

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Cumulative Case Apologetics

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### THE NATURE OF THE CASE FOR THEISM AND CHRISTIANITY

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A good place to begin the discussion of apologetic methodology is to ask about the nature of the case for theism and Christianity. Various answers have been given to this question. Some have argued that we can prove the truth of Christianity or at least theism by offering *demonstrably sound arguments*. Such arguments are logically valid and have premises that can be shown to be true. A demonstrably sound argument is coercive in the sense that anyone who wants to retain rationality must accept the argument.<sup>1</sup>

There are two arguments that have at some time in their history been advanced as demonstrative proofs of God's existence: the ontological and the cosmological. The strategy of the *ontological argument* is to argue that there is something in the concept of God that guarantees his existence—that is, that God's existence is necessary. Unfortunately, it is agreed by most philosophers since Kant that no version of the argument succeeds in making its case as a demonstrably sound argument. The problem is that the argument has a premise that the nontheist will not accept as true. Even an ardent defender of the ontological argument like Alvin Plantinga admits that in the end there is a premise in the argument that one will accept if one accepts the conclusion, or will reject if one rejects the conclusion, that God exists. Therefore, what this argument shows is that there is nothing contrary to reason or irrational about accepting this argument. What he claims for the argument is not that it proves the truth of theism, but its rational acceptability.<sup>2</sup>

The *cosmological argument* fares no better in this regard. The strategy of this argument in its various forms is to argue from the existence of contingent states of affairs to the

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<sup>1</sup> See John Hick's fine discussion of "proof" and "probability" in *Arguments for God's Existence* (New York: Seabury, 1971), vii–xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 111. For further information on the ontological argument, see Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1962), 28–117; John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, eds., *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*, ed. Baruch A. Brody, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 100–116; and Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965).

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existence of God as the only explanation for these states of affairs. A familiar form of this argument is the causal form. We have all heard of it in its simplest formulation. If something exists, it must have an adequate cause or explanation. The causal chain must either be infinite or there must be an uncaused cause, God. An infinite regress of causes is impossible. Therefore, God must exist as the uncaused cause of what exists.

Many theists, myself included, think that this and other forms of the cosmological argument are sound. Again, the difficulty is with those who are not theists. They refuse to accept one of the essential premises to this argument. They might deny that God is the only adequate explanation for the existence of anything. Or they might argue that an infinite regress of contingent causes is not impossible. I think the theist is right, but we are trying to convince the atheist, and that is the problem. Thus, if what I have said is the case, then the cosmological argument does not constitute a proof in the sense of being a demonstrably sound argument.<sup>3</sup>

A second way to understand the case for theism and Christianity is to argue that we can make a *probable case*. We will relax the standard and give up the search for absolute certainty. While we cannot prove that God exists and that Christianity is true, we can at least show that it is probable, maybe even very probable. There are a variety of ways to attempt this. One of the most common is through the *teleological* or *design argument*. The argument claims that the universe exhibits design or order. According to the theist, this order or design is best explained as the work of an intelligent designer.

While this argument holds a grip on theists, it is less persuasive for nontheists. What persuades many atheists to reject this argument is that there is an entirely acceptable (and perhaps equally probable) alternative explanation for any order that we find in this universe, namely, evolutionary forces. If one accepts the evolutionary theory, then any universe that survived would have to exhibit order or it would have perished. The dynamic interactions between organisms and their environment along with the need to adapt for survival are adequate explanations for any order shown by this universe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the statement, defense, and objections to this argument, see Brody, 121–57; Donald R. Burrill, *The Cosmological Arguments: A Spectrum of Opinion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967); William Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibnitz* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979); idem, *The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life, 1979); and idem, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Again, the argument from design can be set out and defended in very sophisticated ways. It is subject to a variety of objections as well. For a survey of the aforementioned, see Brody, 158–212; W. Salmon, "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogue," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (Fall 1978): 143–76; G. Schlesinger, "Theism and Confirmation," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (January 1983): 46–56.

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Let me summarize the case up to this point. First, traditional arguments that have been thought to prove God's existence and provide a basis for arguing to the truth of Christianity fail if we understand "prove" in some strict sense that might require the atheist to believe that there is a God. That is, there are some premises in the argument that the nontheist will refuse to accept, causing the argument to fail. Second, if we understand probability in any meaningful sense, we run into problems as well. Not only is the standard relaxed, but alternative explanations can be offered to that of the theist. If what we have argued is true, it seems that theists can take one of two approaches. They can appeal to some form of *fideism*—that is, they can claim that God's existence and the truth of Christianity are matters that are justified by faith alone. Or they can defend the possibility of a rational case for theism and Christianity of a sort other than those just examined. The latter approach is not one that conforms to the normal patterns found in deductive or inductive argumentation.<sup>5</sup>

In my judgment, the latter course has more promise. There is a rational approach that has been called a variety of names, the *cumulative case approach* or the *inference to the best explanation approach* being the most common. Such an argument is rational but does not take the form of a proof or argument for probability in any strict sense of these words. This approach understands Christian theism, other theistic religions, and atheism as systems of belief. Such systems are rationally supported by a variety of considerations or data. The model for defending Christianity is not to be found in the domain of philosophy or logic, but law, history, and literature. This does not mean that the apologist may ignore the deliverances of philosophy or logic, but that the nature of the case for Christianity is to be found in a different field.

The cumulative case approach to apologetics has been adopted by a number of distinguished apologists, such as F. R. Tennant, Elton Trueblood, G. K. Chesterton, and C. S. Lewis. It also has been adopted by such philosophers as Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, and William Abraham.<sup>6</sup>

Because the term *cumulative case* is used in apologetics in ways other than the way I am using it, it will be helpful to try to explain my use in precise terms.

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<sup>5</sup> See Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 34–39.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.*; Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); William J. Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985); and *idem*, "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism," in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, ed. William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer (Oxford University Press, 1987).

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First, the argument for theism and Christianity is an informal one, not a formal one. There are neither premises nor derivations. It is more like the brief that a lawyer brings, or an explanation that a historian proposes, or an interpretation in literature.

Second, it is a broadly based argument that is drawn from a number of elements in our experience, which in turn either require explanation or point beyond themselves. Later in the chapter I will set out what constitutes the elements for this case.

Third, none of the elements that constitute this case has any priority over any other. In the classical approach to apologetics, priority is given to the proof that God exists. For this reason, natural theology and its arguments usually have priority. Once it has been shown that God exists, his nature and love for the sinner are defended. Such an argument is cumulative in the sense that Christianity is defended in terms of more than a single argument. It is not, however, cumulative in the sense that I am using the term because, in the classical approach, God's existence must be proven first. In the approach I am defending, one may start with any element of the case, and depending on the response, appeal may be made to some other element to support or reinforce the claim that Christianity is true.

Traditional Christian theists are urging that their explanation makes better sense of all the evidence available than does any other alternative worldview on offer, whether that alternative is some other theistic view or atheism. The opponent is contesting that claim. The dispute is over what Gilbert Ryle calls the "plausibility of theories."<sup>7</sup> What Christian apologists are defending is the claim that Christian theism is the best explanation of all available evidence on offer. The opponents are required to present a more convincing cumulative case.

Fourth, unlike some approaches, the cumulative case approach is not simply a defense of God's existence or theism, it is an apologetic for Christianity. Put a bit differently, if successful, it establishes the Christian worldview, not just a theistic worldview.

Basil Mitchell gives a parable of two explorers to explain the nature of a cumulative case argument.<sup>8</sup> They come to a hole in the ground. One explorer finds nothing unusual about it, while the other thinks there is something odd about it. They find some other holes in the vicinity. Then they come upon a papyrus fragment in a cave that looks as if it might be a part of the plan for a building. The large hole could be for the center post, and the other holes for poles that gave support to the sides of the building. They even try

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Ryle, "Induction and Hypothesis," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume (1937).

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, *Justification of Religious Belief*, 43–44.

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to reconstruct the building. One explorer thinks that he can see how a building once sat on that spot. He theorizes that there is some order or plan in the location of the holes. Though he lacks the complete plan, he thinks that the fragment supports his view. The other explorer, by contrast, sees the placing of the holes as accidental and argues that there are unexplained and missing elements in the data. The first explorer, in turn, thinks it is possible to explain why certain elements are missing.

Mitchell holds this parable to be a good example of a cumulative case. There is a need for ultimate and overarching explanations, but attempts to give such explanations may conflict. The data at certain points may even be capable of a number of different interpretations. However, the theory that best accounts for the data is to be preferred.

Mitchell tries to relate the parable to the question of God's existence and the truth of Christianity. He suggests that the large hole could be the need to explain certain aspects of the universe and reality, which natural theology is an attempt to address. Some of the smaller holes represent religious experiences, the experience of God's presence, of sin, and of grace. Finally, the fragment of the plan is analogous to the concept of the Bible or Christian revelation. In this example, it is even possible to see how the various elements help to reinforce one another.

Two other examples are offered by Mitchell, one from literature and the other from history. In both disciplines scholars develop theories or hypotheses to explain the text in the first case and the facts in the second. These theories or hypotheses are themselves tested for their ability to explain the data.<sup>9</sup>

## TESTS FOR TRUTH

To settle conflicting truth claims and determine what is the best explanation for all the data, there must be some tests for truth. The reason for this is simple: Christianity is not the only worldview that claims to be true.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in this section I will outline what I take to be the appropriate criteria for testing worldviews.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 45–57.

<sup>10</sup> For another discussion of similar tests for truth, see Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). While Nash's approach to apologetics would be different from mine, it is noteworthy that the tests for truth that he suggests are quite similar to mine. This is because these tests are used generally, and they are not tailored for the religious issue alone.

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## The Test of Consistency

The first test that any truth claim must pass is that of *consistency*. This means that a system of belief must not lead to a contradiction. Any system of belief that is internally inconsistent is false. To show that a contradiction can be generated from a group of beliefs is the strongest type of disproof. It is called a *reductio ad absurdum*. Consistency is such a strong test that logicians teach that anything whatsoever follows from a contradiction. It is fair to say that most systems of belief can be stated in sufficiently sophisticated ways that they will avoid such a failure. Take this example from the Bible. One might argue that James says that works alone can save, while Paul teaches that faith alone saves. Is this not clearly a contradiction, and should not the Christian revelation fail the test of consistency? Christian theologians and apologists have thought not. They have claimed that James and Paul are harmonizable. Paul must be understood as teaching that the basis of salvation is faith alone. James, on the other hand, deals with the evidence for saving faith. He says that works are the evidence that one has saving faith. Thus, the evaluation of this test when applied to a system of belief will not always be agreed upon. This does not detract from the fact that consistency is an exceedingly important test.

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## The Test of Correspondence

The second test for truth is *correspondence* or *empirical fit*. This test requires that any belief must correspond with reality. It is related to the belief that a correspondence theory of truth is the correct theory of truth. Empirical fit is a test between a system of belief and reality. Whenever some belief does not correspond to our understanding of reality, some may continue to believe it, but since it is hard to avoid the conclusion that that belief is false, it will usually not attract many followers. For example, some religious systems of belief have taught that sickness and death are not real, but illusions. The faithful may continue to believe that this is true, but, as has been said, it is hard not to think that that belief is false and that few will accept it.

## The Test of Comprehensiveness

*Comprehensiveness* is the third test for truth. This criterion requires that we prefer theories or systems of belief that explain more of the evidence over those that might account for less. Explanations for the existence of evil in the world are good examples of this point. An atheist may claim that evil is best explained by the fact that there is no God, or at least not one with the attributes taught in the Bible. If this was the only datum religious belief had to explain, the atheist's conclusion might be best. However, there is much more that calls for explanation, and atheism fails this test when compared with Christian theism.



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## The Test of Simplicity

A fourth test for truth is *simplicity*. This test instructs us not to multiply explanatory items unnecessarily. It has also been called Ockham's razor. If an explanation is both simple and adequate, it is to be preferred. The application of this test is not always easy to determine, for when is an explanation adequate? However, there certainly are cases where it is clear that elements of explanations are not needed and should not be used.

