

Does Religious Distribution Reflect Free Will or Cultural Conditioning — 19

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: [0009-0009-3725-8682](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3725-8682)

Revised August 2026

Central claim

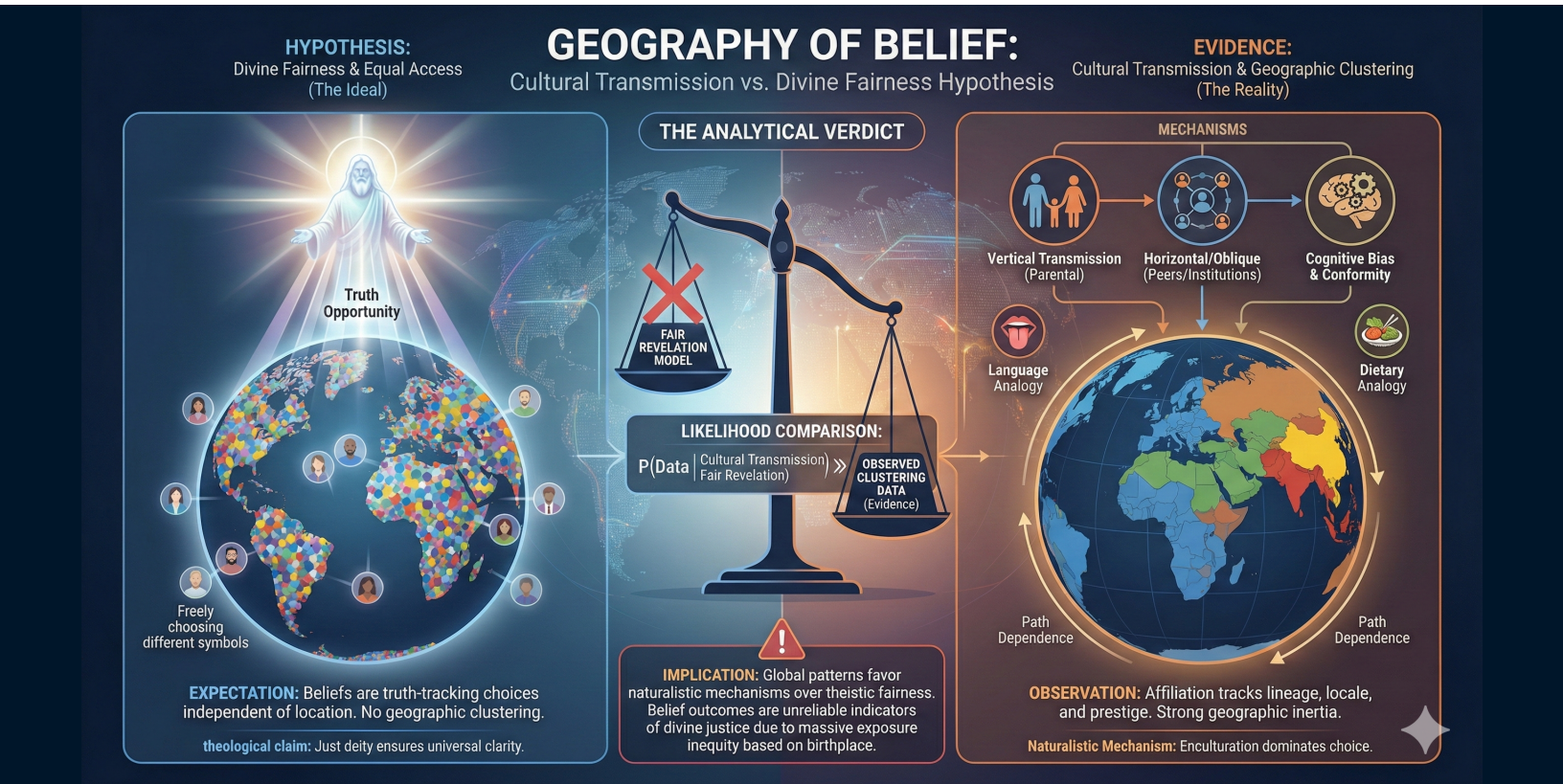
At population level, the global religious distribution bears the signature of cultural conditioning more clearly than that of decontextualized choice on an equal field. Its dependence on family, local majorities, and national history is more expected under a cultural-transmission-dominant account than under *equal-access exclusivism*: the view that a perfectly loving and just deity makes one salvation-relevant creed comparably clear and that outcomes substantially reflect responsible response. This comparison does not deny free agency or theism; it shows that belief outcomes cannot by themselves certify equal access or culpability.

