

A Personal Jesus and Nonpublic Knowledge — 13

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: 0009-0009-3725-8682

Revised August 2026

Central claim

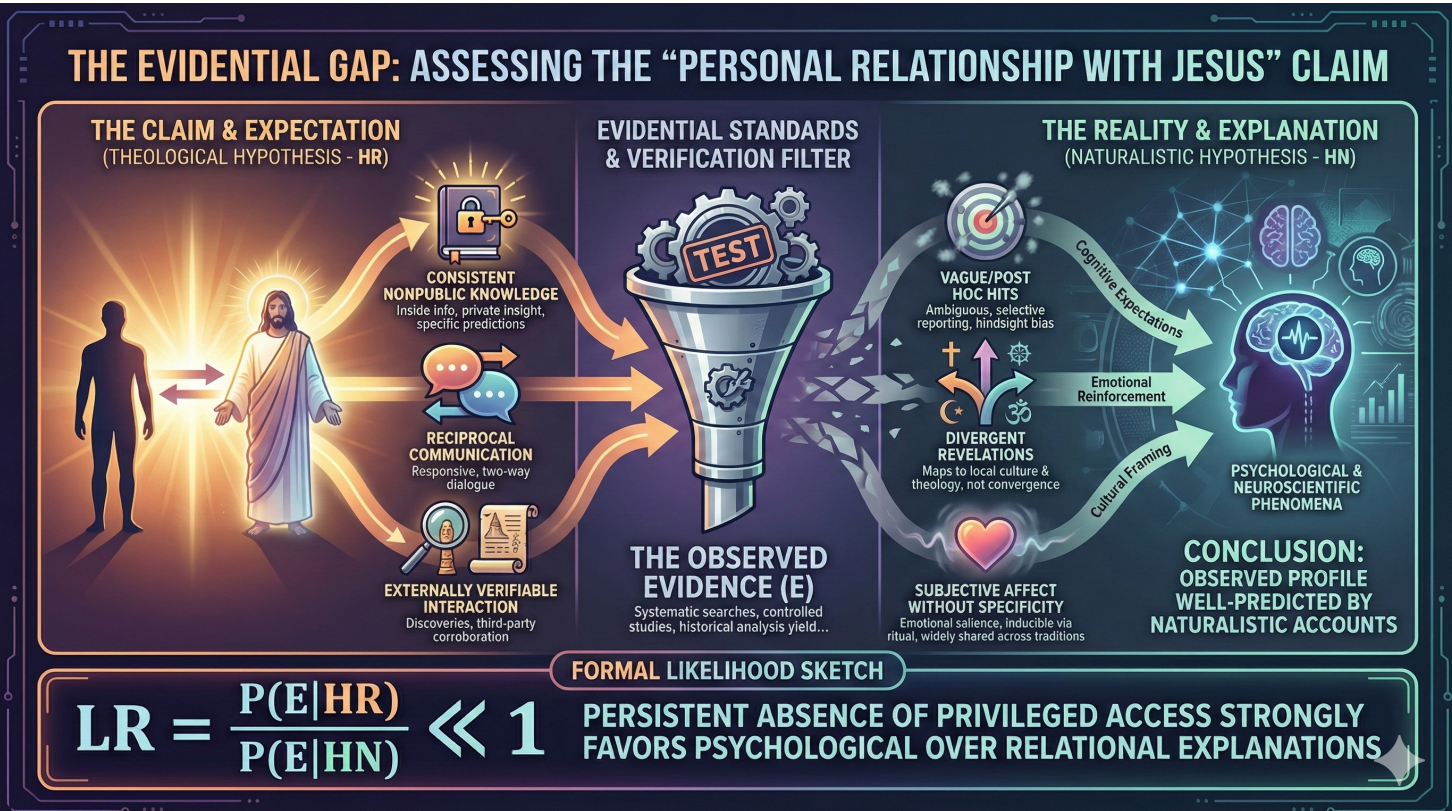
When a reported personal relationship with the living Jesus is offered as public evidence of literal reciprocal communication, its familiar marks—felt presence, guidance impressions, transformation, and culturally patterned testimony—do not by themselves warrant preferring that explanation to a psychological-cultural comparator family. Those marks are not shown to be appreciably more expected under external communication, while identifiable human processes can generate them. This undercuts the public inference without proving that no such relationship exists or denying its private, practical, or religious value.

