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Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine *Agapē*: Reply to Aaron Preston

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Abstract: Philosophers have spent considerable time and effort trying to specify how humans can use speculative reason and other questionable theoretical resources to secure knowledge of God's reality (or the lack thereof). Perhaps the supporters of the arguments of natural theology merit the prize for unmatched efforts on this front, but the payoff of their seemingly endless efforts seems dubious at best. I contend that the latter efforts get things backwards. If a worship-worthy God exists, the main question is not about how humans can use speculative reason and other doubtful theoretical resources to secure knowledge of God's reality. Instead, the key question is just this: how does *God introduce and identify himself* to cooperative humans, who have inadequate resources for finding God on their own. This essay develops this lesson in reply to Aaron Preston's proposal to maintain some kind of spectator evidence in natural theology. Christ-shaped philosophy, as I understand it, calls for a Gethsemane-oriented epistemology, but does not need the arguments of traditional natural theology.

1. Foundations of Gethsemane Epistemology

On reflection, it seems very strange to suggest that even if God exists and is worthy of worship and hence perfectly loving toward all people, humans still need to use speculative reason and other tenuous theoretical resources to secure knowledge of God's reality. It is particularly strange to suggest that humans need to rely on the dubious arguments of natural theology to secure knowledge of God's reality. The natural question for any such suggestion is this: what is *God's* problem in self-revelation to humans? In other words, why would God leave humans with a need to recruit highly questionable, speculative arguments that widely fail to convince suitably critical inquirers? If such arguments are central to a proposed basis for human knowledge of God's reality, perhaps humans do not have genuine knowledge

of God's reality after all. At least, many skilled inquirers have reached this conclusion, and we do not have a compelling argument from natural theology to counter their conclusion.

In addition, it is highly doubtful that a God worthy of worship would involve human knowledge of God in the merely intellectual, speculative puzzles characteristic of the arguments of traditional natural theology. Such a God would be morally more serious and profound than that perspective suggests. Those arguments supply nothing by way of the kind of challenge to human wills that a redemptive God would offer; nor do they indicate the reality of a personal God worthy of worship.

The God of Jewish and Christian theism does not invite people into the quagmire of traditional natural theology, even if the god of the philosophers does. W.R. Matthews has remarked:

There are, I suppose, many in these days who long for the assurance that God is a reality and not a fiction, and the lover of men, but who are looking for that spiritual assurance in the wrong place. They turn over the arguments for and against the Christian belief in God, 'and find no end in wandering mazes lost'; or they seek for some overwhelming religious experience which will sweep doubt away, only to be haunted by the suspicion that this experience when it comes is nothing but a drama played on the stage of their own minds.¹

Critical inquirers who have explored the arguments of traditional natural theology, especially in their elaborate contemporary forms, know well the feeling of "wandering mazes lost." We should not expect a truly redemptive God to promote such wandering, given its lack of redemptive value.

We should expect a truly redemptive God to offer a distinctively redemptive approach to human knowledge of God's reality. Commenting on the Christian God, Matthews has pointed us in the right direction, as follows:

The guidance which comes from the earliest days of our religion would not indeed lead us to despise intellectual enquiry and mystical vision, but it would not lead us to begin with them. It would tell us to start loving our fellows, to cultivate the settled and resolute will for their good. So by coming to know what love means we shall come to know what God means, and by realizing its power, its reality as a human force, we shall

¹ W.R. Matthews, "Who is God?" *The Modern Churchman* 26 (1936), 182.

be in contact with a power which is more than human, with the creative energy of the world. ‘Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love.’²

Matthews refers to human “contact with a power [of love; Greek: *agapē*] which is more than human.” He also identifies the volitional component of human *willing* what is good in the realization of *agapē* and in contact with it. Both of these components figure crucially in what I have called “Gethsemane epistemology.”

