

A Personal Jesus and Nonpublic Knowledge

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Thesis. If Christians truly enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus, we should observe robust markers of privileged access—namely consistent nonpublic knowledge, reciprocal communication, and externally verifiable interaction; their persistent absence strongly favors psychological over relational explanations.

This paper critically examines the Christian claim of a “personal relationship with Jesus” by applying evidential standards drawn from ordinary human relationships. Genuine personal ties typically exhibit nonpublic knowledge (inside information, private memories, predictive or insider insight), two-way communication responsive to context, and mutual influence open to third-party corroboration. We outline concrete evidential profiles that would substantiate the relationship hypothesis: preregistered predictive hits exceeding chance under controls; discovery of artifacts or texts otherwise unknown; and convergent private revelations about specific, previously undisclosed details. We then survey the record and find these markers conspicuously absent in practice. Where specific predictions are offered, they tend toward vagueness, post hoc fitting, or selective reporting; where guidance is claimed, no archaeological or textual discoveries materialize; where revelations are alleged, they diverge along cultural and denominational lines rather than converging on common, testable content (Alston, 1991; Hick, 1989; McKim, 2001). We further assess theological defenses—faith over evidence, the sufficiency of scripture, appeals to spiritual sensations, divine omniscience, mystery, and transformation—and argue that each substitutes subjective

or unfalsifiable criteria for the outward-facing markers typical of real relationships. The psychology and neuroscience of religion readily account for the phenomenology of presence and transformation without invoking a specific external interlocutor (Barrett, 2004; Hood et al., 2009; Luhrmann, 2012; Newberg & d'Aquili, 2008). A likelihoodist appraisal concludes that the observed profile—strong affect with low specificity, denominational divergence, and lack of privileged access—is well predicted by naturalistic accounts (Dennett, 2006; Earman, 2000; Oppy, 2013).

Opening Narrative

Imagine a close friend. Ask them for a detail that only true intimacy would make available: an inside joke, a private episode, or unreleased plans. In ordinary life, such relationships routinely produce *nonpublic knowledge*. Now compare this baseline with the Christian claim of a “personal relationship with Jesus.” When pressed for privileged information, believers reliably offer public scripture or subjective impressions. The evidential mismatch—relationship language without relational yield—demands explanation (Alston, 1991; James, 1902). If a communicatively unconstrained agent were engaged in reciprocal fellowship, why is there no reproducible trail of privileged access? Emotional assurance is not yet interpersonal evidence; it is, at best, a hypothesis that still requires external confirmation (Kahneman, 2011).

Core Evidence & Analysis

Relational Baseline: Privileged Access

In genuine human relationships, privileged access is near universal: confidences, distinctive memories, insider knowledge. This pattern gives us a neutral test. If Christians enjoy ongoing fellowship with a living Jesus, at least some cases should yield confirmable nonpublic knowledge. Yet systematic searches produce no reproducible instances: what is offered is either (a) already public, (b) too vague to test, or (c) post hoc interpretation

(Alston, 1991; McKim, 2001).

Artifact Guidance and Discovery

A powerful class of evidence would be discovery guided by the alleged interlocutor: the location of an unknown document, inscription, or site. Religious movements that traffic in strong empirical claims accrue credibility when predictions *hit* new data (Hick, 1989). Christianity's personal-relationship rhetoric has not generated verifiable archaeological leads attributable to private revelation.

Convergent Private Revelations

Independent agreement on specific, previously unknown details would sharply raise likelihood under the relationship hypothesis. Instead, purported revelations map local theology and culture, showing divergence rather than convergence (Barrett, 2004; Webb, 2011). This pattern tracks cognitive expectations more than an external source.

Predictive Accuracy Under Control

Low-prior hypotheses demand strong predictive confirmation (Earman, 2000). Prophetic claims subjected to preregistration, clear scoring rules, and blinding have not produced above-chance accuracy. Known mechanisms—ambiguity, hindsight, and selective reporting—suffice to explain apparent successes (Hyman, 1989; Wiseman et al., 2005).

Affective Phenomenology Without Specificity

Believers cite peace, joy, conviction, or a “still small voice.” Yet affective states are inducible through ritual, expectation, and communal reinforcement and are widely reported across traditions (Hood et al., 2009; Luhrmann, 2012). Neuroscientific work shows characteristic activation patterns during intense devotional practice, but such findings underwrite *capacity* for experience, not contact with a specific agent (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2008). Thus the phenomenology lacks the *specificity* needed to pick out Jesus over non-Christian comparators.

Divergence and Loss of Distinctiveness

If a robust, externally guided relationship were common, we would expect cross-tradition consistency in content. Instead, traditions emphasize different modalities (scripture alone vs. sacrament vs. inner voice), undermining claims to a shared external interlocutor (McKim, 2001; Norenzayan, 2013).

Formal Likelihood Sketch

Let H_R be the hypothesis that believers stand in a genuine reciprocal relationship with Jesus, and H_N the hypothesis that reported experiences are naturalistic psychological phenomena. Let E denote the accumulated results of tests for privileged access. Then the likelihood ratio is

$$LR = \frac{P(E \mid H_R)}{P(E \mid H_N)}. \quad (1)$$

Annotation: If H_R predicts even a modest base-rate of accurate privileged access, the persistent absence of hits forces $LR \ll 1$, making H_N the better supported hypothesis. Null results accumulate weight against H_R , whereas they are fully expected under H_N .

Counterarguments & Responses

Faith, Not Evidence. Trust is not groundless even in ordinary life; it is *licensed* by prior reliability. Absent confirmatory markers, “faith as relationship” offers no discriminator between veridical contact and projection (Plantinga, 2000).

Scripture as Sufficient Revelation. Public texts can shape devotion but do not constitute two-way relationship. Reading a detailed biography of Lincoln differs categorically from conversing with Lincoln. If the claim is *personal* relationship, private markers are the relevant evidence (McKim, 2001).

Spiritual Sensations as Evidence. Affective states are not veridical indicators of an external agent and are elicitable via natural means; if feelings suffice, parity considerations extend comparable weight to non-Christian traditions (Dennett, 2006; Hood et al., 2009).

Omniscience and Human Limits. Greater knowledge does not hinder, but rather enables, graded communication. An omniscient agent could trivially share modest, testable insights without overwhelming finite minds (Swinburne, 1998).

Divine Mystery. Mystery may preserve devotion, not provide evidence. In human analogs, the perpetually absent, uncommunicative partner cannot cite mystery as proof of intimacy (Hick, 1989).

Transformation as a Substitute. Transformative effects occur across literature, therapy, meditation, and non-Christian devotion; they are *non-unique* and therefore cannot by themselves indicate a specific external agent (Dennett, 2006; Oppy, 2013).

Direct Engagement with Alston, Plantinga, and Swinburne

Alston's model of "doxastic practices" argues that religious experience can confer *prima facie* justification if it arises from a socially established practice of forming beliefs (Alston, 1991). Yet the decisive absence of convergent, specific nonpublic knowledge undercuts the reliability condition: a practice that produces no confirmable hits cannot confer warrant.

Plantinga's claim that belief in God may be "properly basic" under a divinely designed cognitive faculty grants warrant absent propositional evidence (Plantinga, 2000). However, when comparable faculties in rival religions produce contradictory outputs, parity considerations generate a defeater: Christians cannot privilege their deliverances without independent confirmation.

Swinburne's principle of credulity asserts that if it seems to someone that x is present, then x is probably present unless counterevidence exists (Swinburne, 1998). The repeated null results in controlled contexts, coupled with cross-tradition variability, constitute exactly such counterevidence. Under these conditions, the principle of credulity collapses: appearances lose probative force when systematically disconfirmed.

Together, these engagements show that the most sophisticated epistemological defenses do not withstand the specificity and convergence tests: absent privileged access, they fail to license belief in a literal personal relationship.

Discussion / Broader Implications

The evidential weakness of the personal-relationship model has consequences that extend beyond individual testimony. At stake is not merely the credibility of personal claims but the coherence of a central theological motif. When a relationship fails to exhibit ordinary hallmarks of intimacy—nonpublic knowledge, reciprocal communication, shared experiences, and objective verifiability—its plausibility diminishes. Two broader implications follow.

Indistinguishability from Psychological Phenomena. Experiences described as a “personal relationship with Jesus” resemble phenomena well-explained by psychology of religion: heightened emotion during group ritual, cognitive reinforcement through prayer practices, and the interpretive framing of life events as providential (Barrett, 2004; Hood et al., 2009). Without nonpublic markers, these experiences cannot be separated from self-generated conviction or cultural suggestion. The indistinguishability problem undercuts the claim that Jesus is an *external, interactive* agent and places the relationship language on par with reports of sensing a deceased loved one’s “presence.”

Loss of Distinctiveness Across Traditions. Many religions emphasize personal intimacy with the divine or revered figures—Sufi *dhikr*, Hindu *bhakti*, or Buddhist reports of luminous awareness. The phenomenology overlaps with Christian testimonies in salience, transformation, and conviction. If Christianity’s model offers no more than subjective experience absent privileged access, it loses any evidential advantage over competitors, inviting parity of credence (Alston, 1991; Hick, 1989).

