

Personal Gods, Shadows, and Holy Books — 02

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Central claim

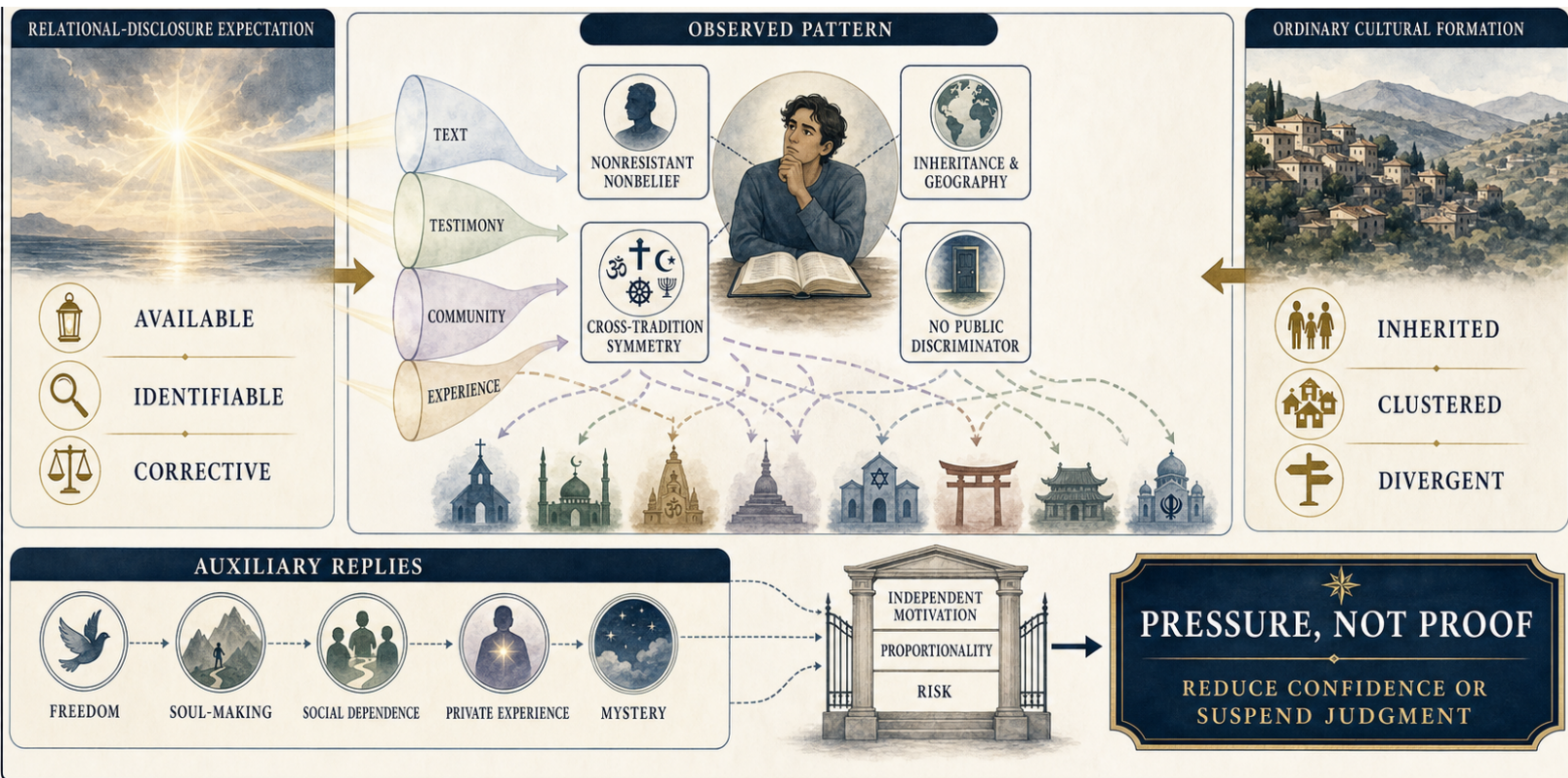
If the Christian God perfectly loves every capable person and wants a conscious relationship with each one, sincere seekers should not remain dependent on ancient books, inherited loyalties, and private impressions that look much the same across rival religions. Yet that is the public pattern, and ordinary cultural transmission predicts it better than universally available, source-identifying revelation does. This does not rule out every god or every private experience; it gives readers serious reason to reduce confidence in strong Christian disclosure claims and to withhold allegiance where the evidence does not identify its source.