Preview:

Public claim	Needed difference	Evidence assessed	Rational update
The living Jesus literally participates in a reciprocal personal relationship and communicates with the claimant.	The evidence offered should be appreciably more expected under external communication than under identified human pathways.	Absorption, inner speech, social cognition, attribution, and communal reinforcement all make generic relationship-like reports expectable.	These strands do not strongly confirm the public claim. Specific, independently corroborated evidence could change that result; mere compatibility cannot.

The paper evaluates a public inference, not the sincerity, psychological health, or spiritual worth of those who report a relationship with Jesus. It offers a comparative philosophical assessment, not a numerical likelihood estimate or an exhaustive survey of religious experience.

Visual preview:



The infographic’s relational hypothesis and naturalistic hypothesis represent the paper’s target and comparator family. Its strong likelihood-ratio sign is conditional: it applies only where a defined opportunity makes a persistent absence of a discriminator more expected under the comparator. It is not a measured or global probability.

Abstract

Claims of a personal relationship with Jesus often function both as first-person religious commitments and as public evidence that the living Jesus literally communicates with people. The second use requires comparison with serious alternatives. This paper argues that felt presence and guidance, transformation, and culturally patterned testimony do not by themselves strongly publicly confirm literal reciprocal communication: the available record does not show these generic marks to be appreciably more expected under that explanation, while absorption, inner speech, social cognition, attribution, and communal reinforcement provide independently supported pathways to them. This is an undercutting result, not a quantified claim that the alternatives are equally likely. Prospectively recorded nonpublic information could be more probative if protected against leakage, evaluated under prespecified blind criteria, and independently corroborated or replicated. The argument therefore supports restraint rather than disproof. It leaves open first-person warrant, pragmatic value, embodied or transformative insight, and future discriminating evidence while denying that sincerity, vividness, benefit, or religious interpretation alone already supplies strong public support for the literal claim.

Keywords: religious experience; Jesus; personal relationship; nonpublic knowledge; testimony; likelihood; public evidence

1. Two Claims Hidden in One Expression

The expression “a personal relationship with Jesus” is central to much contemporary Christian speech. It can name a pattern of trust, prayer, moral orientation, belonging, and perceived presence. It can also make a literal ontological claim: Jesus is now a living personal agent who attends to the claimant, responds, guides, consoles, corrects, or otherwise communicates. These uses may overlap in practice, but they carry different evidential burdens.

This paper addresses Christians and apologists who move from the reported relationship to a public conclusion about literal reciprocal communication. It does not ask whether a life organized around Jesus can be coherent or valuable. Nor does it diagnose people who report vivid religious experiences. Its question is narrower: when the relationship is offered to other people as evidence, what features make that evidence more likely if Jesus is literally communicating than if familiar psychological and cultural processes generate the same phenomenology?

The target is the **literal reciprocal-relationship model**. On this model, the living Jesus is an external personal agent who sometimes participates in a two-way relationship with the claimant. The **psychological-cultural comparator family** includes capacities for absorption and imagery, interpreted inner speech, social cognition, attribution, practice, testimony, and community reinforcement that can produce experiences that feel relational and are understood through a Christian frame. These pathways may operate separately or together; they are not one fully quantified theory. They do not imply deceit, pathology, or conscious invention, and they predict sincere experience.

The governing thesis follows. Felt presence, guidance impressions, personal transformation, and culturally patterned testimony are compatible with literal communication, but identified human pathways also make them expectable. The cited evidence does not establish equal probabilities; it undercuts an inference from the generic experiences alone to a specific external source. Verified nonpublic knowledge could improve the comparison if prospectively recorded, protected against leakage, assessed under prespecified blind criteria, and independently corroborated or replicated. Until a source-specific difference is established, public confidence should not rise merely because the experiences occur. This is an argument about evidential reach, not a proof of absence.

The distinction between personal and public justification matters immediately. A person may reasonably organize a life around an experience whose significance depends on memory, trust, accumulated context, or a framework not fully shareable with outsiders. Public evidence need not be neutral or compel every hearer. It must, however, be open to intersubjective appraisal without simply assuming the external source under dispute. Testimony can transmit justification, but its force depends on the witness, circumstances, alternatives, and what

the testimony is meant to establish (Webb, 2022). The transition from “this felt like a response from Jesus” to “this publicly supports literal communication from Jesus” is therefore an inference, not a repetition.

