

The Generic Evidence Problem

Natural Theology, Rival Religious Uptake, and the Failure of Specific Confirmation

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Central claim

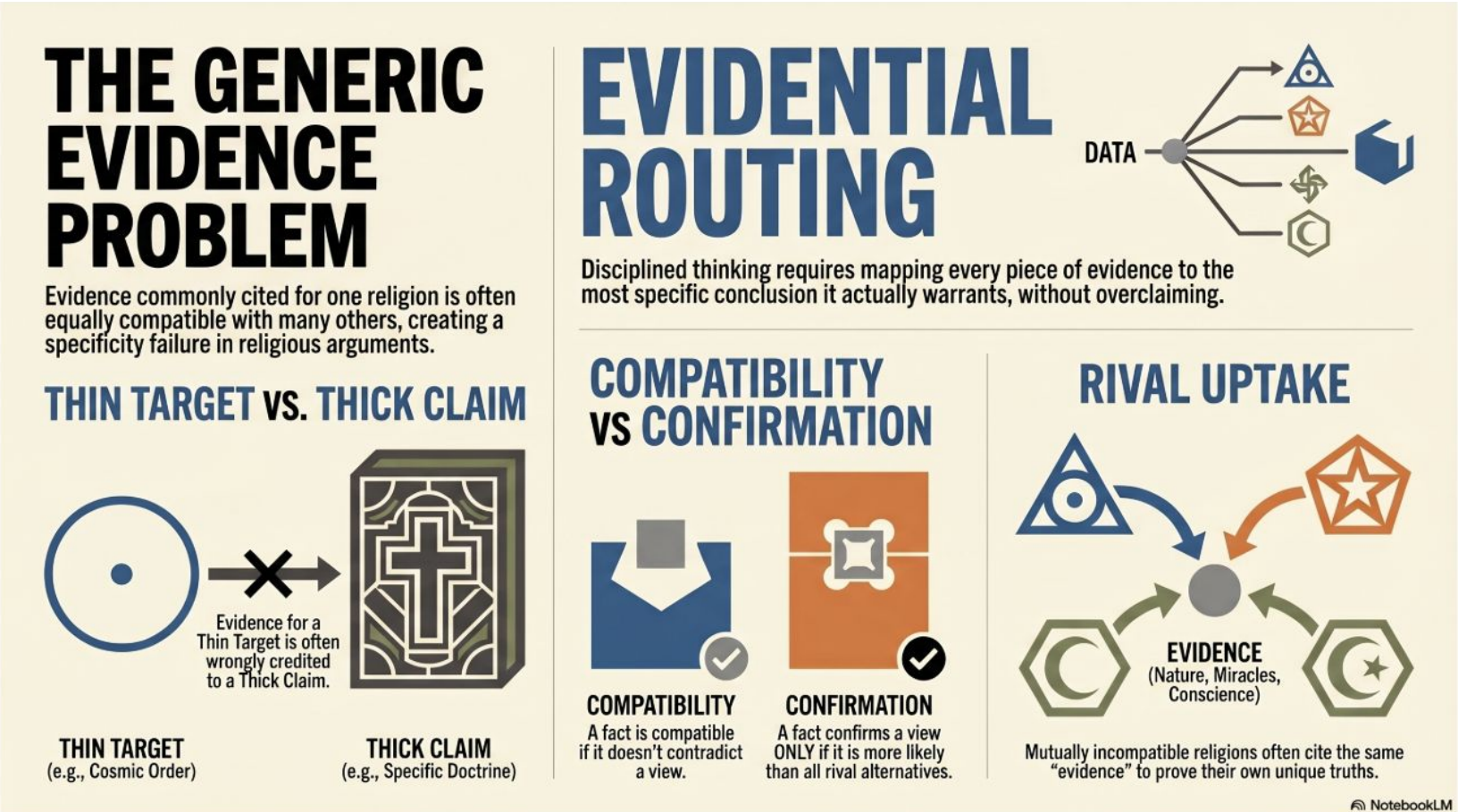
Generic evidence—order, consciousness, moral experience, beauty, and religious experience—does not specifically confirm Christianity merely because it fits a Christian God-concept. Specific confirmation requires a likelihood advantage over serious religious and nonreligious rivals. Shared uptake does not prove equal likelihoods, but it removes the right to presume a Christian address. Additional evidence may still discriminate, but then the added evidence, not the generic datum, does the selecting.

Preview:

Apologetic starting point	Required comparison	Generic-evidence failure	Rational conclusion
The world appears ordered, intelligible, meaningful, or religiously charged.	Ask whether the datum is more expected under the Christian claim than under serious rivals.	The same datum is compatible with several incompatible traditions and is credited to a thick doctrine without a discriminator.	Route the datum only to the most specific conclusion its comparative force warrants.

Rival uptake is a warning that comparison is missing, not proof that every rival has the same likelihood. The burden is to show an independent advantage; compatibility and sincerity cannot supply it.

Visual preview:



The image separates a thin target from a thick doctrine, compatibility from confirmation, and a shared datum from the rival claims that recruit it. It illustrates the routing problem; it does not assign numerical probabilities to the competitors.