Preview:

Christian claim	Expected difference	Observed pattern	Rational response
A loving God seeks conscious relationship and authorizes a message for everyone.	Sincere people should be able to identify the divine source across cultures.	Belief follows inheritance; rival faiths use similar evidence; some seekers find no God.	Reduce confidence in the disclosure claim unless a genuine discriminator appears.

The conclusion concerns a strong Christian promise of available relationship. It does not deny every possible deity, every private justification, or every human value found in sacred texts.

Visual preview:



*The map contrasts an available and identifiable divine source with the inherited, clustered, and religiously divergent pattern we observe. Familiar replies pass through three tests—*independent support, proportionality, and risk*—before the limited conclusion: *evidential pressure, not deductive proof*.*

Abstract

Christianity commonly presents God as perfectly loving, able to communicate, desirous of conscious relationship, and the source of a message meant for human beings across cultures. That claim creates an expected difference: sincere and capable seekers should have some dependable way to identify the divine source rather than merely inherit one local interpretation. The public record does not display that difference. Apparently nonresistant nonbelief occurs; religious identity remains strongly shaped by family and geography; incompatible traditions appeal to similar combinations of scripture, testimony, community, and experience; and no shared corrective reliably separates one claimed revelation from its rivals. This pattern is more expected if religions develop through ordinary human cognition and cultural transmission than if a perfectly capable communicator is providing universally available, source-identifying revelation. The case is cumulative, and four explicit arguments carry it: an expected-difference argument, a symmetry argument, an every-outcome problem for unconstrained replies, and the claim that a book can preserve a message without identifying a divine author. Freedom, soul-making, social dependence, private experience, transcendence, sin, and mystery may explain some ambiguity, but none answers the challenge merely by naming a possible good. The principal limit is important: the evidence does not disprove every god, cancel every person's private justification, or show that sacred texts have no value. It does give reflective inquirers substantial reason to reduce confidence in strong Christian disclosure claims and to suspend allegiance when the alleged source cannot be distinguished from ordinary religious formation.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; revelation; religious diversity; nonresistant nonbelief; religious epistemology; cultural transmission

1. If God Wants Relationship, Why So Much Guesswork?

This paper is addressed especially to Christians who say that God loves every person, wants a conscious relationship with each capable person, and has authorized a message by which people can know who God is. The challenge is direct. A perfectly loving and competent communicator should not leave sincere people unable to tell whether they are encountering God, their upbringing, their own minds, or another community's inherited tradition. Yet that is precisely the uncertainty in which human beings ordinarily find themselves.

The problem is not that God would use books. Books can preserve testimony, carry ideas across centuries, and invite sustained reflection. The problem is that holy books arrive through the same human channels as other ancient writings: authorship, editing, translation, canon formation, institutional custody, and competing interpretation. A book may bear the claimed source's outline while leaving the source unidentified. That is why the title speaks of a shadow. A shadow can be evidence, but different objects can cast similar shadows. Before it warrants trust in a particular person, it must help us tell whose shadow it is.

Nor does the argument demand a deity who appears continuously in the sky. Michael Rea argues that divine presence may be mediated through material, linguistic, and liturgical practices, while Chad Engelland contends that a creator, unlike a finite object, could be known indirectly through effects rather than appearing as one more thing in the world (Engelland, 2026; Rea, 2018). Those are serious proposals. They change the expected form of disclosure, but they do not remove the need for identification. If Christians claim not merely an ultimate source but a perfectly loving personal God with a determinate message, the available effects must support that richer identity rather than equally fitting incompatible interpretations.

The target must therefore be stated carefully. The argument examines a strong Christian disclosure claim with four parts:

1. God is a perfectly loving personal reality.
2. God knows each person's situation and can communicate without error.
3. God wants every capable, nonresistant person to have a genuine opportunity for conscious relationship.
4. God authorizes a recognizably Christian message as an adequate route to that relationship.

Some Christian theologies reject one of these claims. They may deny that conscious recognition is universally intended in this life, relocate the opportunity after death, or treat relationship as possible without explicit belief. Such views may escape part of the argument. They do so by narrowing the promise. They cannot keep the full rhetoric of universally available personal relationship while quietly abandoning the expectation that gives that rhetoric content.