The evidential fork

If “personal relationship” is primarily existential, devotional, or metaphorical, it may be meaningful without producing novel public tests. If it is offered as literal reciprocal communication and public confirmation, it must risk comparison with processes that generate the same experiences. The first route preserves religious meaning without a strong public inference; the second route permits that inference only to the extent that discriminating evidence appears.

This fork is not intended to force every believer into one pure category. A relationship claim can be partly devotional and partly literal. The point is proportional: its public evidential weight cannot exceed the part exposed to comparative assessment.

2. What a Relationship Does—and Does Not—Predict

Ordinary personal relationships include recognition, trust, attention, shared history, mutual responsiveness, and sometimes information exchange. Yet a relationship does not logically require the transmission of surprising facts. Friends can be close without exchanging secrets, and silence does not by itself end a relationship. A simplistic demand that Jesus continually reveal hidden numbers would therefore misunderstand many religious claims.

The evidential expectation arises more conditionally. If an external agent is able to communicate, willing on some occasions to be recognized as communicating, and the resulting experiences are offered as evidence of reciprocity, then at least some difference between communication and its absence should be possible. That difference need not be spectacular. It could appear in the timing, specificity, accuracy, independence, or repeated responsiveness of what is conveyed. Without some possible difference, the literal model remains compatible with every outcome but ceases to gain public support from any particular one.

This qualification prevents two opposite errors. One error says that every genuine relationship must yield paranormal information. That is false. The other says that felt relationship is public evidence of an external relationship even when no imaginable observation could count differently under an internal-source account. That inference is too permissive. The proper question is not whether nonpublic knowledge is mandatory for relationship. It is whether the claimant has identified any feature of the reported interaction that discriminates an external communicative source from the comparator.

Religious epistemologists have developed accounts on which experience can warrant belief without first passing a neutral public test. Alston argues that socially established practices of putative perception can confer *prima facie* justification, while recognizing serious questions raised by competing practices (Alston, 1991). Plantinga’s extended Aquinas/Calvin model holds that Christian belief could have warrant when produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties in a suitable epistemic environment (Plantinga, 2000). These accounts matter because they show that public demonstration is not the only form of rational support.

They do not, however, erase the present question. A model may explain how a subject has warrant if Christianity is true without showing an outsider that Christianity is true. Indeed, the conditional architecture of such accounts makes the distinction especially clear. This paper need not prove that internal warrant is impossible. It asks what the commonly reported evidence contributes to a public comparison between a literal relationship and an independently plausible alternative.

Swinburne’s principle of credulity starts from a different but related presumption: absent special counterconsiderations, it is reasonable to believe that things are as they seem to be experienced (Swinburne, 2004). That presumption can support a subject’s initial acceptance of an experience. Its public force is weaker when known practices cultivate the experience, rival traditions generate incompatible interpretations, and ordinary mechanisms

predict similar appearances. These considerations do not automatically defeat experience. They are precisely the comparison a public evaluator cannot omit.

3. Comparative Evidence Without Spurious Precision

Evidence discriminates between explanations when it is more expected under one than under the other. This is the useful core of a likelihood approach: an observation's evidential direction depends on a comparison, not merely on its being vivid, unusual, or consistent with a favored claim (Sober, 2008). Exact numbers are unnecessary, but a direction still needs support. The question is whether the offered evidence is appreciably more expected if literal reciprocal communication occurs than if the comparator pathways produce the report.

Let “generic relationship experience” include felt presence, an inner phrase interpreted as guidance, emotional consolation, moral redirection, or a sense of being known. Literal communication is compatible with such experiences. Anthropological and psychological work also associates their occurrence with disciplined attention, absorption, imagery, expectation, inner speech, and cultural models of mind (Luhmann, 2012; Luhmann et al., 2010; Luhmann et al., 2021; Schille-Hudson et al., 2025). Establishing this second route does not prove that the routes are equally probable. It does show why occurrence alone cannot identify the external source.

An experience can be real and beneficial while its external cause remains unresolved. Nor has a complete causal explanation been established for every case. The comparative point is narrower: once independently supported pathways generate the cited marks, those marks cannot be treated as source-specific without further evidence. The result is an undercutter of strong public confirmation, not a positive likelihood estimate favoring the comparator family.

