

If God exists, why doesn't he prove it?

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That there may be room for faith, ...all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience.

—Martin Luther¹

There was a people who had a good understanding of the divine; this people believed that to see the god is death. —Who grasps the contradiction of this sorrow: not to disclose itself is the death of love; to disclose itself is the death of the beloved.

—Søren Kierkegaard²

Throughout the ages, people had looked up into the heavens in search of God. Bearing Jesus in her womb, holding Jesus in her arms, Mary looked down into the face of God.

—Richard John Neuhaus³

The author of *The End of Faith* asked, “How is it fair for God to have designed a world which gives such ambiguous testimony to his existence? How is it fair to have created a system where belief is the crucial piece, rather than being a good person?”⁴ Christians often respond to the new atheists with answers from the Intelligent Design movement or from other developments of Thomas Aquinas’s “proofs” of God’s existence. By contrast, orthodox Christians of the first century, far from advancing philosophical arguments for the existence of God, maintained that those who deny his existence suppress the knowledge they already have of him from the things he created.⁵ Assuming for the sake of discussion that the church has correctly characterized unbelief as wishful thinking, why does God allow such suppression of knowledge? Why does he not make his existence obvious even to those who would prefer to believe they have no divine judge, especially if believing in him is absolutely necessary for their eternal happiness? It would seem as if he is hiding himself,

¹ *Bondage of the Will*, Baker Publishing Group, 1957, p. 101.

² *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. H. V. Hong, E. H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 30.

³ “The Real Presence of Christmas,” *First Things* ([December 21, 2007](#)).

⁴ “God Debate: Sam Harris vs. Rick Warren,” *Newsweek* (April 9, 2007).

⁵ St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 1. The knowledge of the creator as conceived by the early church, of course, in no way depends on attempts to build arguments from modern science. Some of the flaws in such reasoning have been uncovered; e.g., Branden Fitelson, Christopher Stephens, and Elliott Sober [critiqued the use William Dembski made of probability theory](#) in his *Design Inference* (“How Not to Detect Design,” *Philosophy of Science* **66**, 472-488 (1999)).

needlessly requiring that we carefully weigh the evidence for and against his existence. In fact, some have argued that the prevalence of such evils as hypocrisy and religiously motivated violence testify against the existence of any being who is both almighty and loving.⁶ Others hold that it is impossible in principle for finite minds to know whether or not an infinite being exists, quite apart from the question of whether corrupted human minds have an inherent bias against any deity not made in their own image. The conflicting voices caution against dogmatically insisting on the existence of a divine creator and especially against claiming to know the only true God.

The incipient catholic church fully acknowledged this invisibility of her God.⁷ Even centuries before the birth of Christ, the Torah, teaching that the full manifestation of God would only kill its audience, foretold the coming of a man like Moses who would speak God's words with less deadliness.⁸ The account of Jesus' life written toward the end of the first century has the prophecy fulfilled: the Son of God did not remain hidden in heaven, but entered the world by becoming fully human in order to reveal his Father.⁹ Jesus asserted that while no one on earth has ever seen the Father, the Son from heaven has seen him and bears witness of him, doing his works and speaking his words.¹⁰ Likewise, an earlier writing has Jesus teach that God hides himself:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.¹¹

Thus, Christians of this common tradition did not see God as a hypothesis to be proved by the most learned scholars, but as a hidden Father who is known only through his Son and who revealed himself even to small children, those of the most humble intellectual development.¹² According to the same early source, John, while imprisoned for calling his king to repentance, was assured that Jesus was the prophesied savior-king by the observation that in him "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."¹³ Rather than displaying all his power, righteousness, and justice, thereby destroying the guilty human race, Christianity's God sent his innocent Son in the form of a servant to gently reveal his love. This revelation reportedly came by means of Jesus' testimony, his

⁶ For a variety of arguments on the problem of evil, see *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Indiana University Press, 1996.

⁷ John 1:18, 6:46.

⁸ Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

⁹ John 5:45-47.

¹⁰ John 3:11-13, 3:31-34.

¹¹ Matthew 11:25-27; cf. John 1:18.

¹² For a philosophical treatment of the limits of human reason, I recommend C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.

¹³ Matthew 11:2-6.

healing the blind and lame by word and touch,¹⁴ his proclaiming good news to the poor, his bearing on the cross the retribution due all people, and his appearances to his disciples after his resurrection.

Even if the church were correct to believe that Jesus revealed the invisible God, how would that inform people living almost two millennia after the last orthodox Gospel was penned? Today, there are no credible reports of supernatural healings of the lame, leprous, deaf, and dead, leaving only the proclamation of the “good news” to the poor among the signs said to have assured John, and even that proclamation has natural as well as supernatural explanations. Would not those who had seen the risen Christ have had a reason to believe that no one has generations later? Søren Kierkegaard answered that in the negative since not even miraculous signs could prove to Jesus’ contemporaries that he was God in human flesh; faith was as necessary for them as for any today who would believe the ultimate paradox, that the infinite, eternal God became man in time.¹⁵ Kierkegaard argued that for our learning the truth of the paradox, only God himself, in the form of a humble man, can provide the necessary condition—recognition that our failure to know him is our fault, not his.¹⁶ As a scholar of postmodern thought explained,

