Aquino argues that a good account of the rational acceptability of Christian belief can be built by re-situating John Henry Newman’s account of the illative sense in a distinctive naturalized, socialized, pluralized religious epistemology.

The argument begins with an analysis of Newman’s *University Sermons*. Here “wisdom” is seen as a “spiritual gift” through which believers can recognize prejudice and shallowness in formulations and exercises of religious faith. More positively, a wise person may have a simple faith (a consent to revelation) developed in a faith community, or a more reasoned faith more characteristic of apologists and educators than of ordinary believers. Yet a wise person may be either simple or sophisticated. The former may seem fideist, the latter evidentialist, but the latter is simply a development of the former for those believers with “rational” responsibilities. One recognizes wise persons not by their ability to make rational arguments as a foundation for their faith or by the intensity of their commitment, but by their growth in knowledge and moral sense. The early Newman is, in effect, a non-foundationalist in religious epistemology. Yet further analysis is needed especially regarding three issues: how wisdom is acquired in everyday (including religious) contexts, the possibility of reasonable certitude (recall Leibniz’s ditch), and how religious belief can be justified in a way that does not rely merely on internal communal standards (cf. 47).

The argument then moves to Newman’s mature and difficult work, *The Grammar of Assent*. The questions the Grammar seeks to answer are, “Is Christian belief rationally acceptable without explicit awareness of how the mind understands claims of faith and without epistemic access to how the mind justifies knowledge?” (50). In the Grammar, Newman does not lay out the formal conditions for giving assent to claims, but a number of “real world” descriptions of the operations of the mind. Following the Grammar, Aquino distinguishes between apprehension (of a thing or a proposition)
and inference, between real and notional assent, and between religion and theology. One gives real assent to the things of faith, but notional assent to the propositions of theology (56). Certitude in real assent is not reached by demonstration or inference, but by the exercise of the illative sense (Aristotle’s *phronesis*, Aquinas’s *prudentia*). One may retrospectively develop justifications for such assent, but those justifications apply more to one’s notional assent and are not foundations for one’s real assents. The illative sense also assesses first principles of a practice and functions to guide the conduct of argument by judicious appraisal of what counts as evidence (77). A wise person, then, may be simple, but comes to certitude by a personally grounded act of judgment that proceeds in accordance with the contextually appropriate belief-forming processes based in praiseworthy dispositions or epistemic virtues (cataloged 118-19) crowned by the illative sense. Agreeing with Linda Zagzebski, Aquino finds that there are close connections between moral theory and epistemology, including religious epistemology (123). Newman, rightly understood, has replies to the first two sorts of objections.

If one cultivates the illative sense in a community as one cultivates one’s moral sense in a community, how can relativism be avoided, especially if one’s religious assents are made by the illative sense as formed in one particular religious community? Aquino finds that the religious community is not an isolated group. One’s illative sense is formed in various everyday engagements, including religious ones. Moving to more contemporary epistemological work, Aquino develops the notion (implicit in Newman?) that communities of informed judgment shape the judgment of their members. He harvests insights from various commentators to describe “truth-conduciveness, good epistemic practices, and willingness to consult others” as necessary constituent of reliable belief-forming processes (152). Theological reasoning is part of this process. The possibility of fideism or relativism is countered by the range of others one is willing to consult. In theology, as in every other discipline, one has to cultivate good habits of the mind.

Aquino here sketches a plausible vision of a theological epistemology for those inclined both to accept socialized epistemology with a focus on the virtues and to appreciate the complex insights of Newman. Both his exposition and his “updating” of Newman are plausible and interesting. He acknowledges and argues against, fairly successfully, the problem of promoting a basically descriptive account of belief-forming processes to normative status. He has a way to counter arguments that suggest this approach is so personalist as to be individualist or so communal as to be relativist, at least at the theological level.

One problem is that he does not clearly distinguish between “naturally” acquired belief-forming processes and “learned” belief-forming methods. His argument mostly ignores the latter. But his argument is pointed to validating theological claims rather than religious faith. As faith is to apprehend the real (and its assents rooted in processes) and theology is to apprehend and infer the notional (and its assents are rooted both in religious faith and disciplinary methods), it is not clear that he has quite accomplished either. Religious faith is developed in a culture where there are multiple faiths, multiple wisdom traditions, and multiple first principles. Unless one assumes privileged access for one community of informed judgment, then there is more work to do to flesh out the right processes for coming to religious judgment in a pluralistic world. There is also more to be done in working out reliable methods in theology: