

Is the Christian God Sufficiently Visible in Nature to Justify Universal Culpability?

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

Romans 1:18–21 asserts that God’s existence and attributes are so plainly revealed in nature that all people are without excuse for unbelief. This paper evaluates whether that claim coheres with observable evidence and fairness constraints on accountability. I propose four standards any just assignment of culpability must satisfy: *clarity*, *specificity*, *universality*, and *proportionality*. I argue that natural phenomena fail to identify the distinctively Christian God, that belief tracks culture and geography rather than a single, clear revelation, and that divine hiddenness undercuts the Pauline thesis that unbelief is suppression of known truth (McKim, 2001; Oppy, 2013; Schellenberg, 1993). Testimonial patterns rarely begin with nature alone; instead, recognition typically depends on doctrinal and communal scaffolding (Barrett, 2004; Hick, 1989). I situate this analysis within recent work on religious disagreement and cognitive science of religion, concluding that nature does not provide sufficiently clear revelation to warrant universal culpability (De Cruz, 2016; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Teehan, 2016).

Opening Narrative

Imagine being summoned to a cosmic courtroom where the charge against you is grave: failure to recognize and thank the Creator of the universe. The prosecution gestures to mountains, oceans, and stars, insisting these wonders made God’s existence unmistakably clear. Yet awe is not identification, and grandeur is not instruction (Hume, 2007). The

prosecution cites Romans 1: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen.” You are declared “without excuse.”

But across the courtroom stand representatives of every tradition. They have witnessed the same sunrises and storms, yet their conclusions diverge radically. Some worship many gods, some none, others beings unlike the Christian God. If nature truly offered unmistakable revelation, such divergence would be inexplicable. Instead, religious identity tracks geography and socialization (Barrett, 2004; Dennett, 2006; Hick, 1989). To punish failure to recognize a hidden author where no unambiguous signature is present strains any plausible norm of fairness (McKim, 2001; Schellenberg, 1993).

Core Evidence & Analysis

Standards for Fair Culpability

Four standards anchor the analysis: (i) *clarity* (content is intelligible without specialized background), (ii) *specificity* (the evidence uniquely indicates the Christian God rather than generic or rival hypotheses), (iii) *universality* (equal accessibility across cultures and contexts), and (iv) *proportionality* (responsibility scaled to the quality and availability of evidence) (Evans, 2010; McKim, 2001; Schellenberg, 1993). These provide fairness preconditions for culpability.

From Awe to Identification: The Evidentiary Gap

A star-filled sky may inspire wonder, but wonder does not disclose a triune, scripture-quoting, salvation-instituting deity with specific expectations (Evans, 2010; Hume, 2007). Order, beauty, and complexity are evidentially equivocal: they are compatible with theistic, deistic, and naturalistic accounts (Dawkins, 2006; Oppy, 2013). Equivocal evidence cannot ground universal culpability.

Cultural Mediation of Recognition

Global belief patterns strongly correlate with culture and upbringing. Cognitive predispositions (e.g., agency detection) are generic, not specifically Christian; cultural scaffolding channels these tendencies into divergent religious systems (Barrett, 2004; Dennett, 2006; McKim, 2001). If Romans 1 were literally realized in nature, we would expect cross-cultural convergence on the Christian God. We observe the opposite (De Cruz, 2016).

Hiddenness and the Fairness Constraint

If a just God intends universal relationship, it is natural to expect non-coercive yet unmistakable disclosure, not ambiguity that predictably yields incompatible interpretations (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002; Schellenberg, 1993). Appeals to freedom conflate liberty with obscurity; one can freely respond to clear truth (Schellenberg, 2015).

Volition, Testimony, and the Inference Chain

Attributing unbelief to willful suppression presupposes that the relevant truth is already apparent. Yet typical testimonies cite scripture, community, and personal experience as interpretive keys; nature alone rarely yields recognition of the distinctively Christian God (Barrett, 2004; Hick, 1989; McKim, 2001). The inference chain from raw observation to *the Christian God* is long and culturally contingent; fairness cannot demand its completion absent clear premises (Evans, 2010; Oppy, 2013).

Counterarguments & Responses

“Nature Clearly Signals a Creator” (Fine-Tuning and Laws)

Claim. Intelligible laws and fine-tuning render a creator obvious and culpability fair.

Response. Even if true, the signal underdetermines *which* creator and *which* attributes. Underdetermination defeats the specificity requirement; culpability demands a unique pointer, not a family of live hypotheses (Evans, 2010; Oppy, 2013). Moreover,

fine-tuning inferences are consistent with deism or multiverse models; none uniquely select the Christian God.