Preview:

Free-choice reading	Expected if access is equal	Cultural pattern observed	Answer
Affiliation substantially records responsible response to one comparably clear creed.	If so, birthplace, parents, and local models should exert less influence than a cultural-transmission-dominant account predicts.	One broad group forms a majority in 194 of 201 countries; family and local religious models also track belief.	The distribution bears culture’s signature more clearly; agency may remain, but outcomes cannot certify equal access or blame.

The contrast is explanatory, not metaphysical: people may choose within culturally structured options, and affiliation is not a perfect measure of opportunity.

Visual preview:



The infographic contrasts equal-access revelation with parental, institutional, cognitive, and geographic transmission. “No geographic clustering” is idealized shorthand for less inherited dependence, not uniform outcomes; “naturalistic mechanism” means ordinary transmission, which is compatible with theism. “Enculturation dominates choice” names population-level predictive dominance, not the disappearance of agency.

Abstract

Religious distribution answers the title's question at the population level: it bears the signature of cultural conditioning more clearly than that of decontextualized free choice. The contrast is explanatory, not metaphysical; individuals may deliberate and convert within socially structured options. This paper compares equal-access exclusivism—a God-concept, meaning a specified conception of a deity, on which perfect love and justice make one salvation-relevant creed comparably clear and public outcomes substantially reflect responsible response—with a cultural-transmission-dominant account. Official estimates show that one of seven broad religion-or-unaffiliated categories forms a majority in 194 of 201 countries and territories. Cross-national studies also find that parental practice and local religious models predict belief in gods, while research on credible commitment, cognition, and lived religion explains how communities make particular beliefs learnable and durable. These strands measure different outcomes, so none directly maps every person's access to a specific creed. Their convergence nevertheless makes inherited social location a powerful predictor of public religious outcomes. That pattern is more expected under cultural transmission than under equal-access exclusivism. The distribution therefore cannot by itself certify divine fairness or blame outsiders. This result does not deny free agency, disprove theism, or exclude inclusivist, universalist, private-warrant, postmortem, or hidden-revelation accounts; it denies that the observed distribution is good evidence of equal access.

Keywords: religious distribution; cultural transmission; free will; divine hiddenness; religious diversity; equal access

1. The Accident of the Available Creed

Imagine telling a child that she freely chose her native language. The claim would be absurd. She can later learn another language, resist local habits, or leave the place that formed her. None of that makes her first linguistic world self-selected. Religious formation is not identical to language learning, but it shares the structure that matters here: a child ordinarily receives a vocabulary, a community of trusted witnesses, ritual practices, stories, and a map of live possibilities before she can compare them.

The title's "or" is therefore explanatory, not metaphysical. It asks whether the worldwide distribution is better read as a record of decontextualized response to equally available truth or as a culturally transmitted pattern within which people still exercise agency. People can change diets, citizenship, and religion, yet their starting preferences and live alternatives remain patterned by what was available, admired, repeated, and socially rewarded. What feels natural from inside a culture often has a traceable history outside the person.

The challenge is addressed especially to Christians and apologists who combine three claims: one creed carries salvation-relevant truth; a perfectly loving and just deity provides people a fair opportunity to recognize and respond to it; and present belief outcomes substantially reflect what individuals have freely done with that opportunity. Call this package **equal-access exclusivism**. It is a God-concept—a specified conception of a deity—rather than theism in general.

The governing thesis is direct. At population level, religious distribution bears the signature of cultural conditioning more clearly than that of decontextualized free choice. If equal-access exclusivism were a good explanation of public outcomes, place of birth, family formation, and local religious models should exert less predictive force than a cultural-transmission-dominant account leads us to expect. The observed record runs in the opposite direction. That does not refute free will. It undermines the move from *people could choose otherwise* to *people were comparably positioned to recognize one creed and are fairly judged by the outcome*.

