

The Accommodation Burden

Divine Power, Human Understanding, and the Failure of Sacred Opacity

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Central claim

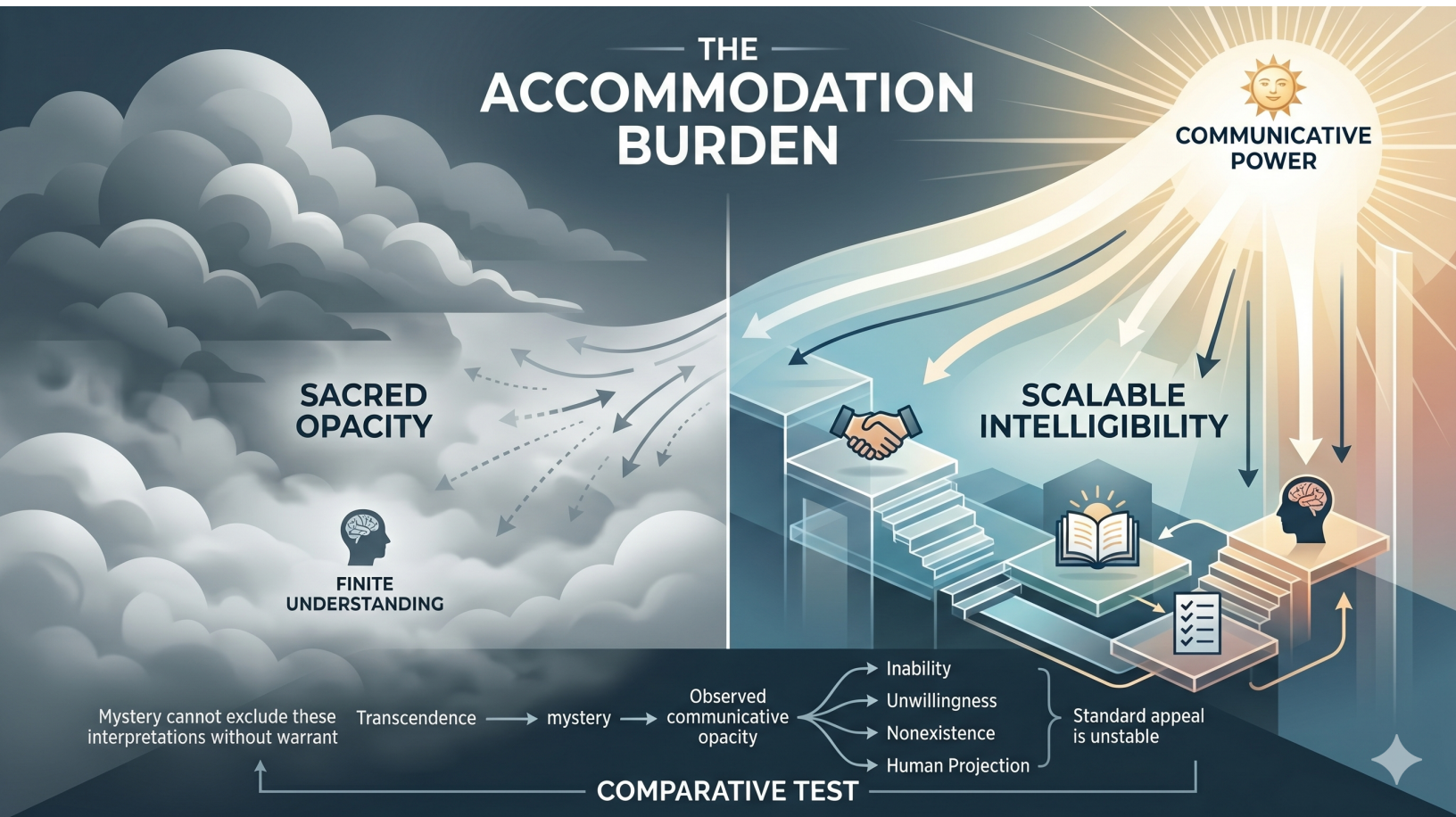
Under a Christian communicative God-concept with perfect knowledge and power plus a high-stakes aim to be understood, persistent public opacity is not evidence of transcendence. Scalable intelligibility is more expected under that model, while unstable and tradition-dependent uptake is more expected from finite human religious production. Hidden reasons may preserve possibility, but opacity supplies no positive warrant without an independently supported reason that predicts it.