“Sensus Divinitatis Survives Cultural Diversity”

Claim. A universal “sense of the divine” is variously expressed across cultures; diversity does not negate universal perception (Plantinga, 2000).

Response. Diversity here is not surface-level but systematic and incompatible (animism, polytheism, non-theism). Such deep divergence indicates that culture constructs recognition rather than merely tinting a shared perception (Hick, 1989; McKim, 2001). A mechanism compatible with incompatible outputs cannot ground uniform culpability.

“Hiddenness Preserves Freedom”

Claim. Stronger evidence would coerce belief and preclude authentic relationship (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002).

Response. Non-coercive clarity is conceptually available and ubiquitous (e.g., mathematical or historical truths that do not compel assent). Ambiguity risks condemning sincere error as rebellion (Schellenberg, 1993, 2015). Freedom does not require obscurity.

“Unbelief is Suppression of Known Truth”

Claim. Unbelievers resist what they already know, driven by pride or aversion to accountability (Plantinga, 2000).

Response. This pathologizes genuine disagreement and ignores the base-rate role of culture and information access in belief-formation (Dennett, 2006; McKim, 2001). Suppression presupposes clarity; clarity is precisely what is missing.

“General Revelation Suffices for Accountability”

Claim. Nature provides enough knowledge of God and duty to render all accountable (Evans, 2010).

Response. Natural cues are as readily read as indifference or impersonal process as

benevolence and design (Hume, 2007). Fair accountability cannot rest on guesswork over equivocal phenomena (Oppy, 2013; Schellenberg, 1993).

“Religious Experience Provides the Needed Specificity”

Claim. Widespread reports of religious experience (visions, presence, guidance) supply specificity that nature lacks; such experiences can justify belief in the Christian God (Plantinga, 2000).

Response. Experiential reports are *themselves* religiously polymorphic and map onto antecedent frameworks, yielding incompatible theologies. Their heterogeneity and cultural dependence make them poor candidates for universal culpability, and defeaters from peer disagreement weaken any alleged obligation to accept them (De Cruz, 2016; Paseau, 2010).

“Pascalian Prudence Shifts the Burden”

Claim. Even amid ambiguity, prudence (Pascal’s Wager) recommends believing or seeking the Christian God.

Response. Decision-theoretic critiques show the wager is *diluted* by many-gods considerations and utility-undefined comparisons; it cannot uniquely select Christianity, nor can prudential calculus ground culpability for disbelief in the absence of clarity (Hájek, 2003; Oppy, 2013).

“Miracle Testimony Breaks the Symmetry”

Claim. Documented miracles (healings, answers to prayer) identify the Christian God.

Response. Testimony to extraordinary events is cross-tradition and subject to selection, memory, and base-rate effects. Without stringent likelihood controls, such reports raise live rival hypotheses rather than uniquely confirm one (Hume, 2007). Equivocal testimony cannot justify universal culpability.

“Consensus Gentium: Most People Believe, Therefore Evidence is Sufficient”

Claim. Near-universal belief through history shows that nature suffices; dissenters are culpable outliers.

Response. The “consensus” fragments on *which* god, trackable by geography and enculturation (Barrett, 2004; Hick, 1989). Social functionality of belief (e.g., prosocial surveillance and costly signaling) explains prevalence without implying evidential sufficiency (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Teehan, 2016).

Discussion / Broader Implications

Religious diversity fits a model where culture scaffolds generic cognitive biases into specific theologies; it does not fit a world where one deity is plainly revealed to all (Barrett, 2004; Hick, 1989). Epistemically, culpability requires access and clarity that many never receive; treating unbelief as suppression imports an implausible view of doxastic control and ignores burdens imposed by peer disagreement (De Cruz, 2016; Kahneman, 2011; McKim, 2001). Socially, secularity and well-being often co-exist, weakening claims that disbelief tracks wilful vice rather than evidence-responsiveness (Zuckerman, 2009). Pastorally, hiddenness burdens sincere seekers and produces avoidable doubt; invoking freedom does not resolve the experiential problem (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002; Schellenberg, 2015).

Conclusion

Romans 1:18–21 is often read as grounding universal culpability in natural revelation. Measured against *clarity*, *specificity*, *universality*, and *proportionality*, nature does not uniquely identify the Christian God, belief remains culturally clustered, testimonial patterns rarely begin with nature alone, and divine hiddenness persists. Appeals to *sensus divinitatis*, freedom-preserving ambiguity, experiential or miracle testimony, or prudential wagering fail to repair these deficits. Consequently, nature does not supply a fair basis for universal culpability. A just and omniscient deity would not predicate ultimate

responsibility on evidence that predictably yields incompatible interpretations across culture and history (McKim, 2001; Oppy, 2013; Schellenberg, 1993).