Apologetic Strategy and the Evidential Gap. If a genuine two-way relationship with Jesus existed, it would be straightforward to demonstrate: controlled predictive

successes, discovery of hidden artifacts, or independent convergence on specific nonpublic details across diverse populations. Instead, defenses increasingly appeal to faith, mystery, or pragmatic benefit—lowering evidential standards in ways that render Christianity indistinguishable from superstition.

Metaphor or Literal Claim. Insisting on a literal personal relationship invites the evidential demand for privileged access. Recasting the language as metaphor—internal transformation rather than external intimacy—avoids failed predictions but tacitly concedes the critique.

Norms of Rational Credence. Accepting the model without nonpublic evidence risks normalizing credence policies that prioritize emotional resonance over evidential responsibility. A responsible epistemology proportions belief to evidence and prefers hypotheses with specific, testable predictions (Earman, 2000; Oppy, 2013).

Conclusion

Synthesis. The core prediction of a literal personal relationship—privileged access that manifests as confirmable nonpublic knowledge, specific reciprocal communication, and third-party verifiability—does not materialize. The cumulative evidential profile (affective salience without specificity, doctrinally patterned variability, and repeated nulls under control) is far more probable on a naturalistic psychology of religion than on a robust relationship hypothesis (Earman, 2000; Oppy, 2013).

Evidential Policy. In ordinary life, we calibrate trust in relationships by their observable reliability. By parity, the personal-Jesus claim should stand or fall with markers that outsiders can test. Appeals to inner assurance, scripture sufficiency, or mystery relocate warrant from public indicators to private conviction; such moves erase the distinction between veridical interaction and projection and license symmetrical credence in rival traditions (Alston, 1991; Hick, 1989).

Research Agenda. The path to positive evidence is clear and tractable: preregistered forecasting with objective scoring; discovery tasks that target unknown artifacts or texts; and convergence trials that preclude leakage while demanding concrete agreement. Success on such protocols would quickly drive the likelihood ratio toward the relationship hypothesis. Continued nulls, by contrast, rationally entrench a naturalistic reading.

Limits and Objections. Nothing here excludes a metaphorical or purely devotional sense of “relationship,” nor does it deny the reality of transformative experiences. The claim assessed is the *literal, interactive* one. If that claim retreats to metaphor, the apologetic shifts from evidential to expressive theology—coherent on its own terms but no longer epistemically distinctive.

Conclusion. Until specific, controlled, and convergent evidences emerge—of the sort ordinary relationships routinely yield—intellectual humility counsels doxastic restraint. The comparative likelihoods favor a psychological source for the experiences described as a “personal relationship with Jesus,” and rational credence should track that balance.

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Appendix

Appendix A — Formalization and Protocol Expansion

Operational criteria for privileged access.

For prospective testing, candidate markers include: (1) preregistered predictions with objective scoring and public archiving; (2) veridical identification of *previously unknown* artifacts or texts; (3) independent convergence on concrete, nonpublic details resistant to leakage; (4) blinded, repeatable tasks with clear success thresholds.

Prospective Protocol

Tasks should be preregistered on public repositories with timestamps; hypotheses must be stated in advance with unambiguous success criteria. Use transparent metrics (e.g., Brier scores or log-loss) aggregated over pre-specified horizons. Conduct power analyses, use third-party randomization and double-blind procedures, and release raw data and analysis scripts at conclusion.

Concrete Exemplars

- **Archive identification.** Name the box and shelf location of an uncatalogued document (pre-1900) in a specific repository; verified by archivists post-preregistration.
- **Archaeological localization.** Provide GPS coordinates (within ± 10 m) of a buried inscription absent from public databases; verified via supervised ground survey.
- **Predictive forecasting.** Four preregistered forecasts within a one-year horizon; mean Brier score $\geq 20\%$ better than a calibrated reference.
- **Independent convergence.** ≥ 3 independent participants preregister a detailed matching nonpublic statement about a later-revealed target under leakage-resistant conditions.

Symbolic Logic Formalization

1. $R(x, y) = x$ has a personal relationship with y
Annotation: Definition of relational predicate.
2. $\forall x \forall y (R(x, y) \rightarrow NPK(x, y))$
Annotation: Genuine relationships require nonpublic knowledge.
3. $R(b, j) \rightarrow NPK(b, j)$
Annotation: If a believer b has a relationship with Jesus j , then that believer must have nonpublic knowledge of Jesus.
4. $\neg \exists b (NPK(b, j))$
Annotation: No believer actually has nonpublic knowledge of Jesus.
5. $\forall b (R(b, j) \rightarrow NPK(b, j))$
Annotation: Restating that the relationship claim requires NPK.
6. $\neg \exists b (NPK(b, j))$
Annotation: Restating that no such knowledge exists.
7. $\therefore \neg \exists b (R(b, j))$
Annotation: Therefore, no believer has a genuine relationship with Jesus.
8. $(\neg \exists b (R(b, j))) \Rightarrow H_{Alt}$
Annotation: Best explanation: believers' experiences are psychological, not evidence of divine intimacy.