Because the comparator is a family rather than a single quantified model, this paper does not assign one value to the probability of the evidence under it. The family is also not an unrestricted category containing whatever the literal model fails to explain. It is limited here to evidenced human capacities and social processes that bear directly on the reported phenomena. Its modest role is to identify live routes to the familiar marks. A strong public inference must address those routes; their mere availability does not establish that one of them caused any particular experience.

A stronger discriminator would have three properties. First, **specificity**: the result is clear enough that observers cannot easily redescribe a near miss as success. Second, **independence**: the information is protected from ordinary access, cueing, and retrospective reconstruction. Third, **corroboration or evidential depth**: either a controlled effect recurs or a singular case has sufficiently independent documentation to make ordinary pathways materially less plausible. These conditions do not guarantee a theological explanation. They identify what would make the comparator family work harder.

Absence requires similar care. Failure to observe a discriminator counts against the literal model only when there was a defined opportunity to observe one and some prior reason to expect it. If a model predicts no rate of clear communication, silence has little negative force. But the same flexibility also blocks easy confirmation. A model cannot fairly treat every vivid experience as expected evidence while treating every failure of clarity as evidentially irrelevant. Divine freedom may make precise prediction difficult; it does not turn non-discriminating outcomes into strong public confirmation.

The title-page infographic uses a likelihood-ratio expression with a strong directional sign. That notation is qualitative and conditional. A low ratio is warranted only for an evidence set shown to be more expected under the comparator—for example, a persistent absence after a defined opportunity and prior expectation. No numerical probability or global ratio for every reported relationship is inferred here.

4. Why Relationship-Like Experiences Arise

4.1 Absorption, practice, and vivid mental imagery

Luhrmann's ethnographic account of American evangelical practice describes prayer as a learned form of attention in which people cultivate the ability to experience an invisible interlocutor as personally present (Luhrmann, 2012). In experimental and interview work, absorption—a disposition toward deep imaginative involvement—together with spiritual practice was associated with sharper mental imagery and reports of unusual spiritual experience (Luhrmann et al., 2010). Four later studies involving more than 2,000 participants across the United States, Ghana, Thailand, China, and Vanuatu found that absorption and culturally variable models of a porous mind predicted reports of vivid spiritual presence (Luhrmann et al., 2021). These associations do not show that every experience is internally caused. They show that report frequency and form covary with measurable traits, practices, and cultural expectations in ways the comparator family anticipates.

Cultivation can be interpreted in two directions. A believer may say practice improves sensitivity to a real agent, just as musical training improves perception of musical structure. The comparator says practice helps construct, notice, and religiously attribute inner events. The associations alone do not decide between these readings. They do defeat an inference from vividness as though no ordinary pathway were independently in view.

4.2 Social cognition and represented agency

Neuroimaging research on personal prayer found activation in regions associated with social cognition, including thinking about another person's intentions (Schjoedt et al., 2009). This is unsurprising if participants experience prayer as interaction. It also illustrates an evidential boundary. Neural recruitment can help explain why an experience has interpersonal structure; it does not determine whether the represented interlocutor exists externally. Such recruitment does not by itself tell an evaluator whether the represented interlocutor is physically present, remembered, imagined, or otherwise absent.

Neuroscience therefore neither refutes nor verifies the religious interpretation. Its public relevance lies in demonstrating an available mechanism for relational form. If ordinary social-cognitive machinery is sufficient to structure an experience as dialogue, the dialogue's felt second-person quality cannot by itself establish an external second person.

4.3 Attribution and inner speech

People routinely experience thoughts as arriving rather than being deliberately authored. A phrase may surface with unusual fluency, urgency, emotional congruence, or apparent independence. A 2025 study using participants from five countries and a preregistered United States sample found that inner speech and absorption predicted voice-hearing reports, including spiritually interpreted experiences; the authors also caution that mediation analyses did not establish causal order (Schille-Hudson et al., 2025). Within a community that expects divine guidance, such events can be attributed to Jesus and evaluated through learned rules distinguishing an accepted prompting from temptation, distraction, or ordinary thought.

These interpretive rules can have moral and practical value. Yet flexible attribution creates a selection problem when guidance is used as evidence: congruent impressions may be preserved while mistaken impressions are forgotten, reclassified, or explained as human interference. A public assessment needs prospective records of both apparent successes and failures, with criteria fixed before outcomes are known. Otherwise the archive cannot reveal its own miss rate.