References

- Barrett, J. L. (2004). *Why would anyone believe in god?* AltaMira Press.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The god delusion*. Bantam.
- De Cruz, H. (2016). Religious disagreement and epistemic self-improvement. *Religious Studies*, 52(1), 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412515000125>
- Dennett, D. C. (2006). *Breaking the spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon*. Viking.
- Evans, C. S. (2010). *Natural signs and knowledge of god: A new look at theistic arguments*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199217168.001.0001>
- Hájek, A. (2003). Waging war on pascal's wager. *Philosophical Review*, 112(1), 27–56.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-112-1-27>
- Hick, J. (1989). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. Yale University Press.
- Howard-Snyder, D., & Moser, P. K., eds. *Divine hiddenness: New essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498995>
- Hume, D. (2007). *Dialogues concerning natural religion* (D. Coleman, Ed.) [Original work published 1779]. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804956>
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus; Giroux.
- McKim, R. (2001). *Religious ambiguity and religious diversity*. Oxford University Press.
- Norenzayan, A., & Shariff, A. F. (2008). The origin and evolution of religious prosociality. *Science*, 322(5898), 58–62. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1158757>
- Oppy, G. (2013). *The best argument against god*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137302126>

- Paseau, A. (2010). The argument from religious experience. *Philosophy Compass*, 5(1), 16–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00266.x>
- Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted christian belief*. Oxford University Press.
- Schellenberg, J. L. (1993). *Divine hiddenness and human reason*. Cornell University Press.
- Schellenberg, J. L. (2015). *The hiddenness argument: Philosophy's new challenge to belief in god*. Oxford University Press.
- Teehan, J. (2016). The evolution of religion and morality: Past, present, and future. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 6(3), 231–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1141766>
- Zuckerman, P. (2009). Atheism, secularity, and well-being: How the findings of social science counter negative stereotypes and assumptions. *Sociology Compass*, 3(6), 949–971. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00247.x>

Appendix

Appendix A: Formalization (Likelihood Sketch and Fairness Criteria)

A.1 Hypotheses and Data

H_1 : The Christian God exists and intends universal recognition through nature,

H_2 : No such God exists (naturalism or non-Christian theism/deism),

D : {religious diversity, testimony patterns, hiddenness, cultural clustering}.

Explanation. We compare how well each hypothesis predicts the observed “data” about human belief and experience.

A.2 Bayes Factor Decomposition

$$\text{BF}_{12} = \frac{P(D | H_1)}{P(D | H_2)} = \prod_{i=1}^4 \frac{P(D_i | H_1)}{P(D_i | H_2)} \quad (\text{A1})$$

Explanation. The overall evidential weight is a product of component likelihood ratios for each datum in D .

A.3 Qualitative Likelihood Judgments

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{P(\text{religious diversity} | H_1)}{P(\text{religious diversity} | H_2)} &< 1, \\ \frac{P(\text{testimonies rarely begin with nature} | H_1)}{P(\text{testimonies begin with nature} | H_2)} &< 1, \\ \frac{P(\text{pervasive hiddenness} | H_1)}{P(\text{hiddenness} | H_2)} &\ll 1, \\ \frac{P(\text{cultural clustering} | H_1)}{P(\text{clustering} | H_2)} &\ll 1. \end{aligned}$$

Explanation. On H_1 , expect cross-cultural convergence and abundant nature-first recognition; on H_2 , diversity, hiddenness, and clustering are expected given cultural transmission and generic cognitive biases. Thus, each ratio is below 1, driving (??) below 1.

A.4 Fairness Constraints as Preconditions for Culpability

Let F denote the conjunction of fairness predicates:

$$F := \text{Clarity} \wedge \text{Specificity} \wedge \text{Universality} \wedge \text{Proportionality}.$$

Explanation. For just culpability, F must obtain. If $P(F | D, H_1)$ is low, then even if H_1 were true, the fairness condition for universal culpability fails.

A.5 Sensitivity Sketch

For weights $w_i > 0$ that encode the salience of each D_i under theory-neutral constraints,

$$\log \text{BF}_{12} = \sum_{i=1}^4 w_i \log \frac{P(D_i | H_1)}{P(D_i | H_2)}. \quad (\text{A2})$$

Explanation. Even modest downweighting of any single favorable component to H_1 does not reverse the sign if multiple D_i strongly favor H_2 . This clarifies robustness against “one-off” apologetic rejoinders.

Symbolic Logic Formalization

P1 : Natural phenomena (mountains, stars, oceans) are observable by all humans.
Annotation: Everyone has access to the same raw data of nature.

P2 : If God's attributes were clearly seen in nature, then cultural interpretations of nature would converge on recognition of the Christian God.
Annotation: Clarity implies universality of interpretation, not radical diversity.

