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# Πίστις is said in many ways

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## Abstract

In this article, we will examine some aspects of the Greek notion of *pistis* (faith, persuasion, belief, confidence, trust, proof, etc.) in two very different fields: the religious one and the rhetorical and philosophical one. We will try to emphasize the rationality of religious *pistis* and to weaken, in a sense, the rationality of philosophical *pistis*. In short, we will try that: (1) the distinction between a rational/philosophical *pistis* (belief founded on rational arguments) and an irrational/religious *pistis* (belief founded on irrational arguments) is not valid from a theoretical point of view – and not applicable from a practical point of view; (2) the category rational/irrational is not useful to assess the epistemological status of a *pistis*/belief.

To show this, we will refer to New Testament authors and Aristotle, who in some ways can be considered as representing specimens of these two (allegedly) opposite models of *pistis*.

## Keywords

*pistis*; belief; New Testament; Aristotle; rhetoric

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we will examine some aspects of the Greek notion of πίστις in two very different fields: the religious one and the rhetorical and philosophical one. Indeed, this notion, with its multiple semantic nuances (faith, persuasion, belief, confidence, trust, proof, etc.), may represent a good starting point for analysing issues that revolve around the classical philosophical and theological topic of “believing”. These issues, which we will attempt to elaborate, all go towards eliminating – or at least mitigating – some classical dichotomies that emerge from the following questions:

- How valid from a theoretical point of view – and applicable from a practical point of view – is the distinction between a rational/philosophical πίστις (belief founded on rational arguments) and an irrational/religious πίστις (belief founded on irrational arguments)?
- Is rational/irrational a useful distinction to assess the epistemological status of a πίστις/belief?

In order to answer these questions, we have to consider two other related issues:

- How can the role played by λόγοι help us to identify the epistemological nature of πίστις?
- How theoretically justifiable and concretely clear is the opposition between faith and reason, which is one of the classical dichotomies concerning the relationship between the religious approach, on the one hand, and the philosophical approach, on the other hand? The same question can be asked in other words: how much *persuasion* is there in *faith* and how much *faith* is there in *persuasion*?<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to a traditional perspective that assumes the rational/irrational dichotomy, we will try to emphasize the rationality of religious πίστις (usually called “faith”) and to weaken, in a sense, the rationality of philosophical πίστις (which we could call “belief” or “persuasion”, as the result of an argumentative-persuasive process). In short, we will try to bring the two types of πίστις closer, trying to emphasise the very fact that, probably, they are not two distinct “types” of πίστις.

In order to show this, we will refer to New Testament authors and Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> who in some ways can be considered as representing specimens of these two (allegedly) opposite models of πίστις.<sup>3</sup>

1 It is worth noting that this question would have sounded strange for ancient Greeks, since “faith” and “persuasion” are both translations of “πίστις”. In the presentation of the project *Overcoming the Faith-Reason Opposition: Pauline Pistis in Contemporary Philosophy* carried out at Radboud University and at the University of Groningen, a similar question is asked in these words: “When we consider the religious origins of the notion of faith, is it indeed the case that it excludes every form of rationality? And when we look at philosophic accounts of reason, do they indeed exclude every form of faith?” [online available at <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/360-25-120-0>; accessed 29.10.2023]. In a sense, this article is an answer to this kind of question.

2 In particular, we consider Aristotle and not authors temporally closer to the New Testament (e.g. Stoics, Platonists), since his reflection on the πίστις – also in the light of his theory of rhetoric – seems to us more articulate and philosophically profound.

3 We are aware that there is a huge contemporary epistemological debate on this topic (e.g. Baghramian

The clue that what we are trying to do is not an obvious move is that if we use the word “persuasion” (the philosophical and rhetorical meaning *par excellence* of “πίστις”) in the religious sphere, we seem to devalue the religious dimension, likening religion to a sort of manipulation;<sup>4</sup> symmetrically, if we use the term “faith” (the religious meaning *par excellence* of “πίστις”) in the philosophical field we give the impression of devaluing the argumentative dimension of philosophical practice, giving too much space to the dimension of irrationality.<sup>5</sup>

As a final preliminary remark, it may be useful to take a quick look at the etymology of the term “πίστις”. This term is derived from the verb πείθω that probably, according to Benveniste, existed first in the middle/past form, πείθομαι.<sup>6</sup> Following Chantraine, the meaning of πείθω in the active form is “to persuade in any way, by reasoning, by prayers, by force, by money”.<sup>7</sup>

The middle/passive meaning is, obviously, “to be persuaded”, but also “to obey” and “to have confidence, trust, faith”. Then, again according to Chantraine, πίστις is the *nomen actionis* that means faith, trust that is inspired to others or that others inspire. It follows that the verb πιστεύω is derived from πίστις and means “to have trust, to believe”.