The main conceptual context for Gethsemane epistemology is the notion of a God who is worthy of worship and hence morally and redemptively perfect. The idea of such a God emerges from some of the Old and New Testament writings, and it captures the kind of God and Father portrayed by Jesus, Paul, and John, among other Biblical figures. A recurring theme of the Old and New Testaments is that God is self-authenticating toward cooperative humans. God is self-authenticating in being *self-manifesting* and *self-witnessing* regarding God’s and Christ’s reality and moral character (see, for instance, Rom. 5:5, 8:15–16, 10:20, Jn. 14:23). This kind of self-authenticating arises from the central Biblical idea of God’s confirming his own reality for humans, given that God inherently has a morally perfect character and cannot find anyone or anything else to serve this purpose of authentication (see Gen. 22:16–17, Isa. 45:22–23, Heb. 6:13–14). We also find God’s self-authentication in the face of competing religions during the time of Elijah (see 1 Kings 17–18). Notably, Elijah does not resort to any argument of natural theology on behalf of God; nor does Jesus, Paul, or John.

The God of the prophet Isaiah announces self-authentication as follows: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isa. 45:22–23, NRSV, here and in subsequent Biblical translations). Here we find God swearing *by himself*, and not by anything else. The suggestion is that God’s own character anchors God’s claims and promises. In other words, God *self-witnesses* to humans, and this applies to human knowledge of God’s reality. We find a similar theme in the apostle Paul, who cites Isaiah in attributing the following to God: “I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Rom. 10:20). This report suggests divine self-

² Matthews, “Who is God?,” 182.

authentication via *self-manifestation*, that is, via God's showing himself to humans to authenticate his reality and faithfulness.

Paul identifies the heart of divine self-manifestation via the Spirit of God. He writes to the Roman Christians as follows: "hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God's love (*agapē*) has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Rom. 8:23). Paul expresses this reality to the Roman Christians, and he does not restrict it to himself or the apostles. Paul's remark about hope in God applies also to faith in God and knowing God. In particular, God has done something within people cooperative toward God to ground, with distinctive evidence, their hope and faith in God and their knowing God. This divine intervention as self-manifestation in human experience includes God's pouring divine *agapē* into human hearts through the Spirit of God given to cooperative people. Accordingly, the humans in question are not disappointed evidentially or psychologically in their hoping and trusting in God.

God's *agapē* poured into human hearts is no mere moral reflection, judgment, or inference; it cannot be reduced to ordinary moral experience. Instead, it is God's *compassionate will* to bring about what is morally and spiritually best for cooperative humans. It thus involves an I–Thou acquaintance relation between a human will and God's will, and this relation can deepen and become more salient over time. Humans can refuse to cooperate with God and thereby block the power of this *agapē* for themselves, because God does not coerce human wills regarding divine redemption (see Rom. 10:21). When humans cooperatively receive divine *agapē*, however, they are transformed toward the moral and spiritual character of God in Christ (see Rom. 12:1–2; cf. Eph. 4:21–23).

Participating in divine *agapē* can lead to deepening knowledge of Christ, as Paul indicates with regard to the Christians at Laodicea: "I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love (*agapē*), so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge (*epignōsis*) of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnōsis*)" (Col. 2:2–3). Paul adds: "I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments (*pitthanologia*)" (Col. 2:4). He thus suggests that *agapē*-based knowledge of Christ is more basic and secure than plausible arguments or claims. This is an important indicator of the foundational role of experienced divine *agapē* in knowing Christ and God.

One's cooperatively responding to the intervention of God's *agapē*-bearing Spirit can result in one's finding God's will within oneself, however imperfectly. This will includes God's will to love others, even enemies of oneself and God (see Mt. 5:43–48, Rom. 12:14–21). People can be surprised by

the new reality of divine *agapē* within oneself, because it marks a noticeable change from one's previous inclinations toward others, particularly toward one's enemies. This reality underwrites Paul's talk of "new creation" in the event of one's coming to know Christ from a divine, agapeic point of view (see 2 Cor. 5:16–18; cf. Jn. 3:1–8).

Paul writes as follows to the Roman Christians: "You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15–16; cf. 2 Cor. 1:21–22). Paul's mention of adoption and of God's fatherhood suggests that he has a kind of *filial* knowledge in mind, and such knowledge is not reducible to ordinary moral experience. Paul identifies the Spirit's witness to cooperative people as indicating their being children of God, and this is no ordinary moral experience. He suggests that God's Spirit prompts cooperative people to "cry 'Abba! Father!'" This use of "Abba" (in a Greek letter) recalls the Aramaic reference by Jesus to God as Father, and Jesus serves as Paul's perfect model for a filial relationship to God. Accordingly, the witness of God's Spirit calls for *kenōsis* from God's children, in keeping with the self-sacrificial obedience to God manifested by Jesus in Gethsemane and in his crucifixion (see Phil. 2:5–8). Paul's Spirit-oriented epistemology, then, comes with a severe moral and spiritual challenge to be conformed to the self-sacrificial character of Jesus. The poured-out *agapē* that underwrites filial knowledge of God in Christ images and emerges from the self-sacrificial character of Jesus.

Romans 8:15–16 calls attention to the widely overlooked role of simple filial prayer in receiving divine assurance, including evidence of God, directly from God. Even young children can enter God's kingdom with *well-grounded* conviction, owing to the gift of God's intervening Spirit. Accordingly, no need arises for a speculative add-on, such as an argument from natural theology. God's Spirit provides the ultimate evidence of God's reality and moral character, and does so with an inward challenge to the human will to yield to God's perfect will. This evidence must be received from a first-person perspective on the evidence, and therefore it does not operate just by proxy or as a speculative option independent of a volitional challenge to inquirers.

As self-authenticating, God supplies the needed evidence of divine reality via self-manifestation, and God does this at the (that is, *God's*) opportune time for a cooperative person. It follows that we should not expect to have a recipe for saying exactly when God will intervene in a person's life; nor should we limit God's intervention to people with "Christian" beliefs.³ God can be

³ On the latter point, see Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5.

elusive and unpredictable in self-revelation, always for the redemptive good of the people involved (see Jn. 3:1–8). Clearly, people are not always ready to receive God’s profound self-revelation; so, God needs to seek opportunities to challenge human wills redemptively. In addition, God’s distinctive self-manifestation with *agapē* need not be discursive, or propositional, but can be nondiscursively experiential, akin, for instance, to one’s being presented *de re* with an experienced quality of human caring toward oneself.

Philosophers tend to demand that an experience of God be more intellectual or cognitive than it needs to be. The key experiential (and evidential) feature is God’s moral character of *agapē*, including God’s will, attracting one’s attention in a salient manner, with the ideal result that one responds cooperatively, in conformity with this perfect will (at least to some extent). Such a response would fit with the attitude of Jesus in Gethsemane, where he yielded his will to God’s will (see Mk. 14:36). It is fitting, then, to think of this perspective as *Gethsemane* epistemology, given that it involves an experience of God’s will and a cooperative human response.⁴ It has no need for the speculative features of the arguments of traditional natural theology.

2. Objections and Replies

Some philosophers regard at least some of the speculative reason or spectator evidence of natural theology as indispensable for human knowledge of God. Apparently this is the position of Aaron Preston in “On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology.” He writes:

I am sufficiently impressed with the ambiguities in all of my past and current sources of evidence on the relevant theological and epistemic issues – from the Bible, to the broad Judeo-Christian tradition, to my own religious experiences (including experiences of conscience that seem to fit the Gethsemane model) – that I feel it would be a mistake to depart from the relatively detached, dispassionate forms of rational thought characteristic of “discussion mode philosophy” even within Gethsemane epistemology. Thus, I worry that Moser claims too much for Gethsemane epistemology, especially as concerns the purported superiority of pneumatic evidence to other forms of evidence about God

⁴ On the role of human cooperation in the evidence for God, see Paul Moser, “God and Evidence: A Cooperative Approach, *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 5 (2013), 91–105.

(all of which, I suppose, fall into the category of spectator evidence), and hence also as an orienting point for Christian philosophy.⁵

Preston leaves unclear the sense of “superiority” in his remarks, and therefore it is difficult to evaluate his main complaint. He seems to use a sense of “superiority” that involves the removal of ambiguity in divine evidence for a very wide range of people, if not for all people. I regard it as a serious mistake, however, to demand “superiority” in this sense, given the avowed elusiveness of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.⁶

My own position on superiority is that Gethsemane epistemology, as outlined previously, is superior in capturing the kind of evidence we should expect of a God worthy of worship. This position, contrary to Preston, does not demand that I engage in the sociology of knowledge of God. It is a separate, and not directly relevant, matter whether certain actual people find ambiguity in their evidence for God. The latter ambiguity can arise from a wide range of sources that have no bearing on Gethsemane epistemology. If one expects a religious epistemology to explain fully why God self-reveals with salience in certain cases and not in others, then one should revise one’s misleading expectation. Just as we lack a theodicy for God’s permitting evil (see the book of Job), so also we lack a full explanation of God’s ways of self-revelation with regard to particular actual cases and people. In addition, we should not expect to have a full explanation in the latter cases.⁷ Our cognitive resources are significantly limited with regard to explaining God’s ways of self-revelation in particular actual cases, and this should come as no surprise.

Preston adds:

In theory, and in itself, it is highly plausible that Gethsemane epistemology has the advantage Moser claims for it. Although it is not entirely clear to me what ‘self-authenticating’ means in more familiar epistemic terms (is it equivalent to ‘self-evident’ or ‘certain?’), it seems that on any plausible interpretation a self-authenticating presentation of God Himself, given directly to consciousness, would have an epistemic advantage over indirect presentations of God via propositions and arguments.⁸

⁵ Aaron Preston, “On the Purported Superiority of Gethsemane Epistemology,” pg. 2.

⁶ I have tried to characterize this elusiveness in *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); see especially chaps. 1–3.

⁷ I have reiterated this point in *The Elusive God, The Evidence for God, and The Severity of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁸ Preston, pg. 4.

As it happens, the terms “self-evident” and “certain” are used by philosophers in varying ways, and therefore it is a mistake to think that there is a “familiar” use that will shed light for all inquirers. In any case, Preston wants to move from theory to practice.

Preston remarks:

...what matters for practical purposes, like making religious commitments and calling for disciplinary reform, is not the epistemic superiority some source of evidence possesses *in theory* or even *in itself*, but its epistemic superiority *for us* and *in practice*. Should it turn out that pneumatic evidence exists but that it is not available to us, we can affirm that it still has an epistemic advantage over spectator evidence, but this would hardly warrant using it as an orienting-point for an academic discipline.⁹

This kind of move to “practice” is a mistake. We cannot dismiss an analysis of knowledge *just* on the ground that we fail to meet the standards of the analysis. Otherwise, we would be involved in a question-begging strategy against all analyses of knowledge that accommodate skepticism. In addition, an epistemology is not a practical recipe for identifying which actual people have knowledge and which do not. Such a recipe would take one deep into empirical matters beyond epistemology proper.

Preston illustrates his concern as follows:

From my own experience, and from what I know of others’ experience, plenty of willing people lack religious experience with the evidentiary-superiority-to-spectator-evidence that Moser attributes to pneumatic evidence. This is certainly true of my own experience (more on which later). Of course, appeal to personal experience has limited epistemic value for others. But in this case I do not think my epistemic situation is unique.¹⁰

He mentions a number of examples, including the cases of William Rowe, John Rawls, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa. He says of Rowe and Rawls: “as we all know, each ended-up losing his faith, at least in part from the sort of cognitive

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 6.

disappointment against which pneumatic evidence is supposed to be proof.”¹¹ Actually, I (at least) would not claim to know why Rowe and Rawls lost their faith, if they ever had faith in God. So, the use of “as we all know” is unduly rhetorical in this context. In addition, Preston suggests that the pneumatic evidence of Gethsemane epistemology is “supposed to be proof” against the cognitive disappointment allegedly experienced by Rowe and Rawls. The immediate question is: “supposed to be proof” *by whom?* Certainly I do not suppose, and have not supposed, it to be such proof. A big problem is that we (or at least I) do not have an adequate characterization of the actual “cognitive disappointment” allegedly experienced by Rowe and Rawls. In particular, I have no idea of what kind of evidence they expected from God, or even if they had a coherent expectation on this front. In addition, it is a category mistake to characterize the agapeic evidence of Romans 5:5 (which is central to Gethsemane epistemology) as a “proof.” Such evidence is not an argument at all, given that it does not require formulated premises.¹² Preston is no longer talking about Gethsemane epistemology here, and I cannot tell whose theory he has in mind. In any case, it is not my account.