Three distinctions the argument keeps separate

1. Cultural influence is not determinism: people can reflect, resist, and convert within inherited settings.
2. Voluntary choice is not equal access: evidence, costs, concepts, and trusted testimony can remain radically unequal.
3. A population pattern is not an individual verdict: affiliation can reveal social dependence without measuring any one person's culpability.

These distinctions keep the paper's claim both forceful and bounded. The question is what best explains the public distribution, not whether culture makes revision logically impossible or whether a census can judge an individual conscience.

2. What the Title's Contrast Does—and Does Not—Test

2.1 Competing public-outcome models

The **equal-access reflection model** says that a perfectly loving and just deity intends people to have comparably clear access to one salvation-relevant creed, and that broad affiliation outcomes substantially reflect their responsible response. It need not predict identical percentages everywhere. Migration, persecution, historical timing, and personal refusal could create differences. But if public outcomes are offered as evidence of fair access, unchosen social location should not remain their dominant predictor.

The **cultural-transmission-dominant model** says that the broad distribution of religious affiliation is governed mainly by ordinary mechanisms: parental formation, local majorities, prestige and conformity, costly public commitment, institutional continuity, population change, switching, and cognitively attractive concepts. *Dominant* describes explanatory weight at population level, not total control of persons. The model permits reflection, conversion, and theism; a theist may accept its social science while locating revelation elsewhere.

The two models are rival emphases about what public outcomes record, not exhaustive worldviews. A deity could use cultural transmission, and a culturally formed believer could be warranted. Yet compatibility does not erase the evidential question. If inherited channels distribute incompatible creeds with sharply unequal availability, the pattern cannot straightforwardly show that one creed was made comparably clear to everyone. Revelation may remain possible, but affiliation loses its force as public evidence of equal access.

2.2 Outcomes are imperfect evidence of opportunity

Affiliation is not a transparent window into every person's evidence. Two people exposed to similar institutions may receive different arguments, experience different relationships, or incur different costs for dissent. Census categories also compress internal diversity and strength of commitment. No global table can establish that every outsider is nonresistant or that every adherent is culturally captive.

This limit blocks an easy deductive argument from unequal percentages to injustice. It does not make the distribution irrelevant. Outcomes are often the public traces by which large-scale opportunity claims are assessed. If a model says comparable clarity is widely supplied, strong and persistent dependence on inherited context is less expected than it is under ordinary transmission. The proper conclusion is comparative and defeasible: the pattern shifts support away from the equal-access model unless an independently motivated account explains the mismatch.

2.3 Three evidence levels must not be collapsed

The evidence operates at three levels. Pew's estimates describe broad affiliation categories; the cross-national surveys measure belief in gods, religious practice, or religiosity; and cognitive and lived-religion studies examine mechanisms that make concepts and practices credible, memorable, and durable. None directly measures whether every person has clearly confronted one specific salvation-relevant creed.

The value of the strands lies in convergence, not interchangeability. At each level, public religious outcomes vary with inherited setting and social learning. The cumulative case is therefore against reading the worldwide distribution as a clean record of context-free response. It is not a claim that a general belief measure settles which creed a person encountered, or that every individual belief is merely inherited.

2.4 Why likelihood is the right standard

Evidence need not disprove one hypothesis to favor another. On the law of likelihood, an observation supports one model over a comparator when it is more expected under the first than the second (Sober, 2008). The argument uses that modest standard. It assigns no numerical probability and does not pretend that a country-level diversity score is a sufficient statistic for divine intention.

The question is therefore: would strong kin, local, and national patterning be less surprising if cultural transmission dominates public outcomes, or if those outcomes substantially reflect responses to one comparably clear creed? The cultural model predicts precisely the dependence at issue. The equal-access reflection model needs additional explanations for it.

3. The Cumulative Evidence

No single strand shows that culture fully explains any person's belief, and the strands are not independent coin tosses. Their force comes from convergence: different methods and outcome levels repeatedly connect public religion to inherited and social conditions. Table 1 keeps each contribution beside its main limit.