The most important aspects we derive from this etymological outline are: (1) “πίστις”, as a *name of action*, refers more to a dynamic mental state *in process* than to a final and static one; (2) the semantic field concerning the term “πίστις” moves around the notions of persuasion, belief, trust and faith without strong differences about the ways in which these states of mind are produced. These two aspects will be very useful.

## 2. The New Testament

Πίστις is probably the most important notion in the entire New Testament, the meaning of which is canonically rendered as “faith”. The number of its occurrences is just one of the elements which demonstrates the importance of this concept: we find “πίστις” 244 times, the verb “πιστεύω” 248 times and the related verb “πείθομαι” 55 times. It is

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2019 and the bibliography cited there) and, moreover, in a sense, the whole of medieval philosophy focuses on this question, starting with the relationship between faith and reason. Moreover, there are many studies on πίστις in Platonic and Aristotelian thought (e.g. Taglia 1998 and Goldin 2020 and the bibliography cited there), not to mention the conceptual changes related to the term in early Christianity (e.g. Morgan 2015 and the bibliography cited there). What we will try to do is to bring further arguments against the rigid faith/reason and, therefore, irrational/rational distinction, and we believe that the originality of our proposal also lies in the choice of texts to compare.

4 See Kinneavy (1987: p. 3).

5 See, for example, the “scandal” Kant talks about in the preface of the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, when he admits that philosophy has to accept the existence of external things *by faith*: “It always remains a *scandal* of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us (from which we after all get the whole matter for our cognitions, even for our inner sense) should have to be assumed merely *on faith*, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof”, BXXXIX, our italics.

6 Benveniste (1969).

7 Chantraine (1968–1980: p. 868).

a semantic field spread throughout the books that make up the New Testament. But the quantitative aspect does not tell the whole story: πίστις is the crucial notion in the New Testament because of its role in Christian theology since it is the “theological concept [...] that represents the correct relationship to God and ultimately the essence of the Christian religion itself”.<sup>8</sup> The same term has different nuances, not only among the different authors of the New Testament but also within any single Book. Considering this, it is clear that an analysis of πίστις in the New Testament can be rather risky. We will try to limit these risks by adopting a specific approach that is not theological, but philosophical-rhetorical. This means that we will try to analyse the New Testament as a philosophical text, at least as possible.

It should not sound strange that the texts that make up the New Testament are the subject of not only theological but also philosophical, narratological and rhetorical analysis. Several scholars<sup>9</sup> have shown that ancient philosophical thought deeply influenced some authors of the New Testament – first of all Saint Paul – and that even the lexicon was shaped by the philosophical background of these authors.<sup>10</sup>

Approaching the New Testament from a philosophical point of view presents certain problems; the first is the heterogeneity of the texts that make up the New Testament itself: there are several authors and, in some cases, the attribution of the texts is doubtful. Faced with such variability, we cannot inevitably expect the conceptual coherence we find in classical philosophical texts; however, we can find some notions common to the various authors, and the case of πίστις is one of them. It is true that the idea of πίστις reflects “different types of Christianity as well as different temperaments. But the deeper one gets into it, the more one is impressed by its deeper unity”.<sup>11</sup>

Putting these methodological issues aside and turning to the more specifically theoretical questions, we would start with a passage from Kennedy,<sup>12</sup> which emphasises the presence of two different types of language in the Bible and introduces the question of the ‘rationality’ of the religious πίστις:

Neither the Old nor the New Testament is pure sacred language in the way that the utterances of an Indian guru or a Greek oracle are. Very often, even in old parts of the Bible, something is added which seems to give a reason why the proclamation should be received and thus appeals, at least in part, to human rationality. [...] There is much use of enthymemes in the New Testament as well, though sacred language also is to be found.<sup>13</sup>

8 Barth (1993: p. 92).

9 For example, Engberg-Pedersen (2000); Thorsteinsson (2006); Van Kooten (2012); Wasserman (2008); Huttunen (2009); Agteres (2015 and 2017); van Kooten & Cimino & van der Heiden (2017); Cimino (2018).