The contemporary hiddenness debate begins with J. L. Schellenberg's contention that perfect love is incompatible with nonresistant nonbelief (Schellenberg, 1993, 2015). Daniel Howard-Snyder and others have challenged the bridges between love, belief, and relationship (Howard-Snyder, 1996). This paper does not need the strongest deductive conclusion that no perfectly loving God exists. Its claim is comparative and more modest: the amount and distribution of religious ambiguity fit ordinary cultural formation better than the strong Christian disclosure claim unless the Christian supplies a well-supported reason to expect this pattern.

Three distinctions keep the challenge fair. *Recognition* is identifying that a particular person exists and is addressing you. *Relationship* is reciprocal awareness and response. *Allegiance* is trust, worship, obedience, or endorsement. Clearer recognition need not force relationship, and relationship need not force allegiance. We regularly know that another person exists while distrusting, resisting, or rejecting that person. This matters because a common reply treats evidence as though it would compel love. It would not.

The governing expectation

If a perfectly loving God wants conscious relationship with every capable and nonresistant person, and if that God authorizes a message for this purpose, then sincere people should have some dependable way to identify the source across cultural settings. The expected difference is not spectacle or forced obedience. It is reliable recognition.

2. The Cumulative Case from the World We Actually See

No single observation settles the issue. The force comes from several strands that point in the same direction. Each strand has limits; together they form a pattern that the disclosure claim must explain.

2.1 Some sincere seekers find no God

Some people actively desire a relationship with a perfectly loving God, pray, study, participate in religious life, and still find no divine person to recognize. We cannot inspect another person's motives perfectly. Self-deception and resistance are real possibilities. But the universal claim that every persistent nonbeliever is secretly resistant is itself an empirical and moral accusation. It requires evidence beyond the fact of nonbelief.

If "resistant" simply means "did not become a believer," the explanation is circular. It turns the outcome into proof of the hidden cause. Max Baker-Hyatt's recent treatment of sin-based replies distinguishes partial explanations from universal ones and argues that several observed patterns make it difficult to attribute every case of nonbelief to the individual's vice (Baker-Hyatt, 2025). That is the proportionate conclusion. Some nonbelief may involve resistance; the existence and distribution of apparently sincere nonbelief still place pressure on a promise of universal relational availability.

2.2 Religion follows family and geography

Where people are born, how they are raised, which institutions surround them, and which communities they trust strongly influence religious identity. Pew Research Center's large global analysis models childhood affiliation, adult switching, fertility, age structure, mortality, and migration; it confirms that religious populations change through recognizable social and demographic processes (Hackett et al., 2025). Adam Green rightly warns that

“belief in God” is not a simple quantity: folk practice, explicit doctrine, emotion, behavior, and metaphysical belief do not always travel together (Green, 2025). Crude head counts cannot reveal every person’s inward relation to the divine.

The complication does not erase the pattern. Public religion is extensively inherited. Stephen Maitzen argues that the uneven distribution of theistic belief is more expected on a non-theistic explanation than on relational theism (Maitzen, 2006). Max Baker-Hytech replies that mutual dependence is itself valuable: human beings learn through testimony, tradition, and one another, so clustered belief need not be surprising if God exists (Baker-Hytech, 2016). Andrew Blanton presses the unresolved question: why could God not preserve the goods of social learning while supplying correction when inheritance produces serious error about God (Blanton, 2025)?

That question is decisive. The challenge is not that a divine message travels socially. Nearly all important knowledge does. The challenge is that a supposedly universal route to relationship remains so dependent on birthplace and community that incompatible identities persist without a reliable corrective.

2.3 Rival religions use similar credentials

Sacred texts, ancient testimony, conversion stories, inward assurance, answered-prayer reports, moral transformation, communal continuity, and revered teachers appear across incompatible traditions. This does not make all religions equally credible. Their historical claims, internal coherence, and evidence may differ. The point is narrower: a form of evidence that is readily produced by several rivals cannot, by itself, identify one rival as uniquely true.

Robert McKim places religious ambiguity and diversity near the center of responsible judgment (McKim, 2001). William Alston argues that religious experience may have genuine initial evidential force within an established practice, and Alvin Plantinga offers an account on which Christian belief could be warranted if produced by properly functioning faculties and divine action (Alston, 1991; Plantinga, 2000). These accounts help explain how a believer might be personally justified. They do not yet give outsiders a public method for deciding whether a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or other source attribution is correct.