Evidence strand	Equal-access prediction	Observed pattern	Comparative contribution	Main limit
Country composition	One creed's public accessibility should not remain overwhelmingly coupled to national location.	In 194 of 201 places, one of seven religion-or-unaffiliated categories forms a majority; in 43, one category reaches at least 95 percent.	Strong national concentration is expected under demographic and historical inheritance.	Broad categories conceal denominations, conviction, and individual exposure.
Kin-biased learning	Parents may matter, but should not remain a dominant route to incompatible outcomes if one creed is comparably clear.	Parents' visible religious practice predicts respondents' belief in gods across international samples.	Belief travels through family models, not decontextualized comparison alone.	General belief measures do not identify a specific creed or prove coercion.
Conformist learning	Local religious prevalence should not carry the main epistemic burden across settings with allegedly equal access.	Older adults' visible practice and local religious models predict younger respondents' belief in gods.	Majority context supplies a transmission pathway expected without special revelation.	Surveys use proxies and cannot recover every causal path or opportunity.
Cognitive and practical scaffolding	A comparably clear creed should not remain heavily dependent on tradition-specific conceptual and ritual support.	Cognitive tendencies interact with teaching, testimony, practice, and culturally specific theology.	Ordinary minds and institutions explain both recurring forms and local variation.	Cognitive ease neither establishes falsity nor exhausts religious reasons.

Table 1: Evidence ledger for the comparison. Each row shows what the strand adds and what it cannot establish on its own.

3.1 National concentration is the normal pattern

Pew Research Center's 2025 global estimates draw on more than 2,700 sources covering 201 countries and territories, together representing 99.98 percent of the 2020 world population (Hackett et al., 2025). A 2026 analysis divides those populations among seven broad categories: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, adherents of all other religions, and people with no religious affiliation. One category forms at least half the population in 194 countries and territories; in 43 places, at least 95 percent belongs to one category (Tong, 2026). These categories conceal major internal differences, but the result still shows that national location is ordinarily a powerful clue to broad affiliation.

This is not a claim that borders mechanically cause belief. National populations embody family structure, migration, fertility, political history, institutions, education, law, conversion, and switching. That complexity is exactly what cultural transmission expects. The relevant observation is path dependence: religious populations bear visible marks of the social histories through which they were reproduced.

Equal-access exclusivism could be made compatible with this record. It might say that the one true creed is equally available despite unequal outcomes, or that public affiliation poorly tracks private recognition. But once that move is made, affiliation itself cannot also be offered as evidence that fair clarity has been achieved. Compatibility is not confirmation.

3.2 Family and conformity predict belief

Gervais and Najle analyzed World Values Survey data from 53 countries or regions and found support for kin-biased and conformist cultural learning in belief in gods (Gervais & Najle, 2015).

Ishii and Watanabe preregistered an extended replication using International Social Survey Programme data. Parental religious practice and the visible religious practice of older adults were associated with respondents' belief, supporting both kin-biased and conformist learning across samples and analytic approaches (Ishii & Watanabe, 2024). The findings do not say that parents simply program children or that dissent is impossible. They show that who models commitment, and how common that commitment is, helps predict which beliefs become credible.

Related cross-cultural work compared mentalizing measures with **credibility-enhancing displays**: actions that make a model's professed commitment costly and therefore believable. Across five studies totaling more than 67,000 participants, the mentalizing measures did not consistently distinguish believers from nonbelievers, while exposure to credible religious commitment strongly predicted supernatural belief (Maij et al., 2017). This matters because it locates much of the explanatory work in socially witnessed practice rather than in a culture-independent recognition of one creed.

3.3 Cognition supplies recurring forms; culture supplies particular contents

Cognitive science of religion does not reduce belief to one bias. Willard and Norenzayan found relations among mentalizing, dualism, teleological thinking, and religious or related beliefs, while also testing cultural exposure (Willard & Norenzayan, 2013). De Cruz argues that theological concepts remain continuous with ordinary religious cognition yet also require culturally specific transmission and explicit coherence work (De Cruz, 2014). Together, such work suggests a division of labor: recurring cognitive tendencies help make some kinds of religious representation memorable, while communities teach people which agents, doctrines, texts, and practices to treat as real.