Taves's building-block approach is useful here because it studies how experiences become designated as religious without assuming either a reductive or a supernatural conclusion in advance (Taves, 2009). The method respects the experience while separating its occurrence from the cultural work that gives it a particular identity.

4.4 Transformation is important but nonspecific

Relationship claims often appeal to changed lives: recovery from destructive behavior, forgiveness, courage, moral seriousness, or sustained purpose. Such outcomes matter. They may provide pragmatic evidence that a practice helps a person, and they may deepen the subject's commitment. They are not, by themselves, source-specific. Therapy, friendship, disciplined practice, medication, political commitment, and other religious traditions also transform lives.

Recent embodied approaches press a helpful correction to an overly propositional debate. Jung argues that some religious experiences may disclose reality through embodied and transformative engagement without functioning as reliable sources of ordinary propositional knowledge (Jung, 2025). Even if that positive account is accepted, the scope distinction remains: transformative or nonconceptual disclosure is not automatically evidence that a specific sentence—"Jesus externally communicated this message"—is true. The argument can therefore recognize transformation as genuine evidence of lived significance without converting it into public proof of a particular external cause.

5. Diversity, Testimony, and the Public Audience

Religious experiences are interpreted within traditions that disagree about ultimate reality, revelation, salvation, and divine agency. Hick emphasizes the interpretive role of cultural concepts while seeking a pluralist account of religious response (Hick, 2005). McKim treats religious ambiguity and diversity as reasons for epistemic humility rather than immediate skepticism (McKim, 2001). Griffioen's survey likewise shows how the epistemology of religious experience turns on competing accounts of perception, seeming, testimony, and disagreement (Griffioen, 2021). Their projects differ, but all make a public problem visible: similar experiential confidence supports incompatible conclusions.

Diversity is not a direct disproof. One tradition could be correct, several reports could be mistaken, or a common transcendent reality could be interpreted through different schemes. But the bare pattern of felt presence and guidance cannot identify which explanation is right. If a Christian points to the immediacy of Jesus while another claimant points with equal sincerity to a different agent or metaphysics, the public evaluator needs a discriminator beyond immediacy and sincerity.

Testimony can still be evidence. We properly learn much of what we know from others. Its force is graded, however, and the content transmitted must be specified. Testimony may strongly support that a person had a vivid experience, moderately support that the experience had certain remembered features, and only weakly support a contested causal interpretation. Webb's survey of religious experience highlights both the possible justificatory role of testimony and the difficulties created by interpretation and diversity (Webb, 2022). Public reasoning should not collapse these levels.

This is why accusations of dishonesty miss the structure of the argument. The comparator works best when claimants are sincere. If testimony were mostly fabricated, a simple deception hypothesis might suffice. The more philosophically interesting problem is that normal cognition, learned attention, and community interpretation can produce honest reports with high subjective certainty and low public specificity.

6. An Evidence Ledger

The central inference is cumulative but undercutting. Each strand identifies why a familiar mark is not yet source-specific; each also has a limit that prevents the availability of a human pathway from becoming a proof that no communication occurred. Table 1 keeps both sides visible.

The ledger blocks two rhetorical shortcuts. A critic cannot infer from available psychological processes that no communication ever occurs. A defender cannot infer from an experience's vividness or benefit that an external source is publicly established. The evidential position between those shortcuts is restrained but substantive:

Table 1: Comparative evidence ledger for the literal relationship inference

Evidence strand	What it supports	Public contribution	Limit
Felt presence and guidance	The claimant undergoes relationship-like phenomenology	Absorption, imagery, inner speech, and social cognition supply independently supported pathways	Does not establish equal likelihoods or show that every experience is internally caused
Transformation	The practice or interpretation may have substantial personal consequences	Beneficial change is real but not source-specific by itself	Nonspecificity does not erase pragmatic or spiritual value
Cultural patterning and diversity	Experience is organized through concepts and communal practices	Rival interpretations and cultural covariation weaken inference from sincerity or vividness alone	Diversity does not entail that all traditions are false
Verified nonpublic information	Accurate, protected information could pressure an internal-source account	Prespecified, leakage-resistant and corroborated success could favor external communication	Theological attribution would still require a bridge from anomaly to source

generic evidence has limited discriminatory value, while stronger evidence remains conceptually possible.