Preston shows further misunderstanding of Gethsemane epistemology in his remarks about Gandhi and Mother Teresa. He remarks:

... take the case of Gandhi, who was arguably considerably more cooperative with God vis-a-vis the love commands than most Christians, but who apparently did not receive from God evidence sufficient to motivate a conversion to Christianity.¹³

Once again Preston goes beyond the evidence we actually have. We have no firm evidence for supposing that Gandhi was “considerably more cooperative with God vis-a-vis the love commands than most Christians.”¹⁴ Preston seems to think that he has sociological evidence indicating how cooperative “most Christians” are regarding the love commands, but this is doubtful at best. In addition, we have no evidence to support Preston’s suggestion that Gandhi “did not receive from God evidence sufficient to motivate a conversion to Christianity.”¹⁵ For all we know, he did receive salient undefeated evidence but opted not to yield to the risen Christ. In addition, we should not think of such

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For relevant discussion, see Paul Moser, “God without Argument,” forthcoming in *Is Faith in God Reasonable?*, eds. Corey Miller and Paul Gould (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹³ Preston, pg. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

salient evidence for God's reality as being *causally* "sufficient to motivate a conversion to Christianity."¹⁶ Such a view does not leave adequate room for a free human decision or commitment in favor of God, but the role for a free human decision is indispensable to making good sense of the human predicament.

Preston seeks support for his position from the case of Mother Teresa. He reports that

...she had profound experiences of God at various points along her journey some of which likely fit the model of Gethsemane epistemology, [but she] ultimately entered a 'dark night' in which she had no self-authenticating experiences of God for a remarkably long time. I submit that these cases are illustrative of the experience of *many* Christians and spiritual seekers. If that's right, then Gethsemane epistemology has a cogency problem on par with natural theology's.¹⁷

Preston's conclusion about Gethsemane epistemology does not follow. Once again he has attributed a requirement to Gethsemane epistemology that is not actually a requirement of my position. This is a pattern in his essay, and it amounts to a recurring straw-man fallacy. My position does not entail that Mother Teresa would have frequent experiences of God throughout her life. It allows that something could interfere with her having such experiences. As it happens, something evidently did interfere. The problem was that she prayed to God persistently to experience what Jesus experienced on the cross. I suggest that this manner of praying is inadvisable (given that it is doubtful that it is truly redemptive), but it evidently interfered with Mother Teresa's having frequent experiences of God throughout her life. The best advice for her may have been: beware of what you pray for, you may get it. In any case, there is no problem for Gethsemane epistemology here.

Preston continues his line of objection as follows:

... insofar as Moser wants to explain people's lack of pneumatic evidence as a function of their unwillingness to cooperate morally with God, it would seem that Moser avoids insulting their intelligence only by insulting their characters: they may not be cognitively defective, but they're morally defective insofar as they're too selfish to embrace the love commands. Surely this is equally insulting if not more insulting than

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

being declared cognitively deficient (personally, I'd rather be dumb than selfish or wicked).¹⁸

We need to distinguish two kinds of explanation of people's lack of pneumatic evidence. The first kind of explanation would use unwillingness to cooperate with God as *the single* explanatory factor in human lack of pneumatic evidence. This is *not* the kind of explanation I offer in Gethsemane epistemology. In *The Elusive God*¹⁹ and *The Evidence for God*,²⁰ I say explicitly that a range of factors account for human lack of evidence for God, not all of which we can identify or be expected to be able to identify. This lesson is analogous to our explanatory limitation regarding God's permitting evil. The second kind of explanation implies that *some people* lack salient evidence for God as a result of their resisting such evidence. Any plausible reading of Romans 1:18, 21, 24, 28 will need to accommodate at least the latter, more modest kind of explanation. As for offensiveness toward human moral character, we should expect the Good News from a God of perfect love to be honest enough to be redemptively offensive. A relevant challenge: try to read the New Testament without being offended regarding moral character. The objection at hand, then, is misplaced.