P3 : Empirical evidence shows that interpretations of nature diverge widely: polytheism, animism, naturalism, atheism, etc.
Annotation: Instead of convergence, we observe global religious and non-religious diversity.

C1 : Therefore, God's attributes are not clearly seen in nature.
Annotation: The Pauline claim in Romans 1 does not align with empirical observation.

P4 : For culpability to be fair, four standards must be met: clarity, specificity, universality, proportionality.
Annotation: These are the fairness conditions for assigning responsibility.

P5 : Natural phenomena lack specificity (they do not uniquely identify the Christian God).
Annotation: Awe at nature is consistent with many hypotheses, not just Christianity.

P6 : Natural phenomena lack universality (interpretations are culture-dependent).
Annotation: Belief tracks geography and upbringing, not objective revelation.

P7 : Natural phenomena lack clarity (multiple inferences are possible, no single obvious conclusion).
Annotation: Ambiguity prevents fair judgment.

P8 : Natural phenomena lack proportionality (the evidence quality does not justify eternal consequences).
Annotation: The penalty exceeds the strength of evidence.

C2 : Therefore, natural phenomena do not meet the conditions required for fair culpability.
Annotation: The evidentiary basis is insufficient to ground responsibility.

P9 : If culpability requires recognition of the Christian God, then the inferential chain from natural data to God must be short and straightforward.
Annotation: Recognition must not depend on excessive reasoning steps.

P10 : The actual chain involves many steps: from awe → design → personal designer → omnipotent deity → Christian God → moral law → personal failure.
Annotation: Each step requires cultural or doctrinal scaffolding, not obvious inference from nature alone.

C3 : Therefore, culpability cannot be justly assigned on the basis of nature alone.
Annotation: The inference burden is too great for fair accountability.

Final conclusion : $\neg(\text{Nature} \Rightarrow \text{Universal culpability})$
Annotation: Nature does not provide sufficiently clear, specific, universal, and proportionate evidence to justify universal culpability. Romans 1's claim that all are "without excuse" collapses.

A step-by-step syllogistic version of the core argument.

P1 : Natural phenomena (mountains, stars, oceans) are universally observable.
Annotation: All humans have access to the same natural data.

P2 : If God's attributes are clearly seen in nature, then interpretations of nature would converge across cultures.
Annotation: Clarity implies cross-cultural recognition of the Christian God.

P3 : Empirical observation shows radical divergence in interpretations: polytheism, animism, atheism, naturalism, etc.
Annotation: Instead of convergence, we see persistent diversity in belief.

C1 : Therefore, God's attributes are not clearly seen in nature.
Annotation: Romans 1's claim of obvious revelation is contradicted by evidence.

P4 : Fair culpability requires four conditions: clarity, specificity, universality, proportionality.
Annotation: These are the minimal fairness standards for accountability.

P5 : Natural phenomena lack specificity: they do not uniquely identify the Christian God.
Annotation: Awe at nature is consistent with multiple hypotheses.

P6 : Natural phenomena lack universality: belief patterns track geography and upbringing.
Annotation: Religious affiliation is mediated by culture, not by direct revelation.

P7 : Natural phenomena lack clarity: they admit multiple incompatible interpretations.
Annotation: Evidence is ambiguous, not obvious.

P8 : Natural phenomena lack proportionality: the consequences prescribed (eternal) far exceed the evidence available.
Annotation: Punishment is disproportionate to evidentiary quality.

C2 : Therefore, natural revelation does not satisfy the fairness conditions for culpability.
Annotation: Universal accountability cannot be grounded in such evidence.

P9 : If culpability depends on nature alone, the inference chain from raw data to God must be short and accessible to all.
Annotation: The path to recognition must be straightforward.

P10 : The actual chain is long and contingent: awe → design → personal designer → omnipotent deity → Christian God → divine law → human failure.
Annotation: Each inferential step requires prior doctrinal or cultural scaffolding.

P11 : Such a chain cannot be reasonably expected of all humans, especially without Christian instruction.
Annotation: Recognition depends on interpretive background, not nature itself.

P12 : Fair culpability requires that recognition of God be possible without excessive inference.
Annotation: Accountability cannot rest on a long and uncertain reasoning chain.

C3 : Therefore, culpability cannot be assigned justly on the basis of natural revelation alone.
Annotation: Nature does not provide the evidentiary foundation for responsibility.

Final conclusion : $\neg(\text{Nature} \Rightarrow \text{Universal culpability})$
Annotation: Nature does not yield sufficiently clear, specific, universal, or proportionate revelation to justify universal culpability. Romans 1's claim that all are "without excuse" collapses.

Figure A1

Extended Symbolic Logic Formulation.