The cognitive science of religion sharpens this restraint without proving that religion is false. Ann Taves shows how experiences classified as religious can be studied in terms of ordinary cognitive, emotional, and social components (Taves, 2009). Research on credibility-enhancing displays and cultural learning explains how costly behavior, trusted testimony, and familiar interpretive habits reinforce commitment (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017; White et al., 2021). Helen De Cruz argues that such research cuts in more than one direction: human receptivity to religious ideas may fit some theistic expectations, while cultural variation intensifies hiddenness (De Cruz, 2016). The proper inference is not “psychology explains God away.” It is that ordinary human mechanisms already predict many generic features of religious experience, so those features have limited power to identify one divine source.

2.4 No public correction overcomes the inheritance effect

Religions propose miracles, prophecy, scripture, historical events, spiritual fruit, philosophical coherence, and personal encounter as discriminators. Some deserve serious examination. Yet no shared method has produced source-identifying reliability strong enough to overcome prior formation and generate broad convergence among comparably informed, sincere inquirers.

Consensus is not required for truth. Bias can defeat good evidence, experts can disagree, and different people possess different information. Still, persistent disagreement becomes part of the evidence when the claim under examination includes a perfectly capable communicator who wants universal recognition. A good message can be misunderstood. A perfect communicator with unlimited access to each hearer’s situation should also be capable of correcting predictable misidentification.

Evidence strand	Why it pressures the claim	Main limit
Apparently sincere nonbelief	Some willing seekers cannot identify a divine partner.	We cannot know every person’s motives perfectly.
Inheritance and geography	Religious confidence tracks ordinary social transmission.	Social learning can be valuable and does not by itself imply falsity.
Cross-tradition symmetry	Rival faiths generate similar texts, testimony, and experiences.	Similar forms may differ in historical or evidential quality.
No shared corrective	No public method reliably resolves source attribution across cultures.	Disagreement alone never proves that all sides are false.

The table is an evidence ledger, not four separate proofs. Each row states one expectation failure and its principal boundary. The cumulative point is that all four arise naturally when religions grow through ordinary cognition, testimony, institutions, and history. The strong Christian disclosure claim needs additional explanation for each strand and for their convergence.

3. Four Arguments That Carry the Pressure

Technical labels can hide the simplicity of the reasoning. The central case can be stated in four short arguments.

1. The expected-difference argument

1. If the strong Christian disclosure claim is true, sincere and capable people should have a dependable route to recognizing the divine source.
2. The public religious record contains no such route across cultures.
3. Therefore, the public record counts against the strong disclosure claim.

The form is deductively valid if “counts against” means that the absent expected difference lowers confidence. The second premise is supported inductively by the cumulative evidence; it is not a theorem about every private case.

2. The symmetry argument

1. A method that similarly confirms incompatible claims cannot, without an added discriminator, identify one of them as true.
2. Scripture, inherited testimony, communal validation, and interpreted experience similarly confirm incompatible religious claims.
3. Therefore, those methods do not publicly identify Christianity as true without an added discriminator.

The argument does not say that all traditions are equal in every respect. It says that a Christian may not count a form of support as decisive at home while dismissing the materially similar form when it supports a rival.

3. The every-outcome problem

1. If clarity, ambiguity, belief, nonbelief, convergence, fragmentation, and every distribution between them are all treated as equally compatible with divine love, no possible public pattern can count against the claim.
2. A claim protected from every possible pattern cannot use a favorable pattern as public confirmation.
3. Therefore, a reply to hiddenness must exclude or make less expected at least some observable patterns.

This is not a demand that theology become a laboratory science. It is a demand that explanation differ from rescue. A reason offered only after the evidence appears, with no independent support and no conceivable limit, preserves logical possibility by giving up public evidential force.

4. The holy-book argument

1. A medium can communicate a message without reliably identifying its ultimate source.
2. Holy books carry humanly mediated messages that receive incompatible divine source attributions and lack a shared correction mechanism.
3. Therefore, the existence and influence of a holy book do not by themselves identify its authorizing source as God.

A book can still contain wisdom, history, poetry, moral insight, and testimony. The conclusion concerns source attribution. “It appears in scripture” identifies a medium and a community’s judgment. It does not complete the argument to divine authorship.

4. Comparing Two Explanations Without Fake Precision

The comparison need not be “Christianity or atheism.” A narrower contrast is enough. On one side is the strong Christian disclosure claim. On the other is ordinary cultural formation: religious beliefs and experiences arise through human cognition, testimony, institutions, local history, and environmental conditions without a universally effective divine communication coordinating recognition.

Ordinary cultural formation does not entail that no supernatural reality exists. A deistic creator, a nonpersonal ultimate reality, an uninvolved god, or other possibilities could coexist with the claim that the public religious map is produced through ordinary social processes. This local comparison prevents the argument from reaching beyond its evidence.

The central judgment is qualitative: the combined pattern of sincere nonbelief, cultural inheritance, rival symmetry, and absent correction is more expected under ordinary cultural formation than under the strong Christian disclosure claim. Elliott Sober’s account of likelihood helps clarify the boundary: evidence may favor one explanation over another without telling us the explanations’ total probability or settling all background evidence (Sober, 2008). No responsible numerical ratio is available here, and none is needed.

A Christian may retain belief because of other arguments, prior commitments, or private experience. The paper’s claim is that this public evidence pushes in the other direction. To resist that pressure, the Christian needs more than the statement that God *might* have a reason. The proposed reason must help us understand why this much ambiguity, distributed in this way, is fitting.

Three questions distinguish an explanation from an escape route:

1. **Independent support:** Is the proposed divine reason grounded in a defensible account of love, freedom, embodiment, community, or value rather than inferred only from the need to save the claim?
2. **Proportionality:** Does the proposed good require this degree and distribution of ambiguity, or could the good remain with clearer identification?
3. **Risk:** What public pattern would have been less expected if the proposed reason were true?

These tests do not assume that human beings can know every divine reason. They ask whether a reason offered as an explanation actually guides expectation.

5. The Strongest Replies—and What They Must Explain

5.1 Clearer evidence would compromise freedom

Michael Murray's well-known reply connects hiddenness with the danger that overwhelming awareness of an infinitely powerful judge could coerce human response (Murray, 1993). The strongest version is psychological rather than logical: continuous, terrifying salience might distort motives and produce prudential submission rather than love.

This may rule out some forms of disclosure. It does not explain the full distance between terror and our present ambiguity. Recognition is not allegiance. We know that parents, rulers, employers, and estranged partners exist without being compelled to love or obey them. In ordinary life, informed agency usually requires knowing who is involved and what options are real. A loving God could provide stable, nonthreatening recognition while leaving character, trust, worship, and obedience open.

The freedom reply therefore needs to show why enough clarity for relationship would itself destroy freedom. Naming the danger of overwhelming spectacle does not establish that sincere nonbelief is necessary.

5.2 Ambiguity enables growth and social dependence

Seeking under uncertainty can cultivate patience, courage, humility, interpretation, and mutual dependence. These are genuine goods. Yet relationships commonly foster growth through interaction rather than anonymity. A teacher may let students struggle while remaining identifiable. A parent may allow risk while remaining available. Communities can transmit knowledge while using records, multiple witnesses, and feedback to correct error.

The relevant comparison is not ambiguity versus a world with no struggle. It is our actual religious uncertainty versus a world with somewhat clearer source identification and all the remaining moral difficulty of life. Soul-making must explain why misidentifying the teacher, receiving incompatible instructions, or never recognizing any teacher is needed for the good. Social dependence must explain why a perfect communicator would not correct inherited failure where conscious relationship is said to matter universally.

5.3 God offers morally purposive evidence, not neutral proof

Paul Moser argues that divine evidence should serve moral transformation rather than detached curiosity (Moser, 2008). This rightly challenges the image of God as an object delivered for spectator inspection. An encounter with a morally perfect person would make demands on the inquirer.

The difficulty remains source identification. Rival communities also interpret guilt, love, surrender, awe, and moral transformation as divine address. A person must distinguish God from conscience, social pressure, charisma, trauma, wish fulfillment, or another tradition's revelation. If "receptive" means "arrives at the favored conclusion," the reply becomes circular. Morally purposive evidence answers hiddenness only if it reliably brings sincere people into an identifiable relationship without defining every failure as moral refusal.

5.4 Private experience can justify the believer

Private experience may carry more weight for the subject than for an outsider. Alston and Plantinga are right to resist the assumption that all rational belief must begin with a public argument. Perception, memory, testimony, and other minds are not ordinarily established from scratch before they may be trusted.

Two concessions follow. Public ambiguity does not show that every believer is irrational, and an outsider may lack evidence available to an experiencer. But the distribution problem remains. Some sincere people report no divine encounter; others report incompatible divine objects. An account showing how Christian experience *could* be warranted if Christianity is true does not show why experiences are distributed as they are or how rival source attributions should be publicly compared.

5.5 God is transcendent and cannot appear like a person

Rea and Engelland warn against treating God as a finite embodied agent. The warning is appropriate. The argument asks for reliable reference, not a divine body. If order, contingency, consciousness, moral experience, or gratitude point toward an ultimate source, further reasoning is still required to identify that source as perfectly loving, universally relational, Christian, and the authorizer of particular texts.

Transcendence may explain why God does not appear as one object among others. It does not by itself explain why the people allegedly addressed cannot agree about the addresser or the message. If human concepts cannot identify God at all, positive theology loses content together with criticism. If indirect identification is possible, its ability to distinguish the claimed source remains open to examination.

5.6 Nonbelievers resist God through sin

People do resist unwelcome evidence. No serious critic should idealize every seeker. The problem is turning a possible partial explanation into a universal verdict. If nonbelief itself proves resistance, while belief is compatible with equal pride, cruelty, carelessness, or dogmatism, the explanation predicts no independent relationship between receptivity and recognition.

Baker-Hytch identifies difficulties for universal sin-based accounts involving people without a developed monotheistic concept, cultural distributions, and the weak apparent correlation between theistic belief and the relevant virtues. Partial sin-based accounts may explain some cases (Baker-Hytch, 2025). To explain the whole pattern, however, defenders need indicators of resistance specified independently of whether the person accepts Christianity. Otherwise the reply stigmatizes doubt while protecting the claim from evidence.

5.7 God may have reasons beyond human understanding

Finite people should expect not to grasp every reason available to an unlimited intelligence. This blocks the confident statement that God *could have no* sufficient reason for any hiddenness. It does not make observation irrelevant.

The standard must be applied symmetrically. If human limitations prevent us from judging what perfect love would do, they also weaken confident inferences that observed events reveal perfect love. Mystery can reduce the force of the critic's expectation, but it simultaneously reduces the positive explanatory content of the religious claim. Used only when evidence is adverse, mystery is a one-way shield rather than a reason.

6. What Would We Expect to See If the Claim Were True?

The argument becomes fairer when it states what would weaken it. Confidence in the strong Christian disclosure claim should rise if reality displayed one or more of the following:

- a cross-cultural practice that reliably led unprimed, sincere inquirers toward the same source-identifying claims;
- independently verifiable and specific information delivered through the claimed revelation at rates clearly different from rival traditions and ordinary causes;
- strong evidence that apparently nonresistant nonbelief is rare once resistance is identified by criteria that also apply to believers;
- a well-supported account showing why freedom, embodiment, community, or relationship requires the observed degree and distribution of ambiguity; or
- stable corrective feedback that exposed mistaken religious attribution without forcing love or obedience.

The case would also lose relevance if Christians clearly abandoned the universal present-relational claim. A theology may hold that God has no intention of being consciously recognized by every capable person in this life. That view is less vulnerable to the argument, but it promises less. The point is not to prevent revision. It is to prevent a claim from shrinking during criticism and expanding again during preaching.

What would not weaken the argument by itself? More testimony of the same religiously non-discriminating kind, a bare appeal to unknown goods, or the classification of every counterexample as insincere. Nor would showing that some believer is personally justified. The challenge concerns the public pattern generated by a universal claim, not the entire evidential life of every individual.

7. The Rational and Moral Response

The public evidence supports a calibrated response, not an indiscriminate rejection of religion. A person with a powerful private experience or a wider philosophical case may reasonably weigh more than the evidence discussed here. Religious beliefs also come in degrees. Lower confidence need not mean immediate certainty that Christianity is false.

But public ambiguity should change something. For an inquirer who lacks source-specific private evidence, the observed pattern supplies a serious defeater for confident acceptance of the strong Christian disclosure claim. Suspension, agnosticism, or substantially reduced confidence is reasonable. Allegiance should not outrun identification. If the evidence does not distinguish the person allegedly asking for trust, withholding worship and obedience is not a moral failure; it is ordinary care in a high-stakes relationship.

The argument also exposes a double standard. Christians routinely decline to treat another religion's scripture, testimony, transformation, and inward assurance as sufficient proof of that religion. They ask whether the text is reliable, the experience is correctly interpreted, and the community's reasoning is circular. The same questions must apply at home. A method that becomes compelling only after the favored tradition is assumed does not identify the favored tradition.

Religious institutions therefore carry a practical responsibility. Stigmatizing doubt, treating every dissenter as secretly corrupt, or demanding confidence beyond the evidence amplifies the hiddenness problem. A community confident in truth should welcome honest comparison, name uncertainty, distinguish recognition from allegiance, and state what evidence would change its mind. Insulation protects institutions. It does not reveal God.

Nonbelievers also owe restraint. Cultural causation does not entail falsity. Cognitive science does not show that every religious experience is illusory. Disagreement does not prove that all parties are wrong. The conclusion is comparative and revisable: the public pattern fits ordinary religious formation better than it fits the strong promise of universal, source-identifying Christian disclosure.

8. Conclusion

A Shadow Is Not Yet a Person

Personal gods, shadows, and holy books belong to one problem. A personal God is said to want relationship. Shadows are the ambiguous traces through which that person is inferred. Holy books are powerful human media said to identify the source and message. The question is whether those traces distinguish the attributed person as well as that person's love, purpose, and communicative ability lead us to expect.

They do not. Some sincere seekers find no divine partner. Religious identity remains deeply tied to family and geography. Incompatible traditions offer similar combinations of scripture, testimony, community, and interpreted experience. No shared corrective reliably separates one claimed revelation from its rivals. These observations are not four unrelated complaints. They form a cumulative pattern that ordinary cultural transmission predicts with ease and that a universally relational Christian God must explain.

The principal replies identify real possibilities. Overwhelming display might distort freedom. Uncertainty can foster growth. Communities and testimony are valuable. Private experience may justify its subject. A creator may be known indirectly. Some nonbelief may involve resistance, and finite minds may miss divine reasons. But possibility is not explanation. Each reply must show why its proposed good calls for this amount and distribution of ambiguity, and it must leave some pattern less expected than another.

The conclusion is therefore firm but bounded. The evidence does not prove that no god exists, that every believer is irrational, or that sacred books contain no wisdom. It does show that the public religious world bears against strong Christian claims of universally available, source-identifying relationship. Where no reliable discriminator appears, reducing confidence or suspending judgment is not rebellion. It is the rational response to evidence that does not identify its alleged source.

A final challenge to the Christian reader

Ask whether you would accept the same evidential pattern from a rival faith. Would its ancient book, inherited testimony, transformative experiences, and assurance of hidden reasons be enough to identify its deity and command your allegiance? If not, what feature available to sincere outsiders makes the Christian case different?

Then ask what public pattern would count against your present claim. If greater clarity confirms God's love, but ambiguity also confirms God's wisdom; if belief confirms grace, but nonbelief confirms resistance; if convergence confirms truth, but fragmentation confirms divine respect for culture, then every outcome has been made favorable. The belief is no longer supported by the outcomes, because no outcome is allowed to oppose it.

A God worthy of trust need not satisfy every human demand or remove every uncertainty. But a tradition that asks for trust in God's name must do more than point to a shadow and insist that doubt is blameworthy. It must help the seeker identify whose shadow it is. Until it can, withholding allegiance is not a refusal of truth. It is fidelity to the same standard of honest recognition that responsible trust requires everywhere else.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

This appendix states the paper’s central reasoning in two complementary forms. The first is a premise–conclusion reconstruction—syllogistic in the broad sense of making each inferential step explicit. The second expresses the same comparative claim with conditional probabilities. Neither form turns the paper into a deductive proof that no God exists. The empirical premise remains inductive, and the conclusion concerns the direction in which the public evidence should move rational confidence.

A.1 Premise–conclusion reconstruction

- P1:** When a body of evidence is more expected under a live comparator than under a target claim, that evidence counts against the target relative to the comparator.
- P2:** The strong Christian disclosure claim leads us to expect that capable, sincere, nonresistant seekers across cultures will have a dependable public route to identifying the divine source and its authorized message.
- P3:** The public record instead contains apparently nonresistant nonbelief, strong inheritance and geography effects, similar credentials for incompatible religions, and no shared corrective that reliably identifies one claimed revelation as divine.
- P4:** That combined record is more expected if religions develop through ordinary human cognition and cultural transmission than if universally available, source-identifying Christian disclosure is occurring.
- P5:** Rational confidence should respond to this comparative evidential difference unless sufficiently strong independent evidence offsets it.
- P6:** High-cost allegiance to an alleged speaker should not exceed the available evidence that identifies who the speaker is.
- C1:** Therefore, the public religious record counts against the strong Christian disclosure claim relative to ordinary cultural formation.
- C2:** Therefore, an inquirer who lacks sufficiently strong offsetting evidence has reason to reduce confidence in that claim or suspend judgment.
- C3:** Therefore, withholding allegiance until the alleged source is adequately identified is rational rather than culpable resistance.