10 See also the research project carried out at Radboud University and at the University of Groningen mentioned above.

11 Baillie (1927: p. 44).

12 Kennedy (1984).

13 Kennedy (1984: pp. 6–7).

So, according to this passage, in the New Testament, there would be, on the one hand, a model of faith/πίστις linked to a “pure sacred language”, devoid of arguments, which does not depend entirely on us accepting it or not, but, on the other hand, there is also – and this seems more interesting from a philosophical point of view – a model of faith/πίστις which depends on supporting arguments and therefore – since these arguments must be accepted (or not) by the listeners – a πίστις whose acceptance depends on the listeners themselves.<sup>14</sup>

This second model of faith/πίστις emerges clearly if one investigates the role that speeches (λόγοι) play in producing πίστις itself: it is no coincidence that in several passages of the New Testament, there is a strong connection between πίστις and listening to λόγοι, discourses;<sup>15</sup> one believes after listening to λόγοι, and one believes *precisely because* one has listened to λόγοι.<sup>16</sup>

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on/trusted (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς) him for the word (διὰ τὸν λόγον) of the woman [...] And many more believed/trusted (ἐπίστευσαν) because of his own word (διὰ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ) (Jn. 4,39.41);<sup>17</sup>

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on/trusted (περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων) me through their [the disciples] word (διὰ τοῦ λόγου) (Jn. 17,20);

14 The dependence of πίστις on good arguments is radically in opposition to the Latin formula *credo quia absurdum* – erroneously attributed to Tertullian or Augustin – which has been often considered as an iconic description of Christian faith. Against this opinion see what Joseph Ratzinger said in the General Audience on Wednesday, 21st of November 2012: “Today, in this catechesis, I would like to reflect on the reasonableness of faith in God. The Catholic Tradition, from the outset, rejected the so-called “fid-eism”, which is the desire to believe against reason. *Credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd) is not a formula that interprets the Catholic faith.” [retrieved 29.11.2023 from [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20121121.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121121.html)]. To underline the irrationality of religious πίστις, a passage from the First Epistle to the Corinthians is often quoted, which reads: “for after that in the *wisdom* (σοφία) of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the *foolishness* (μωρία) of preaching to save them that believe” (I, 21). According to some scholars, “the contrast between the *sophia* of the argumentative procedures of Greek philosophical culture and the non-reasonableness of the Christian message is here proudly declared and vindicated”, Lo Piparo (2006: p. 82). However, it seems to me that the foolishness in this passage is not the foolishness of arguments, but the scandal of Jesus’ teaching (for example “love your enemies”) which is so radically different from common beliefs as to appear foolish.

15 As Kittel rightly observes, “throughout the NT hearing is strongly emphasised, to some degree almost more so than seeing (Mk. 4:24; Mt. 11:4; 13:16; Lk. 2:20; Ac. 2:33; 1 Jn. 1:1)” (Kittel 1964: p. 219). See also Ljungman (1964: p. 78).

16 See what Kennedy says about this: “The early Church adopted the Greek word *pistis* to mean ‘Christian faith’.” In classical Greek, the meanings of *pistis* range over the spectrum of “trust, belief, persuasion”; it was, however, the word used by Aristotle for proof in rhetoric, and this usage became standard among teachers of rhetoric. The acceptance of *pistis* to mean “Christian faith” by the early Church implied at the very least that faith came from hearing speech, and provided a future opening for the acceptance of classical rhetoric within Christian discourse”, Kennedy (1999: p. 146).

17 The English translation we use is the King James Version, sometimes with some modifications.

Many of them which heard the word (τῶν ἀκουσάντων τὸν λόγον) believed/trusted (ἐπίστευσαν) (Act. 4,4).<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere this πίστις-hearing relationship is even more explicit:

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in/trusted (πιστεύσωσιν) him of whom they have not heard (οὐκ ἤκουσαν)? (Rom. 10,14);<sup>19</sup>

So then πίστις comes by preaching/hearing (ἐξ ἀκοῆς), and preaching/hearing (ἡ δὲ ἀκοή) by the word (διὰ ῥήματος) of God (Rom. 10,17).

Given this, “the use of ἀκούω and its derivatives in the NT reflects something of the significance of the Word as it is spoken and as it is to be heard in the reciprocal NT relationship between God and man”<sup>20</sup> and believing is a linguistic game, in the sense that it cannot be separated from linguistic practices, it is intertwined with λόγοι.

Besides, as we have already partially seen when analysing the semantic field revolving around “πίστις”, πίστις is (also) the result of a persuasive-argumentative process, well defined by the verb πείθω/πείθομαι. See, for example, these two significant passages from the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul’s action is explicitly described as a linguistic action aimed at persuasion:

And [Paul] reasoned (διελέγετο) in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded (ἐπειθεν) the Jews and the Greeks (Act. 18,4);

And [Paul] went into the synagogue, and spoke boldly (ἐπαρρησιάζετο) for the space of three months, disputing and persuading (διαλεγόμενος καὶ πείθων) the things concerning the kingdom of God (Act. 19,8).

