. Some believe in it; some fear it; most would like to possess it at least some of the time. Ethics that takes salvation seriously is often particularly interested in certainty. Life cannot be entirely hunches, intuitions and grey areas if God has offered salvation and made it possible for people to achieve it. Any ethics that bases itself upon the search for a mind-independent goal will take some position on certainty. Meanwhile,

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ordinary people assert, debate and defend their own certainties, often with greater passion than they extend to other areas of morality.

Divine commandments give a particular kind of certainty. Those who believe God has communicated with us and commanded obedience of us can have absolute confidence that God's commands are to be heeded and that the purpose behind this is for the best. 'Heeding' is important. It means not only paying attention to and following instructions (as with a how-to-assemble kit) but paying close attention to the one instructing, understanding the importance of following him and making a commitment to doing so. People do not obey the commandments of their God as they obey the commands of the police. Whereas most commands are made because there is no time or need for superiors to communicate their requirements otherwise, God's commandments are made by one who is not a superior but origin and end of everything. Thus commands from God are not about us bending before a superior's will but our realizing there is literally no other way to live than as his divine will has it.

I suggested believers who lose faith may still accept the Second Tablet of the Decalogue and still acknowledge the sublime ideals of Christ's teaching, as well as many of the other commands contained within Scripture or Tradition. But to articulate these no longer as "the commandments of God" will be to lose confidence that this is an authoritative moral position secure from error and so impelling assent. Of course, losing certainty is not losing grip of moral truths. We can firmly believe it to be true that committing piracy is wrong without being certain that we are right in this belief. Does certainty then matter? I think that it matters very much. It is in terms of looking for certainty that many will describe their search for God. Morality without certainty may offer a foundation but only an impermanent one.

Is this not to sacrifice too much freedom to achieve certainty? I do not think so. Divine commandments are not orders. Because their source is divine there is reason and truth behind them; hence obedience, though it may be hard, is neither a chore nor should it ever be blind. With divine commands we meet God and are shown some of his plan and given a role in its achievement. Binding ourselves by such a command that offers certainty is far from the burden and pain of 'just obeying orders'.

Aquinas begins his *Spiritual Talks* on the commandments with the New Commandments of Christ since to love as Christ commands is also to fulfil in its entirety the Old Commandments of the Decalogue. He states that fallen man is induced by fear to avoid evil but that 'inasmuch as fear restrained the hand without curbing the mind' Christ also gives us the law of love in which people freely

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submit to the natural law.[40] Christ's commandments do more than give us overwhelming reason to obey: they change the mind. They bring about conversion to God and his law—hence the certainty and confidence of believers. Believers are people transformed. All of this will be taken from Peter, and that is a change and a loss in terms of personal moral experience.

A Culture Loses Its Faith

A culture that seems to be nearing the end of its life-cycle becomes convinced that the Christianity which it followed for centuries is false. What moral thinking and decision-making might it now wish it had done differently? What thought patterns and practices will it now repudiate and feel ashamed of or embarrassed by (colonialist, patriarchalist, superstitious, narrow-minded, oppressive . . .)? And which policies will it now surrender (justification of social institutions by the common good, solidarity with the poor and refugees, absolute protections for innocent human life, support for marriages and families in which spouses of each gender nurture the next generation, education in virtues productive of human flourishing . . .)?

Hopefully, this culture will remain in many respects a morally good culture—not one intending massacre, occupation, ethnic cleansing etc. If it remains committed to achieving good lives for its citizens, including assisting those with special needs to achieve a good life, what has actually changed in its post-Christian state? Is there any moral loss?

It would be reassuring to think that most good things would stay just the same: that atheistic humanism and enlightened benevolence would be sufficient to maintain the key institutions from the recent Christian past (rule of law, democracy, religious freedom, social welfare access for all the needy, proscription on killing, universal healthcare and education, reluctance about violence and conquest . . .) and to add too some welcome variants. But it is unlikely that having removed the foundations all central pillars will remain untouched for long.

In fact, without its Christianity our society would change considerably and surely for the worse. Moral truths will remain recognizable to individuals and groups. But *loss of faith will close the horizon of reason* to many possibilities which reason only ever grasped because of the experience and history of faith (hospitals and universal healthcare, education for all particularly in other cultures and languages,

[40] Thomas Aquinas 'The Two Precepts of Charity' in *The Commandments of God*, trans. Laurence Shapcote OP (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1937), 3.

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taxpayer support for social welfare and social reforms, protection for non-Christian religious believers and minorities).[41] Loss of the coherence of the virtues and of an education in the virtues—in particular, the classic Christian virtues of hope, faith, charity and the infused forms of justice and fortitude, moderation and wisdom—will mean a *loss of moral and spiritual knowledge* and consequent vulnerability to opinions justified by no more than the vehemence (or violence) with which they are expressed. And widespread loss of belief that the sovereign God has communicated his will in direct and unambiguous commands will mean *loss of certainty* regarding many of our social practices and institutions (marriage and family, limitations on economic activity during Sundays and holidays, protection for beginning of life and end of life, universities seeking the unity of knowledge and developing the life of the mind, religious rights of Christian believers . . .).

With loss of confidence in moral reason, decrease in moral knowledge and growth in moral uncertainty dialogue with others over morality becomes more important. But of course dialogue is meaningless to the extent we distrust reason in moral life, repudiate our moral knowledge and devalue our certainties. There is no longer anything to be open about. The possibilities for the deChristianised west are to identify ourselves explicitly as non-Christian, secular believers and enter debates seeking economic power and advantage, as liberal societies do, or seek to retain and recover our Christianity. Western societies through their major institutions are of course heavily liberalized and the result is rather pointless dialogue over moral issues with like-minded liberals or with non-western religious people whom liberals regard as less serious politically. It is hard to decide whether in this environment it would not be better to cease debate over basic morality and simply pursue specific moral issues through such means as media campaigns, PR and the rhetoric of advertising technology.

For Peter and for our societies recognition of the common moral truths will no doubt continue, even if adherence to those truths declines. But so great are the changes in the understanding of what it means to pursue these truths in the deChristianised societies that my initial premise that one who has lost the faith 'remains good' will be harder and harder to maintain. There will be extensive moral loss where faith is lost: we will understand less of our own moral tradition, acknowledge few if any moral truths and lose some precious parts of moral experience. We will then be in danger of losing not only what was specific to Christian ethics

[41] *Fides et Ratio* Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (Sydney: St Paul's Publications, 1998), 73.

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but also what was recognized as common throughout the Christian centuries.

It seems clear that attempts to 'reactivate' lapsed Catholics such as Peter and societies such as ours should focus as much on their loss of morals as their loss of faith. After all, loss of faith means no faith to build on but it need not mean no morality. When a man loses his faith he abandons God but he is highly unlikely to abandon his neighbor. That is surely relevant to projects in evangelization and catechesis.

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