A.2 Symbols

Let the symbols have the following meanings:

T: the strong Christian disclosure claim assessed in this paper;

C: ordinary cultural formation without universally effective, source-identifying divine communication;

D: a dependable, cross-cultural public route by which capable and nonresistant seekers can identify the divine source;

E: the combined public record described in P3, which includes the absence of *D*;

B: relevant background evidence and prior commitments other than *E*;

Pr: the rational-probability function; in $\text{Pr}(E \mid T, B)$, the vertical divider marks conditioning and the comma joins background assumptions;

$\leadsto$: the defeasible expectation relation: the proposition on its left makes the proposition on its right expected without asserting an exceptionless material conditional;

$\rightarrow$: the exceptionless material conditional “if the proposition on the left is true, then the proposition on the right is true”;

$\neg$: the negation of the expression that follows it;

$\models$: the expression on the left includes or entails the expression on the right; and

$\therefore$: the conclusion marker “therefore.”

A.3 Symbolic comparative form

The target claim and observed record can then be summarized as

$$T \rightsquigarrow D, \quad E \models \neg D. \quad (1)$$

The paper's central comparative premise is

$$0 < \Pr(E \mid T, B) < \Pr(E \mid C, B). \quad (2)$$

No numerical values are asserted. Equation (2) states only that the combined pattern is more expected under C than under T , holding the relevant background B fixed. Assuming nonzero prior probabilities for T and C , Bayes's rule gives the corresponding odds form:

$$\frac{\Pr(C \mid E, B)}{\Pr(T \mid E, B)} = \frac{\Pr(E \mid C, B)}{\Pr(E \mid T, B)} \cdot \frac{\Pr(C \mid B)}{\Pr(T \mid B)}. \quad (3)$$

From Equation (2), the first ratio on the right side of Equation (3) is greater than one. Therefore,

$$\frac{\Pr(C \mid E, B)}{\Pr(T \mid E, B)} > \frac{\Pr(C \mid B)}{\Pr(T \mid B)}. \quad (4)$$

Equation (4) is the symbolic core of the paper's thesis: adding the public record E shifts rational comparative confidence toward C and away from T . It does not imply $\Pr(T \mid E, B) = 0$. If B contains strong independent evidence for T , a person may still assign T substantial or even greater total probability. The narrower conclusion remains: E pushes against T , and a person without sufficient countervailing support should reduce confidence or suspend judgment.

A.4 Why strict modus tollens would overstate the case

The following argument is deductively valid:

$$T \rightarrow D, \quad \neg D, \quad \therefore \neg T. \quad (5)$$

But this paper does not assume the exceptionless first premise. The strongest replies to divine hiddenness propose reasons why T might be true even when D is absent. The paper's response is not that those possibilities are logically incoherent. It is that a merely possible reason does not erase an evidential shortfall. Replacing $T \rightarrow D$ with the defeasible expectation $T \rightsquigarrow D$ yields the comparative update in Equations (2)–(4), not the categorical conclusion $\neg T$. That is why the paper concludes with evidential pressure, reduced confidence, and warranted suspension rather than a purported proof of atheism.

Validity. Given P1 and P4, C1 follows as an application of the stated comparative-evidence rule. C2 follows from C1 together with P5. C3 follows from the source-identification shortfall in P3 together with P6. In the symbolic counterpart, Equation (4) follows from Bayes's rule and the comparative-likelihood premise in Equation (2). The reconstruction is valid at those stated bridges; it does not derive the categorical conclusion $\neg T$.

Premise support. P1, P5, and P6 are conceptual or normative bridge principles about comparative evidence, rational confidence, and responsible trust. P2 interprets the strong Christian claim under examination. P3 is an empirical generalization supported by the evidence reviewed in Sections 2 and 5, while P4 and Equation (2) express the paper's comparative and defeasible assessment of that record. Someone may reject or qualify these premises without finding a formal contradiction. The reconstruction also displays the argument's boundary: none of the conclusions says that every possible deity is absent, every believer is irrational, or every private experience lacks evidential force for its subject.

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