Similar to the relationship between λόγοι and πίστις is that between λόγοι and πείθω, the action of persuading. This λόγος-πείθω-πίστις connection (which in another context, the rhetorical one, would seem completely obvious), allows us to underline an aspect on which there is some ambiguity, namely the idea that πίστις is just a sort of gift received by grace that in a certain sense removes responsibility from the individual: on the contrary, the decision-making role and responsibility of every human being seems to be decisive.<sup>21</sup>

18 As observed by O’Reilly (1987: p. 196), “faith in the Acts of the Apostles always involves a prior hearing and acceptance of the word”.

19 Barth (1993: p. 95) rightly observes that, in Paul, “faith always comes from the word itself”.

20 Kittel (1964: p. 216).

21 Within that framing according to which there are three ways to understand faith – as a gift from God, as an autonomous choice determined by human freedom and as a result of a process of knowledge – it is this last aspect that we want underline. Ferretti proposes an overcoming of this paradigm and makes some attempts. In any case, both within this paradigm and in the explanatory models that try to overcome it, it remains the aspect of an “argued” faith, supported “by the knowledge of the reasons (for example miracles or prophecies) that make credible the testimony of those who affirm that God spoke or revealed

After all, as Kinneavy observes, “because the term *pistis* (and related terms) are etymologically related to the concept of persuasion and because the term was in widespread use at the time in the sense of rhetorical persuasion, it is not surprising that the religious concept of persuasion should borrow the secular term *pistis*”.<sup>22</sup>

If we take a look at John’s Gospel in particular, we find an even stronger analogy with rhetorical/philosophical tradition: like in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, what produces πίστις – or, at least, can play a decisive role in producing πίστις – is not only λόγοι but also σημεῖα, signs,<sup>23</sup> exactly the term John uses to identify miracles:<sup>24</sup>

This beginning of signs (τῶν σημείων) did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on/trusted (ἐπίστευσαν) him (Jn. 2,11);<sup>25</sup> When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said (ἔλεγεν) this unto them; and they believed/trusted (ἐπίστευσαν) the scripture, and the word (τῷ λόγῳ) which Jesus had said (εἶπεν) (Jn. 2,22);

And many other signs (σημεῖα) truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written (γέγραπται), that you might believe (πιστεύητε) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing/trusting (πιστεύοντες) you might have life through his name (Jn. 20,30,31).

But λόγοι and σημεῖα do not *necessarily* produce πίστις: in any self-respecting persuasive process – which aims to produce or modify a certain πίστις – free adherence is a necessary condition, and it is precisely free adherence that constantly persists in the case of religious faith, which does not impose itself irrespective of acceptance by the potential believer. This sounds clear in the following passages:

And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned (διελέξατο) with them out of the scriptures [...]. And some of them were persuaded (τινες ἐξ αὐτῶν ἐπεισθησαν), and consorted with Paul and Silas (Act. 17,2,4);

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himself about this or that truth [...]. According to St. Thomas, the object of faith is not “seen”, otherwise there would be no more “faith”; however, it can also be said that in some way it is “seen”, since its “credibility” is seen”, Ferretti (1997: p. 452). What Sztanyo writes in this regard is also interesting: “Biblically speaking, one does not believe that God is (or any other item to be accepted “by faith”): (1) against the evidence; (2) without evidence; or (3) beyond the evidence. Rather, one believes on the basis of evidence sufficient to establish the conclusion”, Sztanyo (1996: p. 3).

22 Kinneavy (1987: p. 104). It is worth noting, as Van Kooten does, that “when this terminology occurs in early Christian texts it is usually rendered in a “fideistic” way as “belief” and “to believe”. Translations of the same terminology in ancient philosophical texts, however, acquire a broad variety of meanings. The undesirable result is that early Christian sources have become disconnected from their natural habitat in the ancient world at large” Van Kooten (2012: p. 216).

23 Charlier (1959: p. 437).

24 In the other Gospels the usual term for “miracle” is “δύναμις”, “power”.

25 It is worth noting that the Greek term translated as “glory” is “δόξα”, which is another crucial term (and notion) in the philosophical and rhetorical tradition, where it is usually translated as “opinion” or – more similar to “glory” – “reputation”.



He expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading (πειθων) them concerning Jesus [...]. And some were persuaded (οἱ μὲν ἐπειθοῦντο) by the things which were spoken (τοῖς λεγομένοις), and some didn't believe/trust (οἱ δὲ ἠπίστουν) (Act. 28,23.24).

In this last passage, Paul is trying to persuade the Jews and the contrast between πείθομαι on the one hand (which therefore implies a πιστεύω) and ἀπιστέω on the other is significant.<sup>26</sup> Faith arises (or rather, can arise) from persuasion, which is an essentially and deeply discursive process.

In some cases, not even miracles produce conversion and this provokes the irritation of Jesus Christ:

Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they did not convert (οὐ μετενόησαν) (Mt. 11, 20).

“Having πίστις”, and then, “πιστεύω”, “believing”, always implies a kind of “πείθομαι”, “being persuaded” but also “trusting”.

### 3. The Aristotelian corpus

If up to now we have tried to show the side of rationality – or perhaps better reasonableness – of the religious πίστις, we will now try to perform the opposite operation, that is to underline the fideistic aspect of the philosophical-rhetorical πίστις. To do so, we will quote a passage from the first book of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that seems to us illuminating in order to grasp the very nature of this type of πίστις:

We most believe/trust (πιστεύομεν) when we suppose/accept (ὑπολάβωμεν) a thing to have been demonstrated (Rh. 1355a 5–6).<sup>27</sup>

Far from saying that only the demonstrations persuade – and, then, produce or modify the beliefs – marking a rigid boundary between a “good” persuasion resulting from demonstrations and a “bad” persuasion, so to speak, irrational, Aristotle says something more complex and theoretically interesting: indeed, not that the demonstrations persuade, but that it is what *we accept* as demonstrations (it would be better to say “good arguments”) that persuades.

In this way, the listener – who is the *judge* of the arguments – is the author of his own belief, so the role of the argumentation in itself and, to a certain extent, that of the arguer diminish radically.<sup>28</sup>

26 Kinneavy (1987: pp. 103–104).

27 All the translations from Aristotle's works are ours. For a deeper analysis of this passage and its implications in the Aristotelian framework of belief, see Di Piazza (2012).

28 An author whose reflections we will also use later and who, in many ways surprisingly, has interesting consonances with Aristotelian thought, is Wittgenstein, in particular his thoughts in *On Certainty*, which

The meaning of this passage becomes clearer if we consider, first of all, the context in which arguments aimed at constructing, modifying or consolidating beliefs take place: when do we feel we have to offer arguments? When do we play the game of argumentation and persuasion?

According to the Aristotelian perspective, we do this when we deal with what can be otherwise (τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἔχειν), that is, when there are no ultimate and definitive truths, where there is – at least in principle – always room for counter-arguments. For Aristotle, this is the space of rhetoric (that is why we use the expression “rhetorical-philosophical πίστις”) and this is the kind of belief we are interested in.

The other crucial aspect we have to take into account concerns, first of all, the features of the assumptions of the arguments. When we argue – and when we want to produce or modify a belief – we always start, more or less explicitly, from what Aristotle calls ἔνδοξα, premises mostly shared by members of a community, which have a δόξα, a reputation within that community. These ἔνδοξα, therefore, have at least three important characteristics: they are mostly accepted by the interlocutors; they can only be questioned at the cost of subverting beliefs belonging to the common sense of that community; they do not have to be argued, but the interlocutors, in a sense, *trust* them.

What is even more interesting in the Aristotelian perspective is that the trust in the premises is not limited only to the *endoxal* premises of argumentation (which deals with what can be otherwise), but also concerns the premises of the demonstration in the strong sense, the ἀπόδειξις, which produces ἐπιστήμη:

The demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) proceeds from what is more trustworthy (ἐκ πιστοτέρων) and prior (Pr. An. 64b 32–33);

So since we know and trust/believe (πιστεύομεν) by the primary premises, we know and trust/believe (πιστεύομεν) more them, because our knowledge of the latter is the effect of our knowledge of the premises. [...] A man must believe in/trust (πιστεύειν) some, if not in all, of the basic truths more than in the conclusion. [...] For those who want to get science (τὸν δὲ μέλλοντα ἔξειν τὴν ἐπιστήμην) nothing must be more trustworthy (πιστότερον) or better known, since it is necessary that we have unshakable trust (ἀμετάπειστον) about what is known in an absolute way (τὸν ἐπιστάμενον ἀπλῶς) (Post. An. 72a 31–72b 5);

Indeed, when someone trusts (πιστεύη) and the first principles are known to him, he has ἐπιστήμη (ἐπίσταται) (EN 1139b 33–34).