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## The Test of Livability

The next two tests for truth might be called the "pragmatic criteria."<sup>11</sup> The fifth test is *livability*. It says that for a belief to be true, it must be livable. This is not the same as our second test for truth, correspondence. That test is more theoretical, while livability is practical. For example, some belief or system of beliefs may pass the theoretical test but show itself to be false, because the advocate of that system constantly contradicts his system in living out his life.

## The Test of Fruitfulness

The sixth test for truth is *fruitfulness*. Here we ask what the consequences are of holding such a view of reality. Does it produce fruitful consequences? Take two systems of belief, one that holds that reality is totally disorganized and random, while the other holds that reality is characterized by regularities. On this criterion the latter theory will be preferred, as it will make things like science possible.

## The Test of Conservation

Finally, I suggest *conservation* as a test for truth. By this I mean that when we find some anomaly to our theory, we first choose solutions that require the least radical revision of our view of the world. Put another way, we seek to modify the paradigm that we are using to understand reality rather than immediately making a radical shift to a new one. For many years Newtonian mechanics constituted the reigning paradigm. Anomalies arose to this system of belief. What occurred first were attempts to modify Newton's views. At some point the problems became so great that it was decided that a new paradigm was needed, and a major shift took place. This is what conservation requires. It is based in the belief that any system of belief that has reached the position of a reigning paradigm must have a good deal of evidence supporting it. Therefore, it is not wise to abandon it as a first move.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 62–63. Nash calls these the test of practice.

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Before I conclude this discussion, a few observations are in order. First, it should be clear that these tests for truth are tests that would be used throughout rational discourse. There is no special pleading by theists for tests that will give their views an advantage. These are tests that scientists, historians, and others—not just theists—would use in settling conflicting truth claims.

Second, not all of these tests or criteria are of equal importance. Undoubtedly, the most important test is the first, consistency. As I said, if a system of belief cannot pass this test, then it may be dismissed. Correspondence or empirical fit is next, and comprehensiveness follows that.

Third, once one gets to the criteria that follow comprehensiveness, the order of importance becomes less clear. In some case, livability might be more important than simplicity, and in another not.

Fourth, the evaluation of any system of belief in terms of these criteria will be open to debate. This is not because truth is relative, but because our knowledge of any system of belief is fallible. This explains why it is that two individuals looking at the same evidence may come to different conclusions. Further, this shows the importance of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the defense of Christian theism.

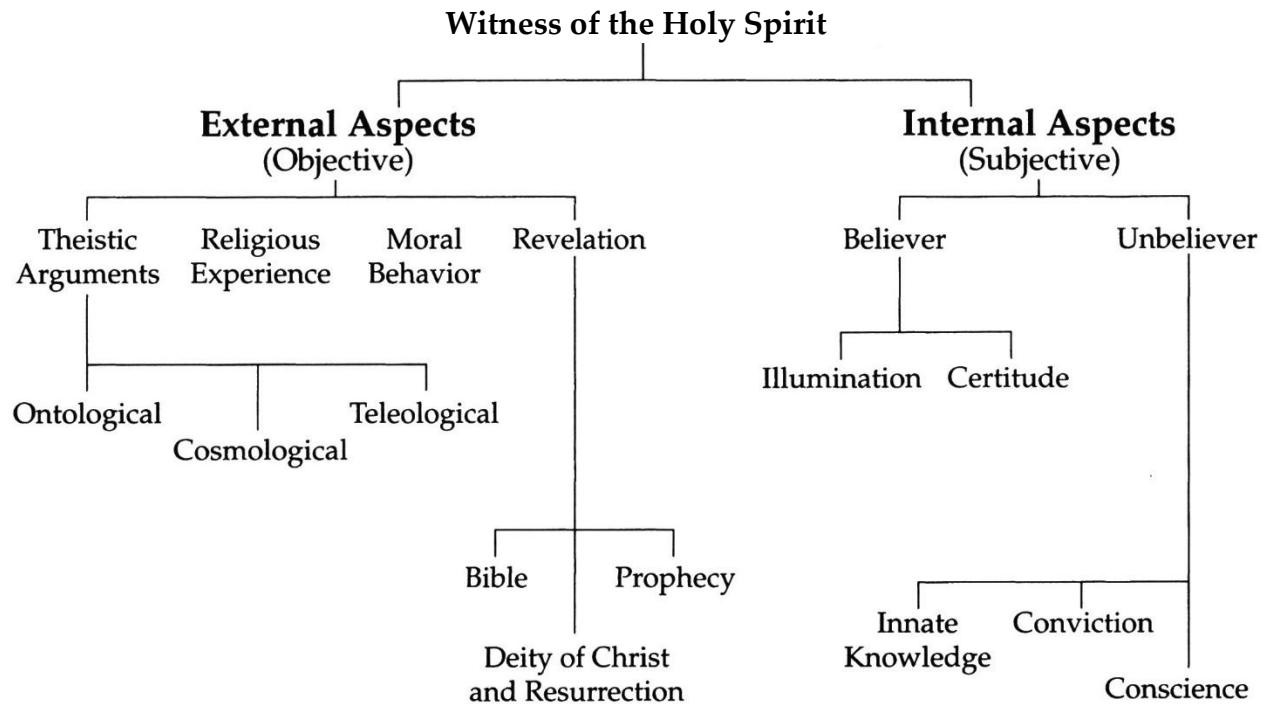
## THE ELEMENTS OF THE CUMULATIVE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY

I have spoken about elements of our common human experience that require explanation and that point beyond themselves to something more in a general way. In what follows I will attempt to describe the most important elements that make up the cumulative case for Christianity. The name I shall give to the case for Christianity is “the witness of the Holy Spirit.” I take this name to emphasize the importance that all Christians place on the work of the Holy Spirit in the defense of the faith. The Scriptures teach that God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, witnesses to the truth of Christianity.



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Having said that, I think that the witness of the Holy Spirit may be divided into two aspects. First, there is the *internal* or *subjective* witness of the Spirit.<sup>12</sup> By this I mean that the Spirit witnesses within individuals personally. I use the word “subjective” in the narrower sense of “to the subject,” not in any relativistic sense. Even though some apologetic approaches would wrongly exalt the subjective element to a place of supreme prominence, I think that there is an important subjective element in the case for Christianity.

Second, there is the *external* or *objective* witness of the Spirit. By this I mean that there are elements of the case for Christianity that are external to individuals. They are objective in the sense that they are public—that is, they are available to all individuals under certain conditions.

### The Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit

Let us examine each of these aspects of the witness of the Holy Spirit in some detail. First, we will turn to the internal, subjective, and personal elements of the case for

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<sup>12</sup> The term *subjective* is sometimes used to refer to an entire approach to apologetics. See Norman L Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 65–81, where he sets out this approach and evaluates it.

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Christian theism. It is helpful to further divide our discussion between the witness of the Spirit to unbelievers and that to believers.

What can be said about the ministry of the Spirit to unbelievers?

The Scriptures teach that there are at least three ministries. First, the Holy Spirit has been given to convict or convince unbelievers of at least three elements of Christian theism (John 16:8–11). He will convict unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Thus, the ultimate task of convincing those who do not believe the truth of Christian theism is the work of the Holy Spirit; the apologist is simply an instrument in the Spirit's hand. Arguments alone, even the best of arguments, will not convince individuals of the truth of the Christian faith apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Spirit may appeal to the conscience, which God has placed within each individual (Rom. 2:14–16). God has written his law on the hearts of individuals so that even when they do not have the written law, their consciences either accuse or defend them. The conscience, however, is not an infallible witness, as we learn that it may be seared.

Third, God has so constituted individuals that they have a sense that there is a God (Rom. 1:19). Theologians have sometimes called this “innate” knowledge of God—that is, God has not left us in a state of neutrality about his existence. Rather, we are born with a sense that there is a God, and that we are accountable or responsible to him. Again, this is not an infallible guide, since it is possible to suppress the knowledge we have about God.

Now, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is not just to unbelievers; he witnesses to believers, too. He illuminates the minds of God's children (1 Cor. 2:9–16) and helps them to understand God's truth. He is our teacher. Because the natural man does not have the Spirit, he will not accept the things of God. They seem foolish to him, and he cannot understand them. The believer, however, knows the mind of God. Sin has affected our ability to understand and accept God's truth; thus we need the Spirit's ministry to us.