Preston develops his objection as follows:

... in the case of the Apostle Paul – whom Moser quotes repeatedly to validate his claims about pneumatic evidence – the richness of his experience of God arguably had more to do with his special mission as “the Apostle to the Gentiles” than with his own willingness to cooperate with God.... There may be other plausible criteria for the bestowal/receipt of pneumatic evidence, but the one I have suggested gives us no reason to suppose it would be readily available to large numbers of people. Consequently, it gives us no reason to think that pneumatic evidence has evidentiary superiority *for us* and *in practice*. It would therefore fail as a superior alternative to natural theology as a disciplinary orienting point.²¹

This kind of objection may seem initially plausible – until one actually reads Paul's writings, and I have highly recommended his writings to philosophers

¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 8.

¹⁹ Moser, *The Elusive God*, pg. 111.

²⁰ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, pg. 252-53.

²¹ Preston, pg. 9.

working on human knowledge of God. (In passing, I note with regret how very rare it is for even Christian philosophers to be conversant regarding Paul's profound writings; it is a serious mistake for philosophers to leave these writings to New Testament scholars.)

Paul clearly did not regard his agapeic experience of God, mentioned in Galatians 2:20 and elsewhere, as special or peculiar to his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. On the contrary, he invokes this very experience as representative for Christians, even Christians in a Roman church he did not found or know firsthand. Romans 5:5, as noted previously, offers the following important observation by Paul: "hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God's love (*agapē*) has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5; cf. Rom. 8:23). Paul, I have noted, mentions this reality to the Roman Christians in general; he gives no indication of restricting this reality to himself or the apostles. In addition, he makes related points about the possession of pneumatic evidence to the church at Corinth (see, for instance, 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; cf. Gal. 3:2–3). His remark about hope in God, I have suggested, applies also to faith in God and knowing God. In this perspective, God has provided self-manifesting evidence to people cooperative toward God, to ground their hope and faith in God and their knowing God. A serious problem, however, is that people often look in the wrong places for the evidence for God, such as in the arguments of traditional natural theology.

A general consideration counts against Preston's current objection. Christian faith in God is best understood as including an affirmative human response to God's love in Christ. This is not a response just to a past occurrence involving the historical Jesus; instead, it includes a response to God's love on offer *now*, where this love is presented to one now, courtesy of God's intervening Spirit. This approach to Christian faith has been shared by thousands of Christians since the time of the historical Jesus. It is not an option limited to the apostles. Similarly, Romans 5:5 offers a genuine option for all Christians, not just for Paul or the apostles.

Preston evidently holds that we must acknowledge a crucial role for "speculative reason" in reasonable belief in God's reality. He comments:

...moral experience has always been at the heart of my own religious experience and commitment. But this is because, to the extent that my moral experience (including and especially certain deliverances of conscience) incline me to embrace the love commands, I am willing to *interpret* the former as possible manifestations of "the voice of God." However, I am acutely aware that this is an interpretation of an experience that, in itself, is not obviously theistic, let alone Christian. I

am willing to employ this interpretation largely because the moral teachings of (some versions of) Christianity resonate with my pre-religious moral experience.... But these analyses are constructions of speculative reason, joining spectator evidence to the data of experience along the lines of an “inference to the best explanation,” and this serves only to make the Christian interpretation of conscience reasonable or plausible. It is not conclusive, as pneumatic evidence is supposed to be.²²

I cannot tell what Preston means by “conclusive,” and therefore will not pursue that matter, given the various senses of “conclusive” in circulation among philosophers. I am on record, in *The Elusive God* and elsewhere, as favoring the use of inference to a best *available* explanation to *propose* or to *defend* a belief in God’s reality. I suspect, however, that Preston is conflating (a) the conditions for *proposing* or *defending* undefeated evidence for a belief with (b) the conditions for *having* undefeated evidence for a belief. This is a serious conflation, because a person can have undefeated evidence for belief in God’s reality without proposing or defending such evidence. A child innocent of philosophy, for instance, can have undefeated evidence for belief in God’s reality. We make the having of evidence too intellectual or cognitive if we require that it include one’s proposing or defending such evidence. Preston, I submit, conflates what should not be conflated here. This is a kind of “level-confusion” that emerges often in reflections on epistemology. My proposed Gethsemane epistemology avoids such a confusion.