This explanation is compatible with sincere and sophisticated faith. Ammerman's account of lived religion emphasizes how religious meaning is embodied in relationships, objects, stories, institutions, emotion, morality, and everyday practice (Ammerman, 2021). Those dimensions are not defects. They are the human media through which a tradition becomes a lived world. Their evidential relevance is that creed is rarely selected from a neutral menu after culture-free comparison.

The cumulative conclusion can now be stated without collapsing the evidence levels. Demographic concentration shows the large-scale affiliation pattern; family and conformity studies identify routes into general religious belief; cognitive and lived-religion research explains how particular representations become learnable and durable. None shows that a transmitted claim is false, and none measures every person's access to a specific creed. Together, however, they make the public distribution more expected when cultural transmission is dominant than when affiliation is supposed substantially to reflect equally informed responses to one clear revelation.

4. The Fairness Fork

Equal-access exclusivism faces a dilemma:

1. Either a person's affiliation is salvation-relevant evidence of her responsible response to comparably clear truth, or it is not.
2. If it is, the strong dependence of affiliation on inherited context makes the fairness claim difficult to sustain.
3. If it is not, the distribution cannot be used to blame outsiders, certify equal opportunity, or vindicate the clarity of one creed.
4. Therefore, the distribution either pressures the fairness claim or loses the apologetic role assigned to it.

The form is deductively valid. Premise 2 is comparative rather than absolute: the pattern does not prove that every person's opportunity was unfair, but it requires an account of why an allegedly equal field leaves outcomes

so strongly coupled to unequal starting points. A reply that removes belief outcomes from the assessment escapes the pressure only by taking the outcomes out of evidence.

This fork also exposes a double standard. Religious clustering is sometimes treated as irrelevant because culture affects everyone, while favorable conversions are treated as signs that truth breaks through culture. Cultural transmission already predicts both stability and exceptions. A person may convert through marriage, migration, testimony, crisis, argument, or a new community. Exceptions do not refute a probabilistic model. To favor equal-access revelation, conversions would need a distinctive pattern more expected under that model than under ordinary contact and switching.

5. The Strongest Replies and Their Evidential Price

5.1 A divine faculty can warrant specifically Christian belief

Plantinga's Aquinas/Calvin model proposes that, if theism is true and human cognitive design functions properly, a *sensus divinitatis* can produce warranted theistic belief without inferential argument. His extended model appeals to revelation and the internal work of the Holy Spirit to explain how specifically Christian belief could also be warranted (Plantinga, 2000). This is a stronger reply than a generic appeal to religious experience because it addresses a particular creed rather than theism alone.

The present argument does not show that no believer is warranted. It asks whether the distribution is public evidence for comparably clear access to one salvation-relevant creed. Plantinga's model can survive the cultural pattern because warrant need not be inferred from population frequencies. But precisely for that reason, the pattern cannot serve as public calibration of the model. Rival traditions can describe culturally formed convictions in parallel internal terms. The public burden remains to identify a discriminator showing why one set of outputs is truth-connected while incompatible outputs are not.

5.2 Greater goods may require temporary hiddenness

The hiddenness problem begins from the possibility of sincere, nonresistant nonbelief (Schellenberg, 1993). Hiddenness defenders argue that such nonbelief may permit goods such as moral freedom, intellectual development, or forms of relationship that would be unavailable under overwhelming disclosure. Teeninga develops a cumulative "many goods" reply according to which several goods together might justify temporary nonresistant nonbelief (Teeninga, 2017). The reply is not refuted by demographic clustering.

It does, however, revise the target expectation. If hiddenness and unequal religious availability are intentionally permitted for greater goods, then comparably clear access in earthly life is no longer guaranteed in the strong sense at issue. Theism may remain coherent; equal-access exclusivism has been weakened. The same distribution cannot simultaneously be excused as purposeful obscurity and offered as evidence of universal clarity.