Preview:

Target model	Expected capacity	Public pressure	Rational result
A perfectly informed and powerful deity seeks high-stakes human understanding.	Communication can be scaled to finite minds without exhausting divine reality.	Purported disclosure remains unstable, contested, and hard to distinguish from projection.	Opacity cannot confirm transcendence; absent an evidenced offset, it favors the finite-human comparator.

The conclusion is comparative and conditional. It does not require exhaustive comprehension, disprove every theism, or deny that a specific and independently supported reason for limited disclosure could change the evidential comparison.

Visual preview:



Left: sacred opacity confronting finite understanding. Right: communicative power expressed as scalable intelligibility. The lower comparison keeps inability, unwillingness, human projection, and nonexistence live until excluded by evidence. This conceptual map states the burden; it is not measurement data and does not establish which alternative is true.

Abstract

A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity. This paper assesses a familiar Christian communicative God-concept: a perfectly informed, powerful, and benevolent personal deity seeks relationship, issues high-stakes commands, and intends finite persons to understand enough to recognize and respond. Defenders sometimes answer opacity by treating incomprehensibility itself as a sign of transcendence. That inversion fails. The difference between exhaustive comprehension and successful disclosure is not a narrow technicality: a reality may exceed every finite model while still being communicated at a scale its audience can use.

The argument combines apophatic restraint, pragmatics, divine-discourse theory, and comparative evidence. Negative theology properly limits positive predication; it does not license detailed relational claims and then suspend their ordinary implications whenever those claims meet evidential pressure. Intentional communication requires audience modelling, relevance, redundancy, and correction. A communicator with perfect knowledge and sufficient power would not face finite surprise about reception. The resulting expectation is not universal agreement or total transparency, but discriminable intelligibility: stable enough public content to distinguish disclosure from projection and disciplined mystery from semantic immunity.

Persistent opacity is therefore not positive evidence for the target model. Finite human religious production expects ambiguity, cultural path dependence, competing interpretations, and retrospective rescue at least as well, and often better. A narrower divine aim or a specific independently supported reason for opacity may alter that comparison; mere possibility cannot. The paper asks readers to stop rewarding a model for the very communicative failure its attributed powers should help it overcome.

Keywords: divine incomprehensibility; divine accommodation; revelation; divine hiddenness; religious language; pragmatics; comparative evidence; apophatic theology

1 The Apologetic Inversion

The bare word *God* hides an argument's most important premise. A God-concept is a specified conception of a deity, and different conceptions generate different expectations. The target here is not every possible theism. It is a Christian communicative model, *T*, that attributes five connected commitments to the deity under examination:

1. complete knowledge of every intended audience, cognitive limit, language, translation path, institutional incentive, and future misunderstanding;
2. sufficient power to choose, repeat, clarify, preserve, or correct communicative means;
3. unsurpassable competence at intentional communication;
4. benevolent concern for finite persons and a desire for some form of relationship with them; and
5. high stakes attached to recognizing, trusting, obeying, or rejecting the alleged disclosure.

These commitments do not describe an impersonal absolute, a finite deity, or a remote creator indifferent to human uptake. They describe an agent whose alleged identity and purposes make communication central. The argument asks what that package leads us to expect.

The apologetic inversion occurs when a defender says that difficulty of understanding raises, rather than lowers, the credibility of the package. The proposed deity is said to be so far beyond finite minds that clear comprehension would be suspicious. Obscurity acquires prestige: if the claim were readily intelligible, it would seem too human; because it resists assessment, it appears transcendent.

There is a sound warning inside this response. Finite persons should not expect to exhaust any reality of great complexity, much less the ultimate reality proposed by classical theism. Complete mastery is unnecessary for warranted belief in minds, natural systems, moral facts, or historical events. The mistake is the next step: moving from *finite models are incomplete* to *communicative opacity is positive evidence*

of *divinity*. Incompleteness is common to true and false models. Opacity can arise from depth, but also from confusion, contradiction, missing evidence, institutional protection, or absent authorship. It is not self-interpreting.

The governing thesis is therefore narrow and sharp. Under *T*, opacity is an evidential cost to be explained, not a credential to be celebrated. The more seriously the model takes relationship, command, judgment, and invitation, the stronger the burden becomes.

The accommodation burden

A communicator who perfectly knows finite limits and has sufficient power to address them should be expected to provide usable entry points, stable contrasts, and correction paths when understanding carries high stakes. Transcendence may limit exhaustive comprehension; it does not turn preventable communicative failure into positive evidence.

2 Depth, Darkness, and Successful Disclosure

Three ideas are often collapsed. *Exhaustive comprehension* would capture a reality without remainder. *Partial understanding* represents some aspects correctly while leaving more to learn. *Successful disclosure* gives an intended audience enough stable content for the communicative act to perform its purpose. Only the first is obviously unavailable to finite minds. The accommodation burden requires the third, not the first.

Consider ordinary expertise. A physicist may explain a field theory to a student without fitting the whole theory into one lesson. A physician may state a life-saving instruction without teaching biochemistry. A judge may give notice of a prohibition without resolving every hard case. Each act is selective, but selection is not falsification. The communicator chooses an accurate scale and supplies a path from present understanding to deeper inquiry.

Religious disclosure can be similarly layered. Analogy, narrative, ritual, metaphor, proposition, example, and correction can all disclose without exhausting. A finite audience need not know the inner life of the alleged deity completely. It needs enough discriminable content to identify what is being claimed, which response is requested, what would count as misunderstanding, and where authoritative repair can be found. Call this *scalable intelligibility*.

Scalable intelligibility is compatible with open questions. It does not require every reader to agree, every metaphor to have one association, or every doctrine to be reducible to literal prose. It requires that the alleged communication be better than a blank onto which incompatible communities can project stable but rival meanings. The standard rises with the asserted aim and stakes. A poem intended to evoke may leave more open than a command whose misunderstanding is blamed or punished.

This distinction blocks the false choice that drives the apologetic inversion. The options are not total mastery or sacred darkness. The important middle is deep but usable disclosure: enough clarity to orient finite agents, enough structure to correct predictable error, and enough openness to support further inquiry.

3 Apophatic Restraint Is Not Evidential Immunity

Classical apophatic traditions often discipline speech more severely than contemporary appeals to mystery. Pseudo-Dionysius pushes language toward negation when positive names threaten to domesticate divine transcendence (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987). Maimonides treats careless positive predication as a route to conceptual error (Maimonides 1963). Aquinas argues in *Summa Theologica* I, question 13, that names apply to the deity analogically rather than in exactly the same way they apply to creatures (Aquinas 1947). These approaches differ, but none makes obscurity a free positive indicator of truth.

Their shared discipline cuts in two directions. If human concepts are too weak to yield expectations about divine action, they are also too weak to support detailed accusations, promises, commands, or assurances. A model cannot be precise enough to say that the deity loves, judges, speaks, invites, and holds people responsible, yet become too analogical to face questions about recognition and uptake. The same terms that carry the religious claim carry its burden.

This reciprocal constraint matters because apologetic mystery often reverses the classical caution. Instead of reducing the amount claimed, mystery protects a large positive package. The deity remains personal enough to command, benevolent enough to trust, clear enough to blame resistance, and opaque enough to evade a failed expectation. That is not apophatic humility. It is selective semantic confidence.

Two responsible routes remain open. A tradition may reduce its positive claims, accepting that it cannot infer familiar agency, intentions, or high-stakes demands from an ineffable source. Or it may retain those claims and accept the expectations that meaningful agency language brings. What it may not do without argument is move between the routes whenever evidence changes. The accommodation burden is internal to the second route.

4 Communication Is a Competence

Intentional communication is an exercise of agency. A communicator forms an intention, models an audience, selects signals, anticipates likely inferences, and adjusts for noise. Grice's account of speaker meaning and cooperative conversation makes audience-directed intention central (Grice 1989). Relevance theory emphasizes that hearers recover meaning by combining signals with context and that communicators design utterances for that inferential process (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Wolterstorff's treatment of divine discourse applies speech-act analysis directly to the claim that a deity speaks through mediated human discourse (Wolterstorff 1995).

These theories do not impose one simple code on every genre. They show why successful uptake is not secured merely by placing words before an audience. Context, background knowledge, contrast, intention, and correction matter. A communicator can exploit ambiguity artistically, allow productive inquiry, or address different audiences differently. But when a specific uptake is intended, ambiguity becomes something to manage rather than praise indiscriminately.

Information theory adds one modest point. Shannon and Weaver model signal transmission rather than theology or semantic understanding (Shannon and Weaver 1949). Their work should not be treated as a divine probability calculator. It does show that redundancy and error control can preserve a signal across a noisy channel. Definitions, examples, contrastive exclusions, distributed repetition, translation support, and correction mechanisms are semantic analogues of that practical insight.

Finite communicators often fail because they do not foresee an ambiguity, know an audience, possess another language, survive long enough to correct an error, or control later transmission. Those excuses describe human limits. Under *T*, they cannot simply be transferred to the alleged communicator. Complete knowledge removes surprise about reception. Sufficient power expands the available means. Benevolent high-stakes purpose raises the reason to use them.

Accommodation is therefore not a concession to weakness. Range is power. A musician able to write only inaccessible complexity has less range than one who can write both a fugue and a lullaby. A teacher unable to guide beginners has less pedagogical competence than one who can lead them without falsifying the subject. If an alleged perfect communicator cannot scale disclosure to finite minds, the limitation belongs to the model, not to the audience.

5 Attributes Generate Expectations

Attributes should change what a model predicts. Otherwise they function as honorifics rather than informative claims. The general attribute–expectation test asks whether the proposed properties constrain

Table 1: How attributed properties generate communicative expectations.

Attributed property	Ordinary implication	High-stakes expectation	What opacity requires
Complete audience knowledge	No surprise about cognitive limits, future drift, or predictable interpretive forks	Signals and correction are designed with actual reception in view	A reason the known failure is permitted or intended
Sufficient power	Many feasible media, repetitions, examples, and repair paths are available	Preventable misunderstanding is reduced without requiring exhaustive disclosure	A constraint stronger than generic linguistic difficulty
Benevolent concern	The audience's avoidable confusion and misidentification matter morally	Greater care where error carries relational, ethical, or salvific stakes	A good that outweighs the cost to finite persons
Relational or directive aim	Recognition of speaker, content, and response is part of success	Enough public stability exists to distinguish invitation from projection	An account of how the aim succeeds despite the observed instability
Perfect competence	Means are proportioned to intended uptake	Depth and accessibility coexist through layered disclosure	Evidence that opacity is designed competence rather than absent control

observable or experiential outcomes (Stilwell 2026a). Applied here, each major commitment in T changes the communicative burden.

Table 1 does not claim that every property entails one detailed text or one uniform experience. It identifies directional expectations. Greater knowledge and power normally increase the ability to prevent foreseeable error. Higher stakes normally increase the reason to do so. A defender may identify an offsetting good, a narrower audience, or a different aim. But that answer revises the expected outcome by supplying content; it does not make opacity evidence of greatness by itself.

The burden also scales cumulatively. Complete knowledge alone may not imply benevolent clarification. Benevolence alone may not supply the means. Power alone may coexist with indifference. The distinctive pressure arises from the conjunction: knowledge of the audience, ability to accommodate, concern for persons, and an asserted aim of being understood. Removing one element may reduce the burden, but it also changes the God-concept.

6 The Comparative Test

Evidence is contrastive. An observation supports one account over another when it is more expected under the first than under the second (Sober 2008). Contemporary hiddenness work increasingly makes this evidential structure explicit rather than treating the issue only as a deductive contradiction (Anderson 2025). The accommodation argument uses the same discipline while targeting a narrower claim: the promotion of incomprehensibility into positive evidence.

Let H be a finite-human-production comparator. On H , religious discourse develops through culturally situated authors, oral traditions, editors, institutions, translations, political incentives, devotional practices, and retrospective interpretation without the control of a perfect revealer. This hypothesis does not imply fraud, stupidity, or absence of insight. It permits moral wisdom, beauty, communal identity, and profound experience. It also makes semantic drift, cultural path dependence, rival canonization, contested authority, and durable interpretive plurality unsurprising.

Let O denote the relevant public opacity: purported disclosure remains sufficiently unstable or underdetermined that sincere inquirers have difficulty distinguishing revelation from projection and

disciplined mystery from ad hoc rescue. The argument does not infer O from disagreement alone. People can disagree because of incentives, identity, ignorance, or resistance even when a statement is clear. The stronger datum combines persistent disagreement with unstable public criteria, mutually incompatible traditions, and the absence of a correction path whose authority does not simply presuppose one disputed tradition.

The comparison now becomes visible:

1. If T is true and no independently supported reason offsets its communicative commitments, scalable intelligibility is more expected than substantial O .
2. Finite human religious production makes substantial O readily expected without an auxiliary rescue.
3. Therefore O cannot confirm T over H merely by being compatible with T .
4. If O is less expected under T than under H , it is comparative evidence against T , although not a deductive disproof of every theism.

This is where the apologetic inversion fails most clearly. Calling opacity “transcendence” does not change the likelihoods. The same observation fits inability, unwillingness, a contrary aim, finite production, or nonexistence. A label cannot exclude those alternatives. Independent evidence must do that work.

Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument focuses on nonresistant nonbelief and perfect love (Schellenberg 1993; Schellenberg 2015). The present argument is adjacent but distinct. It does not require the strong premise that every capable nonresistant person would always be able to enter conscious relationship. It asks a prior evidential question: why should difficulty of understanding count in favor of a communicative model whose attributed capacities make audience-sensitive disclosure available? The answer cannot be simply that hiddenness is logically compatible with a sufficiently transcendent deity.

The literature contains many proposed goods and responses to hiddenness (Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002). Rea, for example, challenges familiar expectations about divine love and personality and develops a model in which transcendence complicates ideal-parent analogies (Rea 2018). Such work can alter the comparison only by giving the alternative content. It may narrow the model, revise what relationship means, or identify a positive practice through which presence is available. That is serious argumentative work. It confirms the central methodological point: opacity does not interpret itself.

7 Why Every-Outcome Mystery Cannot Confirm

Unconstrained mystery creates an every-outcome rule. Clear disclosure is credited to communicative power. Obscure disclosure is credited to transcendence. Agreement displays guidance. Disagreement displays human freedom or depth. Felt presence shows relationship. Absence becomes pedagogy, testing, or hidden purpose. Every result can be redescribed as success.

Compatibility this broad has no discriminating power. A claim may remain logically possible across many outcomes, but an observation confirms it only when the observation is more expected under that claim than under relevant rivals. If both clarity and opacity, convergence and fragmentation, presence and absence are equally absorbable after the fact, none can be selectively counted as public confirmation.

The problem is symmetrical. A defender may say that finite minds cannot estimate the reasons or expectations of a transcendent deity. If so, critics may be blocked from using opacity strongly against the model. But defenders are also blocked from using apparent guidance, meaningful coincidence, doctrinal agreement, or successful communication strongly for it on the same basis. Unknown expectations cannot become one-way evidential credit.

This symmetry does not prove that the model is false. It denies a selective accounting rule. A tradition may rely on independent arguments, testimony, experience, or a specified theory of disclosure. It may

also accept that its confidence is fiduciary rather than publicly evidential. What it cannot rationally do is protect negative outcomes with mystery while cashing favorable outcomes as confirmation.

8 Strong Replies and Their Prices

8.1 Transcendence defeats creaturely standards

The strongest version of this reply says that finite interpersonal standards cannot be projected onto an unsurpassable deity. Divine love, communication, and presence may differ radically from their creaturely analogues. Rea's work gives this concern a sophisticated form rather than using it as a slogan (Rea 2018).

The accommodation argument need not deny analogy or transcendence. It asks for semantic reciprocity. If the terms *love*, *speech*, *command*, and *relationship* retain enough content to support trust, obligation, or blame, they retain enough content to generate minimal uptake conditions. If they do not, the positive religious claims lose content along with the critic's expectation. A defender may weaken the model, but cannot keep all devotional implications while discarding only the evidential ones.

8.2 Clarity would coerce allegiance

Understanding is not obedience. A person can identify a speaker and reject the request, understand a proposition and judge it false, or recognize an invitation and decline it. Evidence can affect rational confidence without mechanically producing love. The distinction between accessible content and compelled allegiance is developed in detail elsewhere (Stilwell 2026c). The short answer is enough here: confusion protects neither morally significant freedom nor authentic relationship. In high-stakes settings, responsible refusal normally presupposes knowing what is refused.

8.3 Opacity is pedagogical

Teachers sometimes withhold answers so that students develop judgment, perseverance, or independence. Hick's epistemic-distance and soul-making themes provide a developed theological version of the general strategy (Hick 2010). Yet good pedagogy is structured opacity. Difficulty is calibrated; the learner has usable tasks; feedback distinguishes productive struggle from mere confusion; and the teacher eventually supplies correction.

The reply therefore acquires empirical and conceptual obligations. Which capacities does this opacity develop? Why is this distribution of difficulty proportionate? What feedback identifies progress? How is pedagogical absence distinguished from no teacher at all? A specific answer may bear the burden. The bare word *pedagogy* cannot.

8.4 Resistance explains the failed uptake

Some traditions attribute nonbelief or misunderstanding to culpable resistance. That explanation may apply in particular cases. A universal version is much harder to sustain because belief, nonbelief, virtue, vice, culture, and historical access do not align in the simple pattern it predicts. Baker-Hytch's recent analysis concludes that sin-based accounts plausibly require causes besides individual sin and therefore work, at most, partially (Baker-Hytch 2025).

For the accommodation argument, the key point is narrower. Resistance cannot be inferred simply from failed uptake and then used to explain the failed uptake. The model needs independent reason to identify resistance in the relevant cases. It must also explain why resistant believers can retain confidence while sincere critics and rival believers remain divided. A partial resistance account may reduce *O*; it does not make all opacity evidence of transcendence.

Table 2: Disciplined mystery versus evidential immunity.

Question	Disciplined mystery	Evidential immunity
What is unknown?	Names the specific boundary while retaining stable content on each side	Treats the whole difficulty as sacred without locating the ignorance
What would count against the account?	Preserves contrasts and identifies outcomes or tensions that carry evidential cost	Redescribes every possible result as compatible success
What supports the reply?	Supplies independent reasons, constraints, or a demonstrated good	Infers a hidden reason from the need to protect the model
How is error corrected?	Provides public or at least intersubjective checks proportionate to the aim	Makes correction depend on accepting the disputed authority in advance
What conclusion follows?	Keeps possibility open while calibrating confidence to evidence	Converts ignorance into positive confirmation

8.5 Accommodation has already occurred

A defender may say that scripture, incarnation, tradition, conscience, religious experience, or ecclesial authority already supplies finite accommodation. This answer accepts the burden in principle. The debate then becomes concrete: what content is disclosed, to whom, by which means, with what correction path, and with what observed success?

Those questions should not be evaded by returning to generic incomprehensibility. A companion analysis applies the same burden specifically to cheaply preventable doctrinal forks in Scripture (Stilwell 2026b). The broader paper here need not settle every institutional or textual case. It establishes the standard: alleged accommodation should yield discriminable uptake appropriate to its stated aim. Merely naming a medium does not show that the communicative purpose succeeded.

9 Mystery Under Constraint

Mystery has legitimate roles. It marks the limits of finite models, resists conceptual idolatry, preserves room for inquiry, and acknowledges that a true account may exceed current evidence. The defect is not mystery but its promotion into evidential immunity.

Table 2 makes the constructive alternative visible. A disciplined theology may say that the deity's essence exceeds comprehension while still defining what a promise commits the speaker to. It may say that reasons for a particular absence are unknown while admitting that the absence is evidence needing explanation. It may offer a countervailing good while accepting the burden of showing why that good fits the scale and distribution of opacity.

The decisive rule is simple: ignorance is not evidence. Not knowing why a communicator permitted a failure does not give us a reason to think the failure was wise, intended, or even produced by a communicator. A hidden reason may exist. Until it is independently supported or embedded in a well-supported broader account, it preserves possibility rather than adding confirmation.

This result is not hostile to intellectual humility. It is humility applied symmetrically. Critics should not claim more than the evidence establishes. Defenders should not promote the absence of an explanation into evidence for the very model that needs one.

10 Conclusion

The apologetic prestige of incomprehensibility rests on a false opposition. Finite persons need not exhaust a transcendent reality in order to receive successful disclosure from it. The relevant alternative

to total mastery is scalable intelligibility: accurate entry points, stable contrasts, and correction paths proportioned to the audience and stakes.

Under the Christian communicative God-concept examined here, complete audience knowledge removes surprise about reception, sufficient power expands the available means, benevolent concern raises the reason to prevent avoidable confusion, and a relational or directive aim makes uptake part of success. Those properties jointly predict communicative competence, not darkness as such.

The public pattern must then be compared with live alternatives. Finite human religious production readily predicts ambiguity, path dependence, rivalry, and retrospective rescue. Opacity therefore cannot confirm transcendence merely by being renamed. Without an independently supported reason that makes the opacity expected under the target model, it is an evidential cost and may favor the human comparator.

The conclusion remains bounded. It does not disprove every theism, demand exhaustive comprehension, or rule out a particular good served by limited disclosure. It asks for an honest accounting rule. Readers should stop rewarding a model for the very communicative failure its attributed powers should help it overcome. A profound communicator need not become small to be understood; greater communicative range is one mark of greater power.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Syllogistic reconstruction

- P1.** Evidence supports a target account over a live alternative only when the observed feature is more expected under the target than under the alternative.
- P2.** The target Christian communicative God-concept attributes complete audience knowledge, sufficient communicative power, benevolent high-stakes concern, and an aim of finite uptake.
- P3.** Unless an independently supported reason offsets those commitments, that target makes scalable intelligibility more expected than substantial public opacity.
- P4.** Finite human religious production makes substantial public opacity expected through ordinary authorship, transmission, translation, institutional competition, and retrospective interpretation.
- P5.** The opacity at issue is not made more expected under the target merely by being relabeled transcendence or mystery.
- P6.** Therefore substantial public opacity cannot be positive evidence for the target over finite human production; absent an independently supported offset, it is comparative evidence against the target, though not a deductive disproof of every theism.

The inference is valid once the comparative-evidence rule and the directional expectations are granted. Its central premises are not truths of logic. They are conceptual and evidential judgments about what the attributed properties mean, how intentional communication works, and which account better expects the public record. A defender can resist the conclusion by revising the target, disputing the opacity datum, or supporting a specific offsetting reason. Bare compatibility does not defeat the comparison.

A.2 Symbols

- *T*: the target Christian communicative God-concept with complete audience knowledge, sufficient power, benevolent high-stakes concern, and an aim of finite uptake;
- *H*: the finite-human-production comparator;
- *O*: substantial public opacity in purported disclosure;

- D : a specific, independently supported reason that predicts or justifies O under T ; and
- P : the probability measure; $P(X | Y)$ is the probability of X conditional on Y .

A.3 Symbolic form

$$P(O | T, \neg D) < P(O | H).$$

Plain-English annotation. Given the target's communicative powers and aims, and in the absence of a supported defeating reason, substantial opacity should be less expected under the target than under ordinary finite human religious production. This is the argument's substantive comparative premise, not a truth of logic. The inequality states a direction; it does not assign exact probabilities.

$$P(O | T, \neg D) < P(O | H), \quad O, \quad \neg D \implies O \text{ favors } H \text{ over } T.$$

Plain-English annotation. When the observed opacity is more likely under finite human production than under the target model, that opacity provides comparative support for the human comparator. This conclusion is defeasible: evidence for D , a narrower target, or a serious challenge to O could change the comparison.

The symbolic form matches the bounded conclusion in the body. It does not derive atheism from opacity. It shows why opacity cannot be counted as positive evidence for T while its live comparator predicts the same feature better. The inference from a likelihood inequality and the observation to comparative support is valid; whether the inequality is sound depends on the conceptual and evidential arguments developed above.

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