Preston seeks to highlight what he deems to be a further problem for Gethsemane epistemology, as follows:

Unless the experience of pneumatic evidence is phenomenologically distinct from ordinary experiences of conscience..., we must suppose that it involves the sort of interpretation described above (a Christian interpretation of a non-theistic experience). But for any such interpretation to be rational, we must have good reasons for adopting it, and it seems that any such reasons will be items of spectator evidence.... What’s more, I submit that given the ambiguities of moral experience, one cannot responsibly interpret any particular deliverance of conscience as the voice of God without using the relatively detached, dispassionate forms of rational thought characteristic of “discussion mode philosophy” as a screening mechanism. Moral reasoning usually involves

²² Ibid., pg. 10.

both speculative and practical reasoning, but both make considerable use of propositions and arguments, and so “spectator evidence.”²³

The problem at hand, however, does not differ in kind from the previous problem, which was identified as suffering from a kind of level-confusion. In the present case, the having of good reasons or evidence is conflated with something called “moral reasoning,” but the mere having of experiential evidence does not require reasoning at all. Preston gives us no good reason to suppose otherwise. Once again, he evidently confuses the having of evidence and the formulating, proposing, or defending of evidence.

It is unclear what Preston would include in “ordinary experiences of conscience,” but it would be a mistake to regard the experience of Romans 5:5 to be “non-theistic.” This experience includes the Spirit of God pouring out divine *agapē* in a human heart, whereby one experiences God’s will to love others, even enemies. This is no mere human effort. Preston notes my suggestion that God alone can empower human *agapē* for enemies, but he objects as follows:

This would be plausible if this power was something we saw only in Christians, but pretty clearly that’s not the case (again witness Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, countless peaceable people I knew growing up in the post-hippy culture of Northern California in the 1970s and 80s, etc.).²⁴

This objection confuses the idea of being empowered by God and the idea of being a self-avowed Christian. I explicitly reject such a confusion in *The Evidence for God*.²⁵ My account of exclusivism and inclusivism allows for God to work redemptively in people who are not self-avowed Christians. So, Preston is far off the mark here.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Preston’s position concerns his limitation on God’s self-manifesting power. Barring the aforementioned level-confusion, he evidently holds that God “cannot” self-manifest, and thereby identify himself, to humans without human reliance on speculative reason and its notorious vagaries. Apparently, then, his position implies that God cannot self-manifest, and thereby identify himself, to children. I presume that many children are innocent of what Preston calls “speculative reason,” but

²³ Ibid., pg. 11.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 11, fn. 16.

²⁵ Moser, *Evidence for God*, chapter 5.

nonetheless can apprehend a self-manifestation by God. At least, I find no reason to hold otherwise. In suggesting otherwise, Preston places a strange limitation on God that cannot readily be sustained. I recommend that we avoid any such limitation. I also recommend that we reject the level-confusion identified above. We might ask, in this connection, whether *Preston's manifesting himself* to others requires their reliance on speculative reason of some kind. This would not be an obvious or compelling position on personal self-manifestation. If this is not required in his case, then we should doubt that it is required in God's case.

Preston takes issue with my general understanding of God, in *The Severity of God*²⁶ and elsewhere, on the ground that my substantive use of "God" as a perfectionist title "simply begs the question against the nominalist/voluntarist position, which allows God to get His way however He wishes *and* count as morally perfect by making God's unfettered will determinative of moral (and all other) reality."²⁷ He adds, however:

Now, I think that the nominalist/voluntarist position is both absurd and pernicious, and I suspect Moser would agree. But I see no way to refute it decisively, and hence no way to provide decisive support for the infinitely preferable (to me) alternative that Moser endorses.²⁸

Well, if the alternative position in question is "both absurd and pernicious," as Preston claims, let us move on. I do not understand exactly what Preston seeks in wanting to "refute it decisively," but when a position is "both absurd and pernicious," we need not tarry long with it. Instead, we may light a candle and move ahead with a position that is not absurd or pernicious. In any case, we may plausibly deny that a god with an "unfettered" will is worthy of worship. A being worthy of the title "God" must have a morally perfect *character* that duly guides the divine will accordingly.