Abstract

Natural theology often begins with data that are genuinely interesting: cosmic order, apparent fine-tuning, consciousness, moral experience, beauty, religious experience, and perceived providence. The argumentative mistake occurs when those data are treated as specifically Christian evidence merely because they fit a Christian interpretation. This paper argues that generic compatibility cannot bear that load. Public specific confirmation requires a rival-sensitive advantage: the evidence must be more expected under the thick Christian claim than under serious religious and nonreligious alternatives. Support for a thin family does not automatically transfer to one content-rich member of that family.

The case proceeds through likelihood-based confirmation, target specificity, rival religious uptake, and an evidence-routing audit. It distinguishes four claims commonly hidden inside the word *support*: compatibility, generic confirmation, specific confirmation, and posterior selection. The fact that incompatible traditions recruit the same evidence does not prove equal likelihoods, but it defeats any presumption that the datum carries a Christian address. The apologist must supply an independent discriminator, control for dependent evidence, and show why a cumulative case gains Christian rather than merely generic force.

The resulting conclusion is severe but bounded. Generic evidence may motivate inquiry, contribute to a thin theistic or purposive hypothesis, or have personal devotional force. It may even become part of a specifically Christian case when joined to evidence that genuinely distinguishes that claim. What it cannot do is cross the thin-to-thick gap by repetition, rhetorical confidence, or private interpretation. Until the relevant likelihood comparisons and bridge premises are supplied, the evidence has been framed as Christian; it has not been shown to be Christian evidence.

Keywords: natural theology; confirmation; likelihood; religious diversity; rival uptake; Christian apologetics; religious experience; moral non-realism

1 Introduction: Evidence Does Not Arrive with an Address

The natural world is easy to recruit. A night sky can be described as cosmic order, a biological system as design, a guilty conscience as moral awareness, a moment of awe as transcendence, and an improbable recovery as providence. Each description may be sincere. None arrives stamped with the name of the doctrine that should receive the evidential credit.

That missing address is the generic evidence problem. The problem is not that order, consciousness, beauty, or religious experience are unreal. Nor is it that no such datum can ever support any metaphysical claim. The problem is routing: how does a datum that fits many incompatible views become evidence for one thick religious conclusion? Popular apologetics often answers by moving too quickly. The world appears intelligible; therefore an intelligence explains it. The intelligence becomes personal, singular, morally perfect, providential, revelatory, incarnate, and Christian. Each step adds content, yet the original datum is repeatedly spent as though it had contained the whole conclusion from the beginning.

This paper uses *God-concept* to mean a specified conception of a deity. The target is not theism in general but public arguments that move from generic data to a thick Christian God-concept. A thin hypothesis might posit an ordering cause, cosmic purposiveness, or some transcendent reality. A thick Christian claim includes far more: personal agency, particular attributes, a relation to creation, a revelatory history, and distinct doctrines about incarnation, salvation, or scripture. Evidence can favor the thin hypothesis without favoring the thick one to the same degree.

The governing thesis is straightforward. A datum specifically confirms a Christian claim over a serious rival only if that datum is more expected under the Christian claim than under the rival. This contrastive requirement is standard in likelihood approaches to evidence and in Bayesian treatments of confirmation (Howson and Urbach 2006; Sober 2008). Showing that a Christian claim predicts or permits a datum establishes only one side of the comparison. Without the other side, the claim has not won; it has merely entered the contest.

Rival religious uptake sharpens the problem. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, deists, pantheists, spiritual naturalists, and nonreligious interpreters can all experience order, awe, conscience, purpose, and transformation. Their thick accounts cannot all be jointly true. The sociological fact of shared uptake does not settle the relevant conditional probabilities. It does, however, destroy the lazy presumption that the evidence routes itself. If the same broad datum is repeatedly read through incompatible traditions, the apologist owes a discriminator that is independent of the interpretive frame.

This is not a demand for certainty. Confirmation is comparative and can be modest. A likelihood advantage can be small; a cumulative case can be probabilistic; personal evidence can remain personal. The demand is simply that the conclusion receive no more content than the argument has earned. The paper therefore distinguishes four evidential achievements, audits the major forms of generic evidence, tests cumulative natural theology, answers the strongest replies, and ends with a practical routing discipline.

The conclusion will be polemical because the shortcut deserves a direct name. Treating compatibility as confirmation and thin support as thick support is not harmless enthusiasm. It is evidential misappropriation: a doctrine takes credit for data that have not selected it. A belief may survive that mistake. The argument cannot.

2 Targets: Thin Families and Thick Doctrines

Evidence always bears on a target relative to alternatives and background assumptions. A footprint can support the presence of an animal without identifying its species. Smoke can support combustion without identifying the cause, agent, or purpose of the fire. A regular pattern can support some structured process without identifying a mind, much less the biography and intentions of that mind. These examples are simple because they make the missing bridge visible.

Natural theology often hides the bridge inside a single word. The word *creator* may begin as whatever explains why something exists and end as a perfect personal agent. The word *divine* may begin as an undefined source of value and end as the Christian deity. The shift feels small because ordinary language compresses several propositions into one label. Logically, the content has expanded.

Hume's restraint remains relevant: an inferred cause should not be loaded with properties beyond what the effect warrants (Hume 1998). Even a successful design inference would leave open the designer's number, power, moral character, relation to time, continued activity, and connection to any claimed revelation. The point is not that every such possibility is equally plausible. It is that none is eliminated merely by repeating the datum of order.

Swinburne presents a far more serious case than popular slogans. His cumulative natural theology combines the existence and order of the universe, consciousness, moral awareness, providence, religious experience, and other evidence within a probabilistic argument for theism (Swinburne 2004). That project at least recognizes that hypotheses require comparative assessment, priors, explanatory scope, and cumulative force. Yet even a successful case for theism does not automatically distribute its support evenly among thick religious members. The distance from generic theism to Christianity remains an evidential distance.

Three distinctions keep that distance visible:

1. **Family support is not member support.** Evidence can favor a broad disjunction—some purposive or theistic account—without favoring a particular member over the others.
2. **Added content adds burden.** A thick claim entails or presupposes more propositions than a thin one. The additional content needs either direct evidence or a defended bridge from what is already supported.

- 3. A bridge is not a synonym.** Calling an ordering cause *the Christian deity* does not establish identity. The identity claim is a further premise.

These distinctions protect rather than trivialize a careful natural theology. They tell a proponent where the argument has actually arrived. If cosmic order supports a thin ordering explanation, say so. If historical or revelatory evidence then narrows the field, present it. The mistake is to spend the first datum twice: once to reach the family and again to select the favored member.

3 What Confirmation Requires

The word *supports* is dangerously elastic. It can mean that a hypothesis permits a datum, that the datum raises the probability of a broad family, that the datum favors one hypothesis over a rival, or that the hypothesis becomes the most probable option after priors and all evidence are considered. These are different achievements.

Table 1: Four evidential claims that should not be collapsed into the word *support*.

Claim	What must be shown	What it establishes	Common overreach
Compatibility	The hypothesis permits or can accommodate the datum.	No contradiction between the hypothesis and the datum.	Treating a possible fit as positive evidence.
Generic confirmation	The datum is more expected under a broad family than under a contrast class.	Some support for the family, relative to that contrast.	Crediting the support to one thick member.
Specific confirmation	The datum is more expected under the target than under each relevant rival it is claimed to beat.	A likelihood advantage over those rivals.	Omitting rivals or assuming their likelihoods.
Posterior selection	Priors, likelihoods, and the total evidence leave the target ahead.	A final comparative probability judgment within the stated model.	Treating one favorable likelihood as the whole posterior case.

Compatibility is weak. Almost any sufficiently flexible worldview can tell a story after the fact. A benevolent deity permits beauty; an inscrutable deity permits ugliness; a providential deity permits recovery; the same deity permits death for a hidden reason. The ability to absorb an outcome is not the same as having predicted it. Dawes is right to insist that theistic explanations, if they are to function as explanations, must face ordinary standards of specificity, constraint, and comparative virtue (Dawes 2009).

Generic confirmation is stronger. Suppose, for argument's sake, that an intelligible law-governed cosmos is more expected under some purposive family than under a specified nonpurposive alternative. That would count in favor of the family relative to that alternative. It would still leave open which purposive account, if any, is best. A Christian God-concept, deism, a non-Christian theism, and other purposive views can share the generic prediction while differing elsewhere.

Specific confirmation requires the missing comparison. Evidence favors one hypothesis over another when it is more probable on the first. The point is comparative, not absolute. A datum can be highly probable under Christianity and still fail to discriminate if it is equally or more probable under a rival. Conversely, a rare datum can be powerful evidence when one hypothesis predicts it much better than another.

Posterior selection asks a still larger question. Even if a datum favors Christianity over one rival, the final comparison depends on prior odds, other evidence, model choice, and the range of alternatives. This paper does not pretend that priors are mechanically objective or that every God-concept can be assigned a precise number. The mathematics supplies a discipline: state what is being compared and what would make the datum differentially expected. Numerical fog does not excuse conceptual fog.

The decisive point is modest. The sentence “Christianity expects this” is incomplete as a public confirmation argument. Expected more than what? By how much? Because of which independently specified feature of the hypothesis? If those questions have no answer, the argument has not failed because critics are hostile. It has failed because its comparative half is blank.

4 Rival Uptake: A Diagnostic, Not a Probability Oracle

Religious diversity is sometimes used too crudely. One side argues that widespread disagreement makes strong confidence irrational. The other replies that disagreement does not automatically defeat a belief, especially when disputants differ in evidence, reliability, or background knowledge. The literature contains both conciliatory and steadfast positions (Lackey 2014; Bergmann 2015; Benton and Kvanvig 2021). The generic evidence problem does not require resolving that entire debate.

The relevant claim is narrower. Rival uptake is evidence about the *routing process*. When the same broad experience is repeatedly mapped to incompatible doctrines, we learn that the experience does not carry a publicly obvious doctrinal label. Traditions supply interpretive categories, testimony, exemplars, expectations, and social reinforcement. Hick made cultural conditioning central to his pluralist interpretation of religion (Hick 2004). One need not accept Hick’s pluralism to recognize the interpretive fact.

The strongest objection should be stated plainly: equal citation does not imply equal likelihood. Christians and Muslims may both cite cosmic order, yet one theology might explain it better. A Hindu and a Christian may both report religious experience, yet their experiences may differ in content, reliability, or fit with other evidence. Counting users is not Bayesian confirmation.