5.3 Justice may be adjusted to circumstance

An inclusivist can say that people are assessed only for what they could reasonably know. A universalist may deny that ultimate well-being depends on present affiliation. A postmortem account may relocate decisive opportunity beyond earthly cultural inequality. Each response directly reduces the moral pressure.

Each also concedes the paper's main point about belief outcomes. If explicit earthly affiliation is unnecessary, not finally decisive, or judged relative to unequal evidence, then outsiders cannot be condemned merely for failing to adopt one inherited creed. These replies may improve the theology precisely because they abandon the inference from distribution to equal present access.

5.4 Freedom requires ambiguity and distance

Another reply says that unmistakable disclosure would coerce belief or distort moral freedom. But belief that someone exists does not compel love, trust, or obedience. Clearer evidence can leave ample room for moral response. More importantly, ambiguity is not evenly distributed merely because everyone faces some uncertainty. One person can inherit a dense network of testimony, ritual, and social permission for one creed while another inherits an incompatible network and severe costs for dissent.

If a freedom-preserving distance must vary by culture, the view needs a reason why that asymmetry is necessary and fair. Without one, “freedom” names the very inequality that requires explanation.

5.5 Theism can use cultural transmission

This is the broadest and strongest compatibility reply. A deity might intend religions to develop historically, reveal through many traditions, or value plural exploration. Nothing in the data rules that out. But it is no longer equal-access exclusivism. A pluralist or culturally mediated theology may fit the evidence better because it predicts diversity and development. Its survival demonstrates the paper’s scope limit, not a rescue of the narrower target.

6. What Rational Fairness Requires

The central theme has a practical implication for believers and skeptics alike: agency operates within a culturally structured field. Before treating affiliation as evidence of virtue, vice, obedience, or rebellion, ask what the person actually inherited: which claims were live, which sources were trusted, which alternatives were intelligible, what dissent cost, and what evidence could realistically be obtained. Formal freedom cannot erase those differences.

The same discipline applies inwardly. A Christian should ask whether a sincere Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or nonreligious person who used the same method—deference to family testimony, communal experience, sacred text, and felt confirmation—would be judged equally reasonable. If the method validates incompatible outcomes mainly by local application, the symmetry cannot be broken by insisting that one’s own inherited result is the exception. A public reason must identify a discriminator that rivals could also inspect.

None of this requires pretending that all traditions are equally supported. Evidence can favor one claim. People can reason their way out of inherited views. The corrective is narrower: do not mistake the possibility of revision for equality of starting points, and do not convert a culturally patterned outcome into moral blame without a proportionate account of access.

7. Conclusion

The answer to the title’s question is explanatory rather than metaphysical. At population level, religious distribution bears the signature of cultural conditioning more clearly than that of decontextualized free choice. It carries the expected marks of national history, parental formation, local majorities, costly commitment, cognitive attraction, institutional life, migration, and switching. Contemporary global composition data and cross-national transmission studies converge on that conclusion.

The result favors a cultural-transmission-dominant model over an equal-access reflection model as an explanation of public religious outcomes. It therefore weakens the claim that those outcomes vindicate divine fairness or reveal culpable refusal of one clear salvation-relevant creed. The strongest replies can preserve a form of theism by appealing to private warrant, purposeful hiddenness, circumstance-sensitive judgment, universalism, postmortem opportunity, or plural revelation. Their evidential price is to weaken or abandon the claim that the observed distribution itself displays equal access.

The principal limit is equally clear. Cultural conditioning is not determinism; the studies address different outcome levels; affiliation is not a perfect measure of individual opportunity; and the evidence does not show that no deity exists. The rational change requested is disciplined and humane: treat creed as a culturally situated judgment requiring evidence, not as a moral diagnostic supplied by birthplace. If belief is to carry ultimate consequences, the burden lies on the theology to show genuinely comparable access—not merely logical freedom in radically unequal worlds.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Plain-language reconstruction

- P1.** The equal-access reflection model predicts that public religious outcomes will depend less strongly on inherited setting than a cultural-transmission-dominant model predicts, because one creed is comparably clear and outcomes substantially reflect responsible response.
- P2.** The cultural-transmission-dominant model predicts strong dependence on family, local majorities, institutions, and national history while still allowing reflection and conversion.
- P3.** The observed distribution shows strong inherited dependence across broad national affiliation and cross-national measures of religious belief and practice.
- P4.** That observed pattern is more expected under the cultural-transmission-dominant model than under the equal-access reflection model.
- P5.** Evidence favors one model over a comparator when the evidence is more expected under the first.