Alleged nonpublic knowledge deserves special attention because it is closer to a genuine discriminator. Reports include unexpectedly accurate impressions about another person's circumstances, timely warnings, or information said to be unavailable to the claimant. A single retrospective story is difficult to evaluate. Information can leak through forgotten conversations, facial or behavioral cues, shared networks, base-rate guesses, ambiguous wording, and selective reporting. The more possible targets and interpretations available, the easier it is to find a match after the fact.

None of these possibilities licenses dismissing a carefully documented case. They explain why documentation should begin before the outcome whenever that is feasible. A useful record would state the target, allowed response format, success criterion, time window, ordinary information channels, complete trial count, and planned analysis in advance. Independent judges would score responses without knowing the condition. For a singular case, independent records and witnesses could provide evidential depth; for repeatable claims, replication would reduce the chance that an unnoticed pathway or flexible judgment produced the result.

If performance survived those controls and independent corroboration, it would be evidence against a simple internal-source account. Even then, the move to Jesus would require further argument. An anomalous information channel, fraud missed by the protocol, a broader parapsychological hypothesis, and multiple theological interpretations would remain competitors. The intended lesson is not that evidence can never be sufficient. It is that the evidential task has stages, and a compelling experience does not complete them automatically.

7. Replies to Strong Objections

7.1 “A relationship is not a laboratory experiment”

Correct. Most human relationships are not established by randomized trials. They are supported by dense, reciprocal interaction within a shared public world. We identify the other person independently, observe responses, exchange information, detect misunderstandings, and distinguish presence from absence with reasonable reliability. A relationship with an invisible agent lacks many of those ordinary anchors. This does not make it impossible; it makes alternative generation of the relational experience more relevant.

The proposed controls apply only when nonpublic knowledge is offered as public evidence. Devotion need not become an experiment. But a claimant cannot both invoke a result as intersubjective confirmation and reject every method for learning whether ordinary information channels produced it.

7.2 “Jesus may value trust rather than proofs”

That is possible. A policy of avoiding decisive evidence could explain why discriminators are rare. It simultaneously reduces how much generic experience can publicly confirm the relationship. If ambiguity is intended, ambiguous data are expected and should not be advertised as strong public proof. The theological explanation and the apologetic use pull in opposite directions.

The same point exposes an “every-outcome” problem. If clarity confirms relationship, ambiguity preserves mystery, success confirms care, and failure confirms a wiser purpose, the model remains compatible with everything. Compatibility is not evidential support. Each appeal that weakens a risky expectation also weakens the inference from an observed success.

7.3 “The whole relationship, not an isolated datum, is the evidence”

Cumulative evidence can be stronger than any isolated item when partially independent strands converge. It is not automatically stronger when the same process generates all the strands. Prayer practice can intensify attention; intensified attention can increase relationship-like experience; community interpretation can label that experience; the label can motivate practice; and perceived transformation can reinforce the entire cycle. Felt presence, guidance, and change may then be correlated outputs of one system rather than independent confirmations.

A cumulative public case must therefore show either independence or a pattern the identified comparator pathways do not already make expectable. The evidence ledger does not atomize relationship arbitrarily. It asks whether accumulation adds discrimination or merely repeats the same source in several forms.

7.4 “Religious perception is innocent until defeated”

Alston, Plantinga, and Swinburne provide sophisticated reasons not to begin with blanket distrust. The present argument can grant an initial first-person presumption. Public comparison then introduces potential defeaters or undercutters: cultivated imagery, known social-cognitive mechanisms, flexible attribution, religious diversity, and the scarcity of prospectively controlled information. Whether these defeat a particular subject’s warrant depends on the broader epistemology. They do show why an outsider need not treat the experience’s own interpretation as self-authenticating.

7.5 “A genuine perception need not resemble a hallucination epistemically”

A disjunctivist reply holds that a veridical perception and a subjectively matching nonveridical experience need not be the same kind of epistemic state. Recent work applies this possibility to religious experience and asks whether a genuine encounter could itself provide knowledge without an inference from neutral data (Chen, 2024). That reply protects a possible first-person route: if the experience is veridical, its warrant need not wait upon a laboratory test.