The *Fragments* are posing the biblical alternative to the Platonic assumption. Instead of assuming that the soul is possessed of the truth, the biblical assumption is that human nature is fallen and corrupted by original sin (the ‘un-truth’).¹⁷ Hence the *Fragments* are describing how first sin and then its remedy, Christ, the authoritative healer of the soul and teacher of the truth, came into the world... Kierkegaard means that the Eternal (God) has come into time (become human) in the absolute paradox of the Incarnation. Climacus [a pseudonym of Kierkegaard] does not consider the idea of a God-man to be a logical contradiction...¹⁸ The paradox belongs to an ethnico-religious order, not a logical one; it is more like what St Paul calls a stumbling block (I Cor. 1:23) or a blasphemy, and Climacus clearly considers it more shocking even than the command to sacrifice one’s son. It is a mind-numbing ‘collision’ that this man, who carries out humble and unmentionable bodily functions, is truly the Eternal One, the Most High, God Almighty. The Christianity Climacus holds up for us turns on the high orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed, ‘true God and true man’. Why does God not find a simpler, less paradoxical way to reveal himself? Precisely in order to repel the speculative philosophers, to defeat or deflect those who would turn Christianity into another theory... In principle, the Incarnation can be understood, the proof of which is that God certainly understands it,

¹⁴ David R. Bickel, “Ways the Son of Man calls forth life,” available at dawningrealm.org.

¹⁵ *Philosophical Fragments*, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁶ *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 46-47, 59, 93.

¹⁷ “...the learner is in untruth, indeed, is there through his own fault—and yet he is the object of the god’s love... We probably think that this may be a matter of indifference to the god, since he does not need the learner, but we forget—or rather, alas, we demonstrate—how far we are from understanding him; we forget that he does indeed love the learner” (*Philosophical Fragments*, p. 28).

¹⁸ Similar interpretations of Kierkegaard are argued in Robert E. Larsen, “Kierkegaard’s Absolute Paradox,” *The Journal of Religion* **42**, 34-43 (1962) and in *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account*.

but Climacus cannot understand it. Neither can we, and furthermore our present business is not to understand it but... to inscribe it in our life.¹⁹

Indeed, the scandal of the cross—that the creator of the universe was arrested, tried, declared guilty, stripped, and publicly executed—has always been absurd to Western philosophy and idolatrous to Semitic monotheism; it is little wonder that so few among the wise have ever believed.²⁰

To make faith in the scandal possible, Jesus not only provided “the condition” by speaking the words of God to his contemporaries, but continues to provide it through the mouths of pastors and other simple Christians who bring the words of God in Jesus’ name.²¹ By means of these lowly servants, not by means of the scholarship and rhetoric that inflate the egos of scientists, historians, philosophers, and theologians, Jesus exposes our unbelief, arrogance, vanity, greed, envy, lust, and hatred. When we recognize that our guilt is such that we cannot see God and live, Jesus—still through his despised servants—comforts us with the good news that God inexplicably loved us so much that he sacrificed his Son in our place for the forgiveness of all our sins.

In a perfect world, there would be no need to exercise faith against human reason, for without the fall into sin, there would be no vested interest against belief in the all-seeing judge and no Incarnation to redeem the world from its sins. But even given the fallenness of the world, why would God demand that we not only believe he exists, but also believe what seems to be a patent contradiction: that the eternal, unchanging God became fully human in time?²² Why not have us instead believe something we can verify or at least understand?²³ As appealing as such an alternative would be, if faith were not opposed to reason, there would be a dilemma, not in a hypothetical, good world, but in the existing, fallen world. Either salvation would be accessible mainly to those bright and educated enough to draw the right conclusions, or the truth would be so obvious that the majority would believe. The depravity of fallen human nature is thereby denied: in the former scenario, moral evil is downplayed to the extent that it can be overcome by human achievement, whereas in the

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, Granta Books, 2007, pp. 60, 62-64. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Volume 1, tr. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 208-213, 217-218, 385, 579-581, 596.

²⁰ St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 1-2.

²¹ Matthew 10:40; John 13:20; 20:21; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

²²“Whoever [wishes] to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian [catholic] faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity” (Athanasian Creed, in *The Book of Concord*, The Three Universal or Ecumenical Creeds: III, 1-40, tr. T. G. Tappert, Fortress Press, 2000).

²³ Attesting to the apparent impossibility of the real union between God and man in Jesus, even some evangelical sects hesitate to affirm that Mary is the mother of God and that God was crucified. The difficulty of believing the core teachings of Christianity has also been noted by many who do not consider themselves Christians. For example, a leading biologist and militant atheist, speaking of “some genuine specimens of good scientists,” is “baffled, not so much by their belief in a cosmic lawgiver of some kind, as by their belief in the details of the Christian religion: resurrection, forgiveness of sins and all” (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006, p. 99). He heaps particular ridicule on the concept of the Trinity (pp. 33-34), the incomprehensibility of which approaches that of the Incarnation. Alvin Plantinga provided [a review](#) from the perspective of a philosophy professor (“The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism Ad Absurdum,” *Christianity Today* **13** (2), 21 (March/April 2007)).

latter, rebellion against God is hardly seen as a significant problem. Who would not want to believe that most people are at least good enough to survive the unmitigated display of God's infinite righteousness and justice? Only the Spirit of God, through the ordinary people who speak the miracle-working words of the crucified and risen Son of God, can teach us to admit responsibility for our complete unworthiness and to receive the forgiveness he freely offers to all, from the brightest of Nobel Prize winners to the least significant of children. Whatever value those words may or may not have for historical inquiry,²⁴ Kierkegaard found them sufficient for faith.²⁵

Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, "We have believed that in such a such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died"—this is more than enough.²⁶

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²⁴ On the reliability of the canonical Gospels and versions of Jesus presented by the mass media, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, HarperCollins, 1996.

²⁵ Alvin Plantinga, aware of no argument for the Incarnation that would convince someone who did not already believe it, argued instead that faith in it, if the Incarnation occurred, would probably be "warranted for most of those who accept it" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 200-201, 242).

²⁶ *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 104.