Therefore, even the ἀπόδειξις – and then also the ἐπιστήμη – needs the πίστις/trust, an original believing that is itself not further founded; a *strong* demonstration is possible if

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collects the last notes of his life. See, for example, the extraordinary analogy between the Aristotle's passage we cited above and the paragraph 196: “Sure evidence is what we *accept* (*annehmen*) as sure, it is evidence that we go by in *acting* (*handeln*) surely, acting without any doubt”, *OC*: § 196.

we base our reasoning on something that cannot be furtherly demonstrated but that we trust: πίστις is a sort of *condicio sine qua non* for any form of believing.<sup>29</sup>

But let us go back to the ἔνδοξα. On the whole, just as in philosophical-rhetorical beliefs, there are unfounded assumptions that cannot be argued further, something similar happens with religious beliefs, at least according to the New Testament. Kennedy sums it up very clearly:

Matthew and Paul make extensive use of the forms of logical argument, but the validity of their arguments is entirely dependent on their assumptions, which cannot be logically and objectively proved. To a nonbeliever, they may seem totally invalid, but much the same might be said of the arguments of a democratic political speaker in the eyes of a person who does not believe in democracy.<sup>30</sup>

Here Kennedy tackles a crucial issue: the arguments at stake in the New Testament are not fallacious from a logical point of view, but they are based on assumptions, ἔνδοξα in Aristotelian terms, that may not be acceptable by nonbelievers .

In a sense, as it is implicit in Kennedy's example, we should keep in mind two aspects:

- the acceptance of hypotheses is not always arguable in turn;
- πίστις is the result of discourses and, more precisely, of argued discourses that seem to be consistent with the starting assumptions, as much in the field of politics and ethics<sup>31</sup> (but we could extend and say, again, of the philosophical-rhetorical field) as in the religious field.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. The nature of πίστις

There is a crucial aspect to clarify, which concerns the *nature* of πίστις, both religious and rhetorical-philosophical.

29 There is, again, an interesting analogy with Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* that we cannot explore in depth here and now. We simply quote three paragraphs that are in perfect unison with the Aristotelian perspective we have just described: "Must I not begin to trust (*trauen*) somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging" (*OC*: § 150); "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded (*der unbegründete Glaube*)" (*OC*: § 253); "Of course *learning* (*lernen*) is based on believing (*glauben*)" (*OC*: § 170).

30 Kennedy (1984: pp. 17–18).

31 The issue of trust in these fields has been a hot topic for several years now. For reasons of space we do not enter into this debate.

32 This is another insight we can find, again, in Wittgenstein: there is an interesting paragraph in *On Certainty* – where the example concerns just a religious belief – in which the Austrian philosopher asserts that the reasonableness of the belief depends on the sharing (on the *endoxality*, we could say with Aristotle) of the presuppositions: "But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa. But is there no objective character here? *Very* intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former" (*OC*: § 336).

The first point is that πίστις is actually, as we have seen, the effect of speeches and arguments that, in turn, are based on a trust basis and, ultimately, on a more radical and *naked* form of πίστις/trust.

The other key-point, connected to the first one, is to imagine the πίστις not as a static state of mind, but as a dynamic one.<sup>33</sup>

This dynamism has to be meant at least in a threefold way:

- Firstly, πίστις is dynamic because it is always potentially subject to change, it is constitutively unstable, even in the religious sphere where it is usually considered extremely solid or even unwavering (just think, for example, of the cases of conversions, ἐπιστρέφω and μετανοέω in the New Testament Greek).
- Secondly, πίστις is dynamic because it is never a single discrete unit, but is an aggregate of πίστεις, forms a system with other beliefs, and a system cannot but be dynamic, since it admits of continuous fluctuations.
- Thirdly, πίστις is dynamic because it can have varying degrees of saturation. It is not a solid, compact state of mind, not even in the religious sphere. It is a porous state of mind.

It is no coincidence that there are several passages in the New Testament where we read that πίστις/faith grows and decreases or – more generally – is subject to change:<sup>34</sup>

And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith (Πρόσθεε ἡμῖν πίστιν) (Lk. 17,5);

But having hope, when your faith is increased (αὐξανομένης τῆς πίστεως), that we shall be enlarged by you according to our rule abundantly (II Cor. 10,15);

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth (ὑπεραυξάνει ἡ πίστις) exceedingly (II Thess. 1,3).

In everyday life we experience beliefs with a different degree of saturation: there is the faith that we define as “unwavering”, but there is also the kind of belief, for example, “I don’t believe in ghosts, however...”, which instead of being a “non-belief”, actually presupposes a – albeit minimal – dose of belief.<sup>35</sup>

How can we evaluate the solidity and the degree of saturation of a belief? It seems to me that the solidity of a belief can be measured by the degree of negotiability that that belief has for us: the less negotiable a belief is for us, the more we live according to it and feel it as unshakable.<sup>36</sup>

33 See Vecchio (2020). The sense of dynamism is grammatically expressed by the fact that the term “πίστις” is a *nomen actionis*.

34 See Kinneavy (1987: pp. 123–124); Barth (1993: p. 95).

35 This question is in some way connected to that of the so called “alief”.

36 There is an interesting clash when there is a “fact” that contradicts beliefs we consider unshakable: what do we save, the facts or the beliefs? The less *hard* the facts are, the more room there is for renegotiation. But this is too vast a topic to be addressed here and now.