Preston concludes by wondering as follows:

... if the Gethsemane experience is supposed to be normative for Christians, perhaps the experience of being forsaken by God is too – in both cases, we hope, scaled down to bearable, merely human proportions. If so, perhaps the general unavailability of religious

²⁶ Moser, *The Severity of God*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

experiences epistemically superior to spectator evidence is to be expected on theological grounds.²⁹

Our assessment of this speculation would require some clarification of what Preston means by “the experience of being forsaken by God.” He mentions Jesus’s cry of abandonment on the cross (mentioned by Mark and Matthew, but not by Luke and John). I have no reason to suppose, however, that the abandonment experienced by Jesus is normative for Christians; nor has Preston given any reason to suppose otherwise. In addition, it is doubtful that typical Christians could handle the kind of abandonment experienced by the human Jesus. Some commentators have suggested that Jesus experienced such abandonment so that typical Christians would not have to undergo it. Even so, Christians are called to share in the sufferings of Christ (see 2 Cor. 1:5, Rom. 8:17, Col. 1:24, 1 Pet. 4:13), for the sake of building up the people of God, but this call does not entail their sharing in his kind of perceived abandonment on the cross. The burden is on Preston to show that the abandonment experience of Jesus on the cross is to be normative for Christians. The disanalogy with the Gethsemane experience, in any case, is clear. Jesus explicitly teaches the Gethsemane attitude to his followers in, for instance, the Lord’s prayer: “Thy will be done.”

3. Redemptive Knowledge beyond Speculative Reason

Richard Shumack has characterized my Gethsemane-based epistemological perspective regarding God in the following terms:

... a personal, relational God would have no interest in human spectators merely sitting in the grandstands, so to speak, debating what God is like. God would only be interested in humans entering the “playing field” of personal encounter. In the same way that any personal encounter I might have with the Queen would properly be entirely on her terms, the personal encounter with God would sensibly be on His/Her terms – terms that are unlikely to be mainly scientific or philosophical. Philosopher Paul Moser argues that this is precisely what we might expect if God is personal and if He is interested, above all, in personal relationships. He suggests that: ... *entertaining signs and wonders are*

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 14.

*optional and not mandatory for God ... God can properly make confident knowledge of God's existence arise simultaneously with filial knowledge of God.*³⁰

Filial knowledge of God is the kind of obedient, Gethsemane-oriented knowledge that is to be expected of a child toward a benevolent parent.³¹ Shumack notes that in this perspective it makes good sense that God is elusive rather than an object of casual speculation or inspection for humans. He adds:

Maybe we can think of God being a bit like a big cat. Big cats, despite being large and powerful and the kings of the jungle, are usually invisible. They are invisible because they hide, and they hide so that instead of being found, they can find on their own terms. In effect Moser is arguing that this is likely to be the case with God. A personal God will not simply allow us to find Him/Her in theory; instead He/She will want to find us in person and will give us enough clues to lead us to the right sorts of places for that to happen. The claim that God turned up in the person of Jesus would be one obvious example of a place to look closer. The sort of intimate presence of the Holy Spirit that accompanies a deep willingness for God to transform the mess in our lives would be another.³²

The God worthy of worship seeks to find us on God's redemptive terms. As a result, we should not look to human speculative reason for the needed avenue. Instead, we should expect God to be self-authenticating in the manner indicated by Paul's letter to the Romans. This perspective may take the wind out of the sails of human speculative reason, but that ship is sinking anyway from the perspective of the redemptive God manifested by Jesus.

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³⁰ Richard Shumack, "God Meets a Different Standard of Proof," *Online Opinion: Australia's E-Journal of Social and Political Debate*, 1 August 2013, viewable at: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=15301>

³¹ For a detailed characterization of filial knowledge, see Moser, *The Elusive God*.

³² Shumack, "God Meets a Different Standard of Proof."