It does not settle the public classification of the case. An evaluator who cannot assume that the experience is the veridical disjunct still needs a reason to distinguish it from the subjectively matching alternative. The present conclusion therefore survives: phenomenological similarity plus a possible factive account does not by itself supply public evidence that this case belongs to the factive side.

7.6 “Transformation authenticates its source”

Transformation authenticates at least one thing: the experience, practice, or community can be causally important in a life. It may also count within a broader theological case. But beneficial consequences alone cannot identify Jesus as the external cause, since incompatible practices produce durable benefit. Jung’s embodied account is

useful precisely because it permits transformative disclosure to matter without treating it as ordinary propositional transmission (Jung, 2025). Respecting that category prevents both reduction and overclaiming.

7.7 “Psychological explanation is genetic fallacy”

Explaining how a belief arose does not by itself show the belief false. The objection succeeds against crude debunking. This paper uses psychological evidence differently. The target claim is supported by experiences said to indicate an external relationship. Demonstrating independently supported processes that can generate those marks undercuts their claimed source-specificity. It does not prove a psychological origin in every case or infer falsity merely from causal history.

8. What Better Public Evidence Would Look Like

A constructive standard should be demanding without being rigged for failure. Consider a preregistered hidden-target design. Before each trial, an independent system randomly selects a target from a large set and protects it from participants and interacting personnel. Claimants record what they take Jesus to communicate in a fixed format and within a fixed time. Scoring rules are established before data collection, with decoy targets matched for plausibility. Judges remain blind to the selected target and condition. All trials, including misses and ambiguous responses, are preserved. A repeatable claim is then tested by independent teams.

Such a design would not test love, salvation, moral formation, or the totality of a relationship. It would test one public claim: that the interaction sometimes conveys information unavailable through ordinary channels. A robust positive result would pressure the comparator used here. A null result would count against only the specified rate and conditions, not against every possible communication.

Less formal evidence can also improve. Prospective diaries timestamped before outcomes, independent medical or factual records, clear separation between prediction and interpretation, complete reporting of misses, and confirmation by observers outside the religious network all raise evidential quality. None makes fraud or error impossible. Together they reduce the degrees of freedom that turn ordinary events into retrospective matches.

This paper does not claim to have surveyed every published or unpublished report of personal-Jesus communication, and it does not establish that no well-documented case exists. It reaches no numerical estimate of success or failure. Its narrower point is that the familiar generic evidence assessed here does not meet the standard needed for strong source-specific public confirmation.

This standard is also reversible. If well-controlled studies or unusually deep cases emerge, the comparative conclusion should change. A framework that cannot recognize successful evidence would be dogmatic. The present restraint is warranted precisely because the literal relationship model is allowed to win when it makes and meets a distinctive expectation.

9. The Appropriate Intellectual Update

For the subject, a personal relationship with Jesus may remain the best interpretation of an entire life. This paper does not claim access to every feature of that evidence. For a public audience, the same conclusion may remain underdetermined because the sharable marks have identifiable alternative pathways and are not shown to favor the external-source explanation. The rational updates can therefore differ without either side being dishonest or irrational.

Christians who value intellectual transparency can respond in several ways. They may present relationship language as a confessional interpretation rather than as a public demonstration. They may offer a broader cumulative case in which religious experience plays a limited, explicitly nonspecific role. Or they may develop prospective evidence capable of discriminating the literal claim. What should be avoided is a slide from phenomenological certainty to public causal certainty.

Critics have reciprocal responsibilities. They should not medicalize ordinary religious life, confuse neural realization with disproof, or deny that practices can disclose value and reshape perception. They should distinguish “not publicly established by this evidence” from “false”. The epistemic restraint defended here is symmetrical: do not claim more than the comparison supports.

The practical result is not sterile agnosticism about every experience. It is disciplined labeling. “I experienced this as guidance from Jesus” accurately reports interpretation and experience. “This change shows that the practice helped me” reports a consequence. “This information was unavailable by ordinary means and was transmitted by Jesus” makes a stronger public claim and requires stronger controls. Clear labels permit serious dialogue without erasing first-person meaning.

10. Conclusion

A personal relationship with Jesus can name a rich devotional and moral reality. When it is also offered as evidence of literal reciprocal communication from an external living agent, the public question becomes comparative. Felt presence, guidance impressions, transformation, and culturally patterned testimony have identifiable psychological and cultural pathways. The cited record does not establish that these generic marks are equally probable under the competing explanations; it establishes that their sincerity and importance do not make them source-specific.