And when, on the other hand, are we less willing to negotiate a belief or, better still, a network of beliefs? The more this belief structures our existence – or, as Wittgenstein puts it, the more this belief is a *hinge* for our entire belief system – the less willing we are to question it.

And it is not by chance, after all, that religious beliefs are often characterized by a peculiar solidity, because in a certain sense they are – we use it in the mathematical sense – extremely *powerful*, they can explain many things of our life: believing that it will rain tomorrow concerns merely my buying an umbrella or not; a religious belief, ultimately, concerns salvation because “the believer is staking his life”.<sup>37</sup>

Another possible question arises: what pushes us, then, to embrace a belief? What makes us accept – to go back to Aristotle’s questions – an argument as a “good argument” such as to produce a belief in us? We propose, very schematically,<sup>38</sup> at least four aspects – which take up the famous Aristotelian triad, ἔθος, πάθος and λόγος – that we consider decisive:

- The degree of “endoxality” of the premises and of conclusions and the logical relationship between them;
- The coherence of the argument with our system of beliefs;
- The kind of πάθος it can arouse;
- The ἔθος of the speaker.<sup>39</sup>

What we want to underline here is just that in this schema – which is valid both for the rhetorical-philosophical πίστις and for the religious one – these elements are not all, traditionally speaking, rational.

## 5. Some consequences

What has been said so far implies several interesting consequences. Firstly, we have seen that every belief – considered as the result of arguments (λόγοι) imbued with ἔθος and πάθος – in turn originates from a foundation that is not further justified; or, to say it

37 Natoli (2016: p. 156).

38 For more details, see, again, Di Piazza (2012).

39 The crucial role played by ἔθος in persuasion and the construction of beliefs according to the Aristotelian framework is masterfully explained by Eugene Garver (1994: p. 17), who defines ἔθος as the shadow of the λόγος, in the sense that we cannot imagine a λόγος without an ἔθος, which, therefore, always plays a role in terms of persuasion. It is worth quoting just this passage from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: “[There is persuasion] through character (ἔθος) whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker *trustworthy* (ἀξιόπιστος). We trust good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally *whatever the question is*, and absolutely true where *exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided*” (*Rh.* 1356a 4–10). It is also interesting to notice that Jesus Christ is sometimes defined as πιστός, whose more appropriate translation seems to be not “faithful” (as we usually find) but “trustworthy” (*2 Thess. 3,3; 2 Tim. 2,13; Hebr. 2,17*): the speeches (λόγοι) and miracles (σημεῖα) that he provides, make him reliable, and this is one of the reasons why his arguments appear to be convincing and persuasive.

in Wittgenstein's words, "at the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded" (*OC*: § 253).<sup>40</sup>

Considering this, we can question a distinction that has been analysed by many authors – not least Kant or Wittgenstein himself – namely the distinction between "knowing" and "believing".<sup>41</sup> According to this distinction, you can say "to know" when you find supporting arguments, when you justify your knowledge; whereas you can say "to believe" when you do not find any other supporting arguments.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the *fideistic* aspect of the non-religious πίστις (the rhetorical-philosophical one) stems above all from the fact that all "knowing", ultimately, is rooted in a "believing", or that every πίστις/belief-knowledge is always rooted in a πίστις/faith-trust.

But perhaps we can go a bit further and question the distinction "unjustified believing" vs "justified knowing" for several reasons:

- firstly, it is a distinction to be questioned because a knowledge, a πίστις/belief, in any case must always be rooted into a πίστις/faith that is unjustified – it is in a sense its continuation;
- secondly, this distinction does not quite work because human beings never quite know what an argument or justification is and – what is even more complicated – what is a *good* argument that should support and justify knowledge, the πίστις/belief. What seems like an argument or justification to someone is not always an argument or justification to someone else. We can also consider the issue from the point of view of the person who changes his own beliefs, not just from the point of view of the person who wants to change the beliefs of others: to what extent will he be able to argue his change of belief? Perhaps, in turn, he will persuade himself – in a game of mirrors – that it is the arguments that convince him and thus, in retrospect, justify his own beliefs;
- thirdly, this distinction does not work because we always believe in a *nest of propositions* (Wittgenstein, *OC*: § 225) and we always have to deal with a network of justifications, more or less explicit, more or less transparent to ourselves, some of which often have a fiduciary/fideistic nature; they are "acts of faith", which our interlocutor – especially if he belongs to another community with which we come into contact – is not required to believe too.

*Knowing*, therefore, always deals with *believing*, πίστις/faith always deals with πίστις/belief-knowledge, so the opposition between faith and reason does not seem fully justified and the dichotomy rational/irrational does not seem a useful distinction to assess the

40 Again, for reasons of space, we will not give an account of the contemporary literature on the epistemology of belief, which has produced an enormous amount of articles and books. We will only use Wittgenstein's *On certainty* as an *ad hoc* support for our arguments.