Further, the Holy Spirit is the source of certitude for believers (1 John 5:6–12). The fact that the Spirit witnesses to our spirit that we have believed the truth explains the tenacity and stubbornness of the believer's faith in God.<sup>13</sup> The last belief many people would give

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 70–72. Nash makes well the point that I am trying to make here. He points out that because worldviews are about reality, we can never have logical certainty. Evidence for interpretations of reality can only have probability or plausibility as I have called it. Nash points out that some have taken this lack of logical certainty to be a sacrilege. He counters this claim that we can and often do believe matters that

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up would be belief in God's existence and his love for them. For this reason, many apologists distinguish between *certainty* and *certitude*. Certainty looks at the strength of the external evidence for a belief. Certitude looks beyond the external evidence, recognizing that there is a subjective element which can alone explain the tenacity and stubbornness of belief. This stubbornness is not the result of ignorance or stupidity; it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, on this view of the case for Christianity, there is an internal witness of the Holy Spirit to individuals. The unbeliever is not in a position of neutrality with regard to God's existence and moral requirements. Moreover, it is the Spirit's responsibility to convict or convince of the truth of God. The Holy Spirit helps believers to understand what God says and requires, and the Spirit also adds the subjective certitude that explains the tenacity and stubbornness of belief in God and the Scriptures.

## The External Witness of the Holy Spirit

If the entire case for Christianity were subjective and personal, it might make belief simply a matter of the will. One might choose to believe whatever he wanted, claiming that he had divine assurance that he was right. That is why there is also an external witness of the Holy Spirit. That witness is objective, and it is public so that under certain conditions it is available for critical scrutiny. The elements that make up the external side of the case for Christianity are open to different interpretations. It is even possible for someone to have a cumulative case for atheism or Islam. That is why there must be tests for truth.

Again, there are many elements to the external witness of the Spirit. First, there are the *theistic arguments*, or arguments for God's existence. These arguments are now introduced as arguments, not proofs. They introduce certain aspects of our experience that appear to need explanation and seem to point to God. Take the cosmological argument, for instance. It is not claimed to "prove" that there is a transcendent creator of the universe, as before. Rather, it makes explicit one way—arguably the best way—in which the existence and nature of the universe can be explained.

The atheist is free to suggest alternative explanations or to deny that it is possible to explain the universe at all. But two things have now changed in our case. The atheist must show that the alternative explanation or theory advanced is more plausible than the one defended by the theist. And, if it is argued that the universe's existence and nature cannot be explained, the atheist must face the other elements of the theist's case. The atheist must

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lack logical certainty with moral or psychological certainty. I have called this certitude to distinguish it from certainty. It is subjective, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

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explain why it is that people claim to have experienced God, why there is a moral law, and why there is a book that claims to be a disclosure from God. So the case for God and Christianity is now much more broadly based.

(A similar kind of claim could be made for the teleological argument in the sense that order and the fitness of means to ends need explanation.<sup>14</sup>)

The second element of the external witness of the Holy Spirit is drawn from *religious experience*. Religious experience may be understood as functioning as an argument in two ways. The theist may argue that throughout human history a host of individuals have claimed to have known and had a personal relationship with God. This claim has been made across cultural and geographic boundaries as well as over time. For the atheist's claim that there is no God to be true, every single one of these individuals must be wrong about a matter that they themselves would characterize as the most important human concern. However, if even so much as one of these individual's claims is true, then there is a God. The atheist may respond that the belief that one has had an experience with God and has a relationship with him is explainable in a variety of ways. The theist's belief is the result of certain psychological and/or sociological factors. Both the theist's and atheist's claim can be tested for plausibility. Is there evidence that psychological and sociological factors are controlling the individual's belief? Furthermore, religious experience is only one element of the case for Christianity.

At this point the atheist might contend that such an argument cuts two ways. That is, we can make an argument of the same sort for atheism. Many people in human history have claimed that there is no God. All of them would have to be wrong for theism to be true. Since this was a matter of greatest importance to those making this claim, it would truly be incredible to think that they all were wrong.