That objection is correct, and it improves the argument. Rival uptake is not the conclusion that all likelihoods are equal. It is a defeater for *presumed specificity*. Once serious rivals make intelligible use of the same datum, the proponent must show the relevant asymmetry rather than assume it. The burden is not discharged by sincerity, numbers, intensity, or doctrinal familiarity.

This yields a three-part diagnostic:

1. **Shared availability.** Is the datum broadly available to people across traditions or worldviews?
2. **Interpretive variance.** Is it regularly assigned incompatible meanings without a public feature that resolves the conflict?
3. **Independent discrimination.** Does the argument supply a reason, not borrowed from the favored tradition’s own conclusion, for expecting the datum more under that tradition?

If the first two conditions hold and the third is missing, the datum is generic at the disputed level. It may remain evidential at a thinner level. Awe may support the claim that the subject encountered something psychologically significant. A structured cosmos may support a search for a unifying explanation. A felt obligation may show that humans make and experience serious normative demands. None of those thin results identifies a Christian doctrine.

Religious experience makes the issue vivid. Alston argues that mystical perception can have *prima facie* epistemic standing within a doxastic practice (Alston 1991). Plantinga offers a model on which Christian belief can be warranted through properly functioning cognitive faculties and an extended Christian account (Plantinga 2000). Those positions may defend the rationality of a believer from a sweeping charge of irrationality. They do not by themselves create a public likelihood advantage over

rival practices that make structurally similar claims. Zagzebski presses the need for engagement precisely because a purely defensive account can become socially unusable across competing systems (Zagzebski 2022).

The distinction between personal warrant and public discrimination matters. A person can possess evidence unavailable to others. A memory can justify the rememberer more than the audience. But an apologist who says the evidence is publicly “all around us” has chosen a public argument. Private warrant cannot be invoked as a substitute when the public comparison fails.

5 Routing the Main Evidence Families

The generic evidence problem becomes clearer when the same questions are applied across domains. Table 2 does not claim that every entry has zero evidential force. It identifies the most specific conclusion the datum could support without additional premises and the discriminator still needed for a thick Christian conclusion.

Table 2: Evidence-routing ledger for common natural-theology appeals.

Datum	Thin conclusion it may support	Live rival uptake	Missing discriminator for Christianity
Cosmic order and laws	Reality has stable, intelligible structure; perhaps a deeper explanation is needed.	Deism, several theisms, nonpersonal order, mathematical or naturalistic accounts.	Why this order is more expected under the Christian God-concept than under the serious alternatives.
Apparent fine-tuning	Life-permitting parameters call for comparative explanation.	Design hypotheses, multiverse models, selection effects, unknown physical necessity.	A defended likelihood model and a bridge from a designer to distinctively Christian attributes and history.
Consciousness and reason	Current reductive accounts may be incomplete; mentality is explanatorily important.	Nonreductive naturalism, idealism, panpsychism, generic theism, other religious metaphysics.	Why Christian personal agency predicts this mental order better than the rival accounts.
Moral experience	Humans experience obligation, guilt, blame, care, protest, and norm-governed life.	Moral realism, constructivism, expressivism, social and evolutionary accounts, multiple religious ethics.	Evidence for stance-independent moral facts, then for a personal ground, then for the specifically Christian identification.
Beauty, awe, and longing	Some experiences are profound, organizing, or experienced as transcendent.	Aesthetic naturalism, human meaning-making, several theisms, pantheism, non-theistic spirituality.	A public feature of the experience that favors Christian interpretation over the alternatives.
Religious experience	Subjects undergo experiences interpreted as contact, presence, unity, command, or transformation.	Incompatible religious practices and nonreligious psychological interpretations.	Reliability criteria that do not assume the favored tradition and that sort conflicting contents.
Providence and answered prayer	Events can be experienced as meaningful, fortunate, responsive, or personally timed.	Coincidence, selective memory, multiple providential traditions, ordinary causal processes.	Prospective predictions, comparison rates, and outcomes that would count against the Christian interpretation.

5.1 Order, fine-tuning, and the thin designer

Order and apparent fine-tuning are among the strongest candidates for generic confirmation because they invite an explicit contrast: purposive selection versus one or more nonpurposive alternatives. Sober’s

treatment of design arguments shows the value of stating likelihoods rather than relying on resemblance alone (Sober 2008). Swinburne likewise asks whether a law-governed, life-permitting universe is more expected under theism (Swinburne 2004). The present critique grants that structure for argument's sake.

What follows? At most, the comparison supports the stated purposive hypothesis over the stated alternative. It does not automatically establish one designer, infinite power, perfect knowledge, perfect goodness, continuing providence, or Christian revelation. Each added property can affect both prior probability and likelihood. A proponent can defend the additions, but cannot conceal them inside the word *designer*.

This is why Hume's old challenge survives even sophisticated probability language. The issue is not merely whether design is possible. It is whether the effect warrants the richness of the proposed cause (Hume 1998). A thin designer can be an intermediate conclusion. Treating it as the destination is the error.

5.2 Consciousness and reason

Consciousness, intentionality, and rational inference create real explanatory problems. A critic of reductive physicalism may be correct that current accounts are incomplete. Yet "not fully explained by this naturalistic model" does not entail "best explained by the Christian God-concept." The space of alternatives includes nonreductive physicalism, property dualism, substance dualism, idealism, panpsychism, neutral monism, generic theism, and other religious metaphysics.

An argument from consciousness must therefore specify what feature of consciousness is at issue and how candidate views predict it. If the premise is only that consciousness seems difficult for one rival, the conclusion cannot leap to Christianity by elimination unless the rival set is genuinely exhaustive. Dawes's demand for explanatory content applies here: naming a mind as the source of minds is not yet a model of what is expected or why (Dawes 2009).

The same caution applies to reason. Logic is not a sectarian asset. Its rules earn trust through coherence, successful prediction, error detection, and repeated public use; confidence in a rule remains corrigible when it fails those tests. A Christian can use that record. So can a non-Christian. The reliability of reasoning does not select a theology merely because a theology can accommodate it.

5.3 Moral experience without moral realism

This paper does not assume stance-independent moral facts. *Moral experience* here refers to the phenomenology and practice of obligation, guilt, protest, blame, care, and negotiated norms. A moral non-realist can take those experiences seriously while explaining their authority through human concerns, social dependence, vulnerability, practical identities, and evaluative construction. Street's Humean constructivism illustrates how contingent evaluative commitments can remain serious without becoming perception of stance-independent properties (Street 2012).

That stance blocks a common selector. The experience of obligation does not arrive with a metaphysical label. Even if a moral realist successfully argued for objective moral facts, two further bridges would remain: from moral facts to a personal ground, and from that ground to a Christian identity. Multiple theistic traditions can make the same move, while non-theistic realism and constructivism offer alternatives. The phenomenology alone performs none of the sorting.

The apologetic use of conscience often compounds the problem through selective trust. Conscience is treated as reliable when it supports divine command, then as corrupted, culturally distorted, or rebellious when it condemns a favored doctrine. That flexibility may be theologically available, but it weakens public confirmation. A faculty that is counted as evidence only when it agrees with the conclusion is not an independent discriminator.

5.4 Religious experience and providence

Religious experience can be vivid, transformative, and rationally important to the subject. Its public force is harder to establish because experience is filtered through expectation, vocabulary, community, and memory. The religious-diversity literature does not yield one simple rule, but it makes dismissal of rival experience intellectually expensive (Benton and Kvanvig 2021; Lackey 2014).

Plantinga's account can explain why a Christian need not infer belief from public natural theology at all (Plantinga 2000). Bergmann likewise argues that some believers may rationally remain steadfast in the face of disagreement (Bergmann 2015). These are serious replies to a universal demand for conciliation. Their cost is dialectical. If warrant depends on the truth and proper function of the Christian account, the model cannot serve as neutral public evidence for that truth without circularity. It can describe how warranted Christian belief is possible if Christianity is true; it does not show an outsider why Christianity is more likely than a rival account of apparently warranted experience. Philipse develops this pressure against the extended model from religious diversity (Phlipse 2012).

Providential interpretation faces a related every-outcome danger. Recovery is an answer; death is a different answer; silence protects freedom; clarity shows care; success is favor; failure is formation. A theology may consistently accommodate each result. But if no result lowers confidence, favorable results cannot be counted as public confirmation without an independent baseline. The apologist must say what pattern is expected, what comparison class is relevant, and what outcome would count against the claim.

Schellenberg's hiddenness argument makes one such expectation explicit: a perfectly loving deity would not permit certain forms of nonresistant nonbelief (Schellenberg 1993). One can dispute that expectation. The methodological virtue is that the disagreement is now visible. The debate concerns what a specified God-concept predicts, not whether any observed ambiguity can be fitted afterward.

6 Why Cumulative Cases Do Not Escape Routing

A natural reply is cumulative. Perhaps no single datum selects Christianity, but order, consciousness, morality, beauty, religious experience, providence, and history together form a powerful pattern. Swinburne's project gives this reply its strongest systematic form (Swinburne 2004). The generic evidence problem does not reject cumulative reasoning. It requires the accumulation to be genuine.

Three checks matter.

6.1 Each item needs comparative force

Adding compatible facts does not automatically produce confirmation. If every item is roughly as expected under several rivals, the conjunction may remain nondiscriminating. Repetition can increase emotional salience without increasing a likelihood ratio. Seven photographs of the same footprint do not identify the species if all preserve the same missing feature.

The proper question for each strand is what it contributes against which alternative. A datum may favor a thin purposive family over a specified naturalistic model, while another may favor one personal God-concept over another. Those are different comparisons. A cumulative case must not pool them as though every favorable ratio had the same target.

6.2 Dependence must be controlled

Evidence items can be correlated. Awe, sensed presence, perceived purpose, and providential interpretation may be four descriptions of one episode rather than four independent data points. Moral experience and religious interpretation may share upbringing, community, and language. Cosmic order and fine-tuning may overlap in what they count from the structure of physical law.

Correlation does not make the evidence worthless. It prevents double counting. A cumulative case gains force when different evidence streams remain informative after their dependencies are considered. It gains only volume when one interpretive source is redescribed several times.

6.3 Family support still needs member selection

Suppose the cumulative natural-theology evidence strongly favors some theistic family over a specified naturalism. Christianity may then receive indirect support as a member of that family, just as every ticket in a reduced lottery becomes more probable when other tickets are removed. That modest transfer is real. It is not specific confirmation of Christianity over the remaining religious rivals.

The distinction matters because apologetic rhetoric often changes the contrast class midstream. Naturalism is treated as the rival while generic theism is being defended. Once generic theism is reached, the conclusion is announced as Christianity even though Islam, Judaism, deism, and other God-concepts were never compared. The argument wins a race against one opponent and claims a championship over competitors who were not on the track.

A disciplined cumulative case therefore carries labels. It states the target of each strand, the alternatives it addresses, the dependence among strands, and the bridge from a thin family to a thick member. Without those labels, accumulation becomes evidential laundering: generic support enters the case and emerges wearing a Christian name.

7 The Strongest Escape Routes

The generic evidence problem is not a trap built from weak objections. Several replies can preserve a Christian conclusion. Each reply also reveals the limit of generic evidence.

7.1 “Christianity has additional historical evidence”

This is the cleanest reply. A Christian may argue that resurrection testimony, scripture, prophecy, or a particular historical pattern distinguishes Christianity. If that evidence is genuinely discriminating, it should be assessed on its own terms. The reply concedes the paper’s point: natural order, moral experience, beauty, and generic religious experience did not make the selection. The additional historical evidence did.

This concession is not trivial. It prevents a popular rhetorical pile from doing work it cannot do and moves the real dispute to evidence with the appropriate specificity. The historical case still faces its own source, prior, dependence, and rival-explanation questions. At least the address is no longer being smuggled in.

7.2 “The Christian hypothesis is simpler or has better priors”

Posterior probability depends on more than likelihood. A defender may argue that one Christian God-concept is intrinsically simple, independently plausible, or supported by background knowledge. Swinburne explicitly assigns simplicity a major role (Swinburne 2004). This reply is legitimate if the simplicity measure and prior judgment are defended.

It does not convert generic evidence into specific evidence. A prior advantage can make Christianity more probable overall even when a datum fails to discriminate. The correct statement would be that background considerations favor Christianity and the generic datum is compatible with it or confirms a broader family. Calling the datum itself specifically Christian obscures which premise did the work.

7.3 “A believer has private warrant”

Alston and Plantinga provide sophisticated accounts on which religious experience or properly functioning faculties can warrant belief without an inference from neutral public evidence (Alston 1991; Plantinga

2000). The generic evidence problem need not deny that possibility. It distinguishes first-person justification from public comparative argument.

If the claim is “this experience rationally supports me because I possess background evidence or a reliable faculty unavailable to you,” the argument is personal and conditional. If the claim is “the evidence is all around everyone and publicly confirms Christianity,” then public discriminators are required. Moving from the first claim to the second changes the evidential situation.

7.4 “Rivals are not equally credible”

Correct. Rival uptake does not equalize credibility. Some traditions may be internally inconsistent, historically weak, explanatorily costly, or defeated by independent evidence. The paper’s requirement is a set of serious live rivals, not every story anyone can invent.

But rivals do not become unserious merely because the favored tradition labels them so. Exclusion needs reasons that do not already assume the conclusion. Where independent arguments eliminate a rival, they can legitimately narrow the set. Once again, the added arguments perform the discrimination.

7.5 “The critic is demanding impossible precision”

No numerical probabilities are required when the evidence does not support them. Qualitative likelihood judgments can still be argued: much more expected, somewhat more expected, approximately equal, or presently indeterminate. Draper’s comparison of theism with a hypothesis of indifference in the evidential problem of suffering illustrates how a philosophical argument can focus on relative expectation without claiming laboratory precision (Draper 1989).

The impossible demand is the apologetic one: accept a specific conclusion while the relevant comparison remains unspecified. Intellectual humility supports suspension when the model is underdetermined. It does not support awarding the unmeasured advantage to the preferred doctrine.

8 Evidential Routing as a Public Discipline

The constructive alternative is evidential routing. For each datum, route support only as far as the comparison warrants. This practice improves both apologetics and criticism because it prevents overclaiming, clarifies where disagreement actually lies, and makes later evidence easier to assess.

Step one prevents interpretation from being hidden inside the observation. “A prayer was answered” already describes agency and response; “the requested event occurred after prayer” is closer to the datum. “Moral law is written on the heart” imports a lawgiver; “people experience obligation and guilt” leaves the explanation open. Neutral description is never perfect, but obvious conclusion-loading can be reduced.

Step two identifies the first destination. A datum may support inquiry, an explanatory family, or a modest suspicion. There is no shame in a thin conclusion. The shame lies in pretending it is thick.

Step three builds a serious comparison set. A rival is serious when it is sufficiently specified, independently motivated, and capable of bearing on the datum. The set can be revised as arguments succeed or fail. No method can compare every logical possibility; no responsible method compares only the favored claim with a caricature.

Step four performs the evidential work. The proponent explains why the datum is more expected under the target. This can involve mechanism, purpose, prior commitments, independent predictions, or explanatory virtues. The rationale must be available before the outcome is known when feasible, and it must expose what would reduce confidence.

Step five prevents conclusion creep. If the evidence supports generic theism, record generic theism. If a later historical argument supports a Christian claim, record that addition separately. The resulting case may be longer, but it will be honest about where each unit of support came from.

Table 3: A five-question routing protocol for claimed religious evidence.

Step	Question	Required answer	Failure signal
1	What exactly is the datum?	A description not already loaded with the favored interpretation.	“Moral law” or “providence” is used where the observation is only felt obligation or fortunate timing.
2	What is the thinnest live target?	The least content-rich hypothesis the datum might support.	A broad clue is immediately named as a thick doctrine.
3	Which serious rivals expect it?	A bounded comparison set with charitable formulations.	Only one weak rival is considered, or alternatives are excluded by definition.
4	Where is the likelihood advantage?	A reason the datum is more expected under the target than under each rival it is claimed to beat.	Compatibility, sincerity, or intensity substitutes for comparison.
5	What remains after the update?	A calibrated conclusion plus the evidence still needed for a thicker claim.	The conclusion silently expands after the comparison ends.

The protocol also improves skeptical criticism. A critic should not say that a datum has no force merely because it is not uniquely Christian. Some evidence may challenge a particular naturalistic account or raise the probability of a broader purposive family. The correct response is calibration, not reflexive dismissal. Evidential routing is symmetrical: it limits both apologetic inflation and skeptical overcorrection.

9 Conclusion

A Frame Is Not an Address

The generic evidence problem is not that the world contains nothing suggestive. It is that suggestiveness is repeatedly mistaken for specificity. Order, consciousness, moral experience, beauty, awe, providential interpretation, and religious experience can all be serious subjects of inquiry. None becomes specifically Christian because a Christian points to it, feels it deeply, or places it inside a Christian story.

The governing reason is contrastive. To confirm a thick Christian claim over a serious rival, evidence must be more expected under the Christian claim. Showing that Christianity can accommodate the evidence is only compatibility. Showing that a broad theistic family predicts the evidence better than one naturalistic model is at most generic confirmation. Showing that Christianity remains most probable after priors and total evidence is a larger posterior argument. These achievements must not be credited to one another.

Rival uptake matters because it exposes the missing address. It does not prove that all religions have equal likelihoods. It shows that interpretation is doing work and that the favored routing cannot be presumed. Once incompatible traditions recruit the same datum, a public apologist must produce an independent discriminator. If historical, revelatory, or explanatory evidence supplies that discriminator, then that added evidence deserves the credit.

This is the principal limit and the live alternative. The argument does not disprove Christianity, rule out personal warrant, or declare natural theology worthless. It leaves open a disciplined cumulative case whose strands have real comparative force and whose bridges are explicit. What it closes is the shortcut.

The polemical verdict is therefore exact. A datum does not become Christian evidence because it has been displayed in a Christian frame. A label is not a likelihood ratio, a devotional interpretation is not a public discriminator, and repetition is not routing. Until the apologist can say “more expected under this claim than under those serious rivals, for these independent reasons,” the evidence has not found its doctrinal address. It has only been claimed by the loudest recipient.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Ordinary-language reconstruction

- P1.** A datum specifically selects a thick Christian claim from a set of serious rivals only if the datum is more expected under the Christian claim than under every rival the datum is claimed to defeat.
- P2.** Generic natural-theology data are commonly shown to be compatible with the Christian claim, or at most to favor a thin theistic family over one specified non-theistic alternative.
- P3.** Compatibility with the Christian claim does not establish a likelihood advantage over serious religious and nonreligious rivals.
- P4.** Support for a thin family does not automatically select one thick member of that family.
- P5.** Rival uptake does not prove equal likelihoods, but it removes any entitlement to presume the missing likelihood advantage; an independent discriminator is required.
- P6.** Therefore, absent that discriminator, generic natural-theology data do not specifically select Christianity, even if they retain personal force or provide some support for a thinner hypothesis.

The inference is deductively valid once “specifically selects” is defined by the comparative requirement in P1. The controversial work lies in applying P2 and P5 to a particular evidence set. Those premises are methodological and empirical: one must inspect how the datum is described, which rivals are serious, and whether an independent likelihood advantage has actually been argued. The conclusion is deliberately bounded. It denies specific selection by the generic evidence alone, not every possible Christian argument.

A.2 Symbols

C : the specified thick Christian God-concept under examination;

$\mathcal{R}$: the set of serious religious and nonreligious rivals relevant to the public comparison;

R : one particular rival in $\mathcal{R}$;

E : the total generic natural-theology evidence being invoked;

$P(E | C)$: the likelihood of observing E if C is true;

$P(E | R)$: the likelihood of observing E if rival R is true;

$\Lambda_{C,R}(E)$: the likelihood ratio comparing C with R on evidence E ;

$O(C:R)$: the prior odds of C to R , before updating on E ;

$O(C:R | E)$: the posterior odds of C to R , after updating on E ;

$S(E, C, \mathcal{R})$: the claim that E specifically selects C over every rival in $\mathcal{R}$.

A.3 Symbolic reconstruction

$$\Lambda_{C,R}(E) = \frac{P(E | C)}{P(E | R)}. \quad (1)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation 1 compares how well the Christian claim and one rival predict the same evidence. A value above one favors the Christian claim over that rival; one means the evidence does not discriminate between them; below one favors the rival. The formula does not tell us the likelihoods, so those values still need argument.

$$O(C:R | E) = O(C:R) \times \Lambda_{C,R}(E). \quad (2)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation 2 states the Bayesian update in odds form. The evidence changes the earlier odds by the likelihood ratio. Even favorable evidence does not by itself settle the final comparison, because the starting odds and the rest of the evidence still matter.

$$S(E, C, \mathcal{R}) \leftrightarrow \forall R \in \mathcal{R}, \Lambda_{C,R}(E) > 1. \quad (3)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation 3 defines specific selection. The generic evidence selects the Christian claim from the stated rival set only if it favors that claim over every rival the argument says it has beaten. This is not a demand to compare every imaginable story; the set is limited to serious rivals relevant to the public claim.

The universal condition in Equation 3 is intentionally tied to the word *selects*. If an argument claims only that E favors C over one specified naturalistic rival, then $\mathcal{R}$ may contain just that rival and the conclusion should remain correspondingly narrow. If the argument claims that E identifies Christianity from a field of serious religious alternatives, then each undefeated member of that field matters. The formalism does not create a larger burden than the conclusion; it prevents the conclusion from becoming larger than the comparison.

This also explains why the members of $\mathcal{R}$ must be chosen before the desired verdict is announced. A rival can be excluded because independent evidence defeats it, because it fails to specify a likelihood at all, or because it is not genuinely relevant to the datum. It cannot be excluded merely because including it would block selection. The rival set is part of the argument, not a list of inconveniences to be edited after the outcome is known.

$$\exists R^* \in \mathcal{R} \text{ such that } \Lambda_{C,R^*}(E) \leq 1. \quad (4)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation 4 states the blocking condition. If even one serious rival predicts the generic evidence at least as well as the Christian claim does, that evidence does not uniquely select Christianity from the stated set. The formula does not claim that rival uptake alone proves this inequality; the comparative likelihood still requires support.

$$[S(E, C, \mathcal{R}) \rightarrow \forall R \in \mathcal{R} \Lambda_{C,R}(E) > 1] \wedge [\exists R^* \in \mathcal{R} \Lambda_{C,R^*}(E) \leq 1] \therefore \neg S(E, C, \mathcal{R}). \quad (5)$$

Plain-English annotation. Equation 5 gives the central deduction. Specific selection requires success against every serious rival. A supported counterexample rival shows that requirement is not met, so the generic evidence does not select the Christian claim from that set. The conclusion concerns this evidence and comparison only; it is not a deductive disproof of Christianity.

A.4 Validity and premise support

The final step is valid by modus tollens applied to the universal requirement for selection. It does not infer that C is false. It infers only that E fails to perform the stated selecting role when a supported rival blocks the universal comparison. That difference is the formal version of the paper's central distinction between disproof and failure of specific confirmation.

The definition of selection in Equation 3 is conceptual. A claim cannot be selected from a stated field while an undefeated member of that field predicts the evidence at least as well. This does not imply that every comparison must use the same field. A narrow argument may compare C with one rival; a broad Christian apologetic claim may require a larger $\mathcal{R}$. What must remain fixed is the relation between the advertised conclusion and the comparisons actually performed.

The blocking condition in Equation 4 is empirical or interpretive rather than logically guaranteed. Rival uptake gives investigators a concrete reason to test it because the same datum has been coherently recruited by incompatible traditions. Uptake alone does not establish $P(E \mid R^*)$, and the paper does not pretend otherwise. A defender can defeat the condition by showing that the Christian God-concept makes the datum more expected than the strongest serious rival does.

Where no such likelihood argument is offered, the conclusion is an establishment failure: specific confirmation has not been shown. Where a supported R^* actually satisfies Equation 4, the stronger conclusion follows: the stated generic evidence does not select Christianity from that rival set. Neither result is a universal disproof. Both are sufficient to reject the popular shortcut from Christian compatibility to Christian confirmation.

Additional evidence can change the result. It can enlarge or refine E , narrow $\mathcal{R}$ for independent reasons, alter the prior odds $O(C:R)$, or increase the relevant likelihood ratios $\Lambda_{C,R}(E)$. If historical or revelatory evidence then distinguishes the Christian claim, the posterior odds $O(C:R \mid E)$ may rise. The formalism therefore leaves a disciplined Christian case open while denying generic evidence the thick conclusion it has not earned.

A.5 A worked qualitative reading

Take cosmic order as E . The Christian God-concept may make $P(E \mid C)$ high, but a deistic rival may also predict order. Unless $\Lambda_{C,R}(E) > 1$, the datum may favor a purposive family without selecting Christianity from the remaining theistic field. Its force may be real yet less specific than advertised.

Now add a historical record that is surprising on deism but expected on C . The likelihood ratio may then change. If independently supported, the record can discriminate where order could not. The argument must identify which evidence did that work; the generic datum cannot receive credit for work done only by the later evidence.

Equation 5 supplies a practical audit: state the exact conclusion and serious rivals, then compare how expected the evidence is under each. If one rival remains at least as predictive, narrow the conclusion or add discriminating evidence. Repeating compatibility does not repair the missing comparison.

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