41 For example, "in Kantian philosophy [...] belief, as the characteristic of religion, became opposed to knowledge, as the hall-mark of philosophy" van Kooten (2012: p. 215). On this topic what Augustine writes in *De doctrina christiana* and *De Magistro* is also very interesting. On this point see Vecchio (2020).

42 In this strange interweaving, therefore, "faith/trust" would concern the "believing", while "belief/knowledge" would concern the "knowing".

epistemological status of a πίστις.

Indeed, is it possible to say that the supposed rationality of a πίστις is given by the fact that there are arguments to support that πίστις? We do not think so. Firstly, because we often delude ourselves we have *inter-subjectively* valid arguments, but we may have difficulty fully distinguishing whether our state of mind is faith/trust or belief/knowledge: a *believing* or a *knowing*.

After all, the existence of radical and deep disagreement and, often, of irreducible conflict should make us reflect: often, even when we believe we have very strong and indisputable arguments at our disposal, our interlocutor remains impervious to such arguments, evidently because he does not consider them to be *true* and *good* arguments. Neither can we appeal too easily to some alleged incapacity of our interlocutor to grasp the goodness of our arguments.

It is for these reasons that it seems almost mysterious that we are sometimes able to produce (or achieve) a *radical* change in beliefs. See, for example, what Chantal Mouffe says about radical changes in political opinions:

To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion (in the same way as Thomas Kuhn has argued that adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a conversion).<sup>43</sup>

Wittgenstein says something similar when he refers to the changes of belief represented by the hinge propositions (but we believe that what Wittgenstein says can also be applied, to a lesser extent, to all other beliefs):

I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, – but wouldn’t I give him reasons (Gründe)? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion (Überredung). (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives) (OC: § 612).<sup>44</sup>

Which *reasons* (*Grund*) exactly can we provide? Unfortunately, we do not have always good grounds (*Grund*) and, in any case, we cannot *decide* what is a good ground. Wittgenstein, again, is illuminating:

I cannot say that I have good grounds (Gründe) for the opinion that cats do not grow on trees or that I had a father and a mother (OC: § 282);

What is a telling ground (Grund) for something is not anything I decide (OC: § 271).

43 Mouffe (2000: p. 102). See also Serra (2017).

44 It should be noted that Wittgenstein is using the word “persuasion” (Überredung) and not “conviction” (Überzeugung) in this passage, with all the differences there are in German between these two words. On this point see Di Piazza (2021).



## 6. Conclusions

In the light of what we have said, the definition of πίστις we find in *Hebrews* 11,1 becomes clearer: “proof (ἔλεγχος) of what we do not see”. This is valid both for religious faith and for philosophical/rhetorical belief: whenever we believe, there is always something we cannot see, cannot perceive, and must trust. Thus, it is also easier to understand why one of the meanings of πείθωμαι – a verb connected with πίστις – is to obey: πίστις implies obedience, because believing suggests always putting oneself in the hands of someone or something we cannot see, we cannot control completely, and, in a certain way, we obey.

Every trust, every belief, every faith is open to the future and admits risk: in belief there is always hope,<sup>45</sup> but also, with Kierkegaard, fear and trembling. As Simmel says, “someone who knows all need not trust, someone who knows nothing cannot reasonably trust at all”.<sup>46</sup>

Does this approach lead to an uncontrolled relativist drift? It is a risk but it is worth taking. There are some, albeit weak and fallible, curbs to this possible drift: an argument must *prove to pay*, i.e. it must *work*. Wittgenstein again:

And can it now be said: we accord credence in this way because it has proved to pay (es sich so bewährt hat)? (OC: § 170);

I am taught that under such circumstances this happens. It has been discovered by making the experiment a few times. Not that that would prove anything to us, if it weren't that this experience was surrounded by others which combine with it to form a system. Thus, people did not make experiments just about falling bodies but also about air resistance and all sorts of other things.

But in the end I rely on these experiences, or on the reports of them, I feel no scruples about ordering my own activities in accordance with them. – But hasn't this trust also proved itself? So far as I can judge – yes (OC: § 603).

Consequently, if an argument works at a certain time and within a certain community, it does not mean that it works at all times and in all places. In any case, it must prove to pay within a belief system, without considering this specific belief system to be the good one or not. Perhaps this is not a great achievement, but it is probably the most we can aspire to, given the specific *nature* of the human being.

45 On the relationship between faith and hope in New Testament see Paul, *Rom.* 4.18.

46 Simmel (2009: p. 315).



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