Conclusion. The observed distribution favors the cultural-transmission-dominant model as an explanation of public religious outcomes and cannot by itself certify equal access or culpability.

Scope. This comparative result does not deny free agency, determine any individual's opportunity, disprove theism, or exclude alternative accounts of revelation and salvation.

A.2 Symbols

- E : the observed strong dependence of religious affiliation on family, local majorities, and national setting.
- C : the cultural-transmission-dominant public-outcome model.
- A : the equal-access reflection model derived from equal-access exclusivism.
- P : conditional probability notation used to compare how expected the evidence is under each model.
- $\mathcal{L}_{C,A}(E)$: the likelihood ratio comparing how expected E is under C and A .

A.3 Symbolic form

The central comparison is

$$\mathcal{L}_{C,A}(E) = \frac{P(E | C)}{P(E | A)} > 1 \implies E \text{ favors } C \text{ over } A.$$

Here E is the empirical pattern summarized in Table 1; C predicts that pattern through family, conformity, demography, and institutions while permitting agency; and A makes the same degree of dependence less expected because public outcomes are supposed substantially to reflect responses to comparably clear access. Thus $\mathcal{L}_{C,A}(E) > 1$ states directional comparative support, not a measured numerical Bayes factor.

Validity. The conclusion that E favors C over A follows by the likelihood principle if the comparative premise $P(E | C) > P(E | A)$ is true. The further claims that no choice is free or that theism is false do not follow and are not part of the reconstruction.

Premise support. P3 is supported by official global composition estimates and cross-national studies of kin-biased and conformist learning, but those sources measure different outcome levels and do not determine individual opportunity. P1, P2, and P4 are model claims whose force depends on defining A as a genuinely equal-access view that treats public outcomes as substantial evidence of responsible response. A hidden, pluralist, inclusivist,

or culturally mediated view changes that prediction. The comparison therefore supplies defeasible explanatory support, not deductive certainty about metaphysics.

References

- Ammerman, N. T. (2021). *Studying lived religion: Contexts and practices*. New York University Press.
- De Cruz, H. (2014). Cognitive science of religion and the study of theological concepts. *Topoi*, 33(2), 487–497. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-013-9168-9>
- Gervais, W. M., & Najle, M. B. (2015). Learned faith: The influences of evolved cultural learning mechanisms on belief in gods. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(4), 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000044>
- Hackett, C., Stonawski, M., Tong, Y., Kramer, S., Shi, A. F., & Fahmy, D. (2025). *How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020*. Pew Research Center. <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>
- Ishii, T., & Watanabe, K. (2024). Cultural transmission and religious belief: An extended replication of Gervais and Najle (2015) using data from the International Social Survey Programme. *PLOS ONE*, 19(6), e0305635. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0305635>
- Maij, D. L. R., van Harreveld, F., Gervais, W., Schrag, Y., Mohr, C., & van Elk, M. (2017). Mentalizing skills do not differentiate believers from non-believers, but credibility enhancing displays do. *PLOS ONE*, 12(8), e0182764. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0182764>
- Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted Christian belief*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>
- Schellenberg, J. L. (1993). *Divine hiddenness and human reason*. Cornell University Press.
- Sober, E. (2008). *Evidence and evolution: The logic behind the science*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806285>
- Teeninga, L. (2017). Divine hiddenness, greater goods, and accommodation. *Sophia*, 56, 589–603. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-016-0561-x>
- Tong, Y. (2026). *Religious diversity around the world*. Pew Research Center. <https://doi.org/10.58094/ef8g-cr20>
- Willard, A. K., & Norenzayan, A. (2013). Cognitive biases explain religious belief, paranormal belief, and belief in life's purpose. *Cognition*, 129(2), 379–391. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.07.016>