The Fitch-style natural deduction of the core result.

0. Vocabulary: $R(x, y)$, $NPK(x, y)$; constant j denotes Jesus
Annotation: Predicate $R(x, y)$ means "x has a personal relationship with y"; predicate $NPK(x, y)$ means "x has nonpublic knowledge about y"; constant j names Jesus.
1. $\forall x \forall y (R(x, y) \rightarrow NPK(x, y))$ (Premise)
Annotation: In ordinary relationships, having a genuine personal relationship entails privileged, nonpublic knowledge. This is the paper's relational baseline.
2. $\neg \exists b NPK(b, j)$ (Premise)
Annotation: Empirical claim from the analysis: no believer b verifiably has nonpublic knowledge about j (reports reduce to public scripture or subjective states).
3. $\exists b R(b, j)$ (Assumption for \neg -Intro)
Annotation: Begin a subproof by assuming there exists some believer with a personal relationship to j , with the goal of deriving a contradiction.
- | 4. $R(c, j)$ (\exists -Elim on 3)
Annotation: Introduce a new arbitrary witness c such that $R(c, j)$, discharging no prior dependencies (standard witness condition for \exists -Elim).
- | 5. $R(c, j) \rightarrow NPK(c, j)$ (\forall -Elim on 1)
Annotation: Instantiate line 1 at $x := c, y := j$ to get the conditional for this specific c and j .
- | 6. $NPK(c, j)$ (\rightarrow -Elim on 4, 5)
Annotation: From $R(c, j)$ and $R(c, j) \rightarrow NPK(c, j)$, infer $NPK(c, j)$ (modus ponens).
- | 7. $\exists b NPK(b, j)$ (\exists -Intro on 6)
Annotation: From $NPK(c, j)$, generalize to "there exists some believer with nonpublic knowledge of j ".
8. \perp (Contradiction from 2, 7)
Annotation: Lines 2 and 7 yield \perp since they assert both $\neg \exists b NPK(b, j)$ and $\exists b NPK(b, j)$.
9. $\neg \exists b R(b, j)$ (\neg -Intro discharging 3 – 8)
Annotation: By negation-introduction: because assuming $\exists b R(b, j)$ led to \perp , conclude that no believer has a personal relationship with j .

Likelihoodist corollary that pairs with the Fitch result.

- $H_1 : \exists b, R(b, j) \wedge \forall x \forall y, (R(x, y) \rightarrow NPK(x, y))$
Annotation: H_1 says at least one believer has a genuine personal relationship with Jesus and such relationships produce nonpublic knowledge. This mirrors the paper's baseline for genuine relationships.
- $H_2 : \neg \exists b, R(b, j)$
Annotation: H_2 says no believer has such a relationship; experiences are understood without appeal to an external interacting agent.
- $E := E_1 \wedge E_2 \wedge E_3 \wedge E_4$
Annotation: E is the observed evidential bundle: E_1 no verified nonpublic knowledge; E_2 no guided artifact/discovery; E_3 no convergent private revelations; E_4 no above-chance predictive success.
- $\mathcal{L}(E; H_2, H_1) := \frac{P(E|H_2)}{P(E|H_1)}$
Annotation: Likelihood ratio comparing how expected E is under H_2 versus H_1 .
- $\forall i \in 1, 2, 3, 4 : P(E_i | H_2) > P(E_i | H_1)$
Annotation: Each component of the observed absence (no NPK, no artifacts, no convergence, no predictive wins) is more expected if there is no genuine relationship than if there is one.
- Modeling assumption: $P(E | H_k) = \prod_{i=1}^4 P(E_i | H_k)$ (conservative independence for illustration)
Annotation: To display the mechanics transparently, treat the components as approximately independent; this only strengthens the qualitative comparison and is not required for the direction of favoring.
- $\Rightarrow \mathcal{L}(E; H_2, H_1) = \prod_{i=1}^4 \frac{P(E_i|H_2)}{P(E_i|H_1)} > 1$
Annotation: Because every factor in the product exceeds 1, the overall likelihood ratio exceeds 1. E favors H_2 over H_1 iff $\mathcal{L}(E; H_2, H_1) > 1$
- Annotation:** Likelihoodist verdict rule: when $\mathcal{L} > 1$, the observed evidence favors H_2 over H_1 .
- Given the paper's evidential survey,
 $\mathcal{L}(E; H_2, H_1) \gg 1 \Rightarrow "H_2$ is strongly favored over $H_1"$
- Annotation:** With all four absences documented in the paper, the comparative support is large, so E strongly favors H_2 .

Figure A1

Extended Symbolic Logic Formulation.