Verified nonpublic knowledge could alter the comparison. To do so convincingly, it would need prospective specification where feasible, protection against ordinary information leakage, prespecified blind assessment, complete reporting, and independent corroboration or replication. Even a successful anomaly would require further argument identifying its source. Failure to obtain such a result is evidence against the literal model only where a genuine opportunity and prior expectation have been established; no global negative likelihood is claimed.

The warranted conclusion is therefore bounded restraint. Familiar reports do not, by themselves, strongly publicly confirm literal reciprocal communication with Jesus. This does not prove that no relationship exists, overturn possible first-person warrant, or negate transformative and pragmatic value. The decisive public question is simple: what feature of the evidence is appreciably more expected if Jesus communicates than if the identified human pathways generate and shape the experience? Until such a feature is shown, defenders should not move from phenomenological certainty to public causal certainty, and critics should leave open what the argument has not decided.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central argument is an undercutting inference about public confirmation, not a deductive proof of nonexistence.

- P1.** A body of evidence warrants strong public preference for literal reciprocal communication over a serious comparator only if evaluators have reason to judge that evidence appreciably more expected under literal communication.
- P2.** The familiar evidence assessed here—felt presence and guidance, transformation, and culturally patterned testimony—has independently supported psychological and cultural pathways, and no source-specific feature in those generic marks is shown to be appreciably more expected under literal communication.
- C.** Therefore, those familiar marks do not by themselves warrant strong public preference for literal reciprocal communication.

Premises 1 and 2 validly yield C. Premise 2 is empirical and interpretive, supported by the cited work on absorption, religious practice, inner speech, social cognition, interpretation, and diversity; it neither assigns equal probabilities nor proves an internal origin in any particular case. Properly controlled and independently corroborated or replicated nonpublic information could supply the missing discriminator; no exhaustive survey is claimed. An absent discriminator counts against the literal model only when opportunity and prior expectation are specified. C therefore concerns only the public force of the familiar evidence, not Jesus’s existence, Christianity as a whole, or every religious experience.

References

- Alston, W. P. (1991). *Perceiving god: The epistemology of religious experience*. Cornell University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471254>
- Chen, C. K. (2024). Religious experience and the philosophy of perception. *Think*, 23(66), 5–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175623000295>
- Griffioen, A. L. (2021). *Religious experience*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108699952>
- Hick, J. (2005). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Jung, J.-H. (2025). Is religious experience epistemologically reliable? an embodied-philosophical inquiry. *Religious Studies*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510139X>
- Luhrmann, T. M. (2012). *When god talks back: Understanding the american evangelical relationship with god*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Luhrmann, T. M., Nusbaum, H., & Thisted, R. (2010). The absorption hypothesis: Learning to hear god in evangelical christianity. *American Anthropologist*, 112(1), 66–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01197.x>
- Luhrmann, T. M., Weisman, K., Aulino, F., Brahinsky, J. D., Dulin, J. C., Dzokoto, V. A., Legare, C. H., Lifshitz, M., Ng, E., Ross-Zehnder, N., & Smith, R. E. (2021). Sensing the presence of gods and spirits across cultures and faiths. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(5), e2016649118.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2016649118>
- McKim, R. (2001). *Religious ambiguity and religious diversity*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/0195128354.001.0001>
- Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted christian belief*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>
- Schille-Hudson, E., Weisman, K., & Luhrmann, T. M. (2025). Voice-hearing in the general population: The relationship between inner speech, absorption, and voice-like hallucinations. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 51(Supplement 3), S292–S303. <https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbaf138>
- Schjoedt, U., Stødkilde-Jørgensen, H., Geertz, A. W., & Roepstorff, A. (2009). Highly religious participants recruit areas of social cognition in personal prayer. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 4(2), 199–207.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsn050>
- Sober, E. (2008). *Evidence and evolution: The logic behind the science*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806285>
- Swinburne, R. (2004). *The existence of god* (2nd ed.). Clarendon Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199271672.001.0001>
- Taves, A. (2009). *Religious experience reconsidered: A building-block approach to the study of religion and other special things*. Princeton University Press.
- Webb, M. O. (2022). Religious experience. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2024). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved August 13, 2026, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/religious-experience/>