At first it might appear that we have come to a standoff on this argument, but that is a mistake. The arguments are not on par. To know that something is true, one need only know a little of the world's knowledge. For example, to know that Deerfield is in Illinois, one only has to have a very little knowledge. I would only be required to know a bit about the geography of Illinois just to the north of Chicago. But consider what one must know to know that there is no God. Would 50 percent of the world's knowledge be enough? Would even 95 percent? No. One would have to know everything, because God could be hiding in the 5 percent where one was ignorant. C. S. Lewis said that wolves are ingenious in hiding out from those who want to catch them. God is far more ingenious than wolves

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<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Justification of Religious Belief*, 40–42.

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in his ability to hide out from those who seek him out of sheer curiosity or for the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, the theist can give an explanation for the atheist's inability to find God. It is possible that some conditions must be met for one to acquire certain types of knowledge. For instance, to know that there is a table in the next room, certain conditions must be met such as (1) one's going into the room, (2) the room having sufficient light, or (3) one's asking for and believing the testimony of someone who has met the conditions needed to have that knowledge. Thus, it is possible that the reason that the atheist has not been able to establish contact with God is that he has not met the conditions that are required for that kind of knowledge.

Now, there is a second way in which we may formulate an argument from religious experience.<sup>15</sup> Many have claimed that encounters with Jesus Christ changed them from sinners to saints. They lived lives that could only be characterized as evil and self-centered until they met Christ. He changed their lives radically. Now they desire to do what is right, and they seek to do acts of charity. They are altruistic and are concerned with the needs of others. Some have lived in such impressive and persuasive ways that it is difficult to doubt their claims. It is true that opponents can attribute the changed lives to psychological or sociological factors. However, it will no longer be enough to simply suggest these kinds of alternative explanations. It will be necessary to show that these explanations are more plausible than the one offered by the individual who points to the encounter with Jesus Christ.

Further, it is important to see that we are not left in a position where we must accept claims of the sort just mentioned without the ability to test them. We can think of a number of criteria for evaluating claims of influence on one's life. Think of individuals who say that an encounter with Abraham Lincoln revolutionized their lives. How would we go about evaluating such a claim? I think that we would want to know what characterized their lives before this encounter. Suppose we were to find out that they once lived in a way that was quite contrary to the values Abraham Lincoln espoused. Then we would want to know how they came into contact with Abraham Lincoln. Did they have some personal meeting? Was their contact with Lincoln through his writings? And, finally, we would be interested in finding out how they lived their lives after their encounter. Did they change their actions and beliefs so that they reflected the principles embraced by Lincoln? If all these criteria were met and these changes were attributed to the influence of Abraham Lincoln, it would be hard to deny their claim. The same is true for those who say that Jesus Christ is the reason for their changed lives. Their claims are

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. This is similar to the way Mitchell develops this element.

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strengthened even further when understood in conjunction with the other elements of the case.

A third external element of the witness of the Holy Spirit, after theistic arguments and religious experience, is the *moral law*. Not only do human beings have a conscience, but they are also incurably moral.<sup>16</sup> Many people today deny the reality of a moral law and espouse moral relativism. They speak often about relativism, and their actions are governed by this philosophy. Moral relativism is far less believable, however, when we are reacting to someone whose actions toward us are guided by this philosophy.

A story about a college course in ethics will help to illustrate my point. The beginning philosophy teacher had a number of students in his class who were defenders of relativism, claiming that there were no universal, absolute moral laws. The teacher did his best to change students' attitudes on this issue. He talked about the impossibility of acting as a moral judge with regard to the Holocaust and slavery. Most students were not willing to defend the actions of the Nazi death camps or the actions of Southern American slaveholders as being right for some people or being right for the day in which they were practiced. The students wanted to condemn such practices as wrong. The brightest student in this class, however, would not change his mind; he continued to defend relativism. The teacher thought he would teach this student a lesson, so on the student's final exam he wrote that the student had gotten an F on the final and an F in the course. The professor did this in spite of the fact that the student had received an A on the midterm and had written one of the best final exams. The final exams were returned to the students by university postal service, and this student was both stunned and angry when he received his grade. He went immediately to the professor's office to inquire why he had received an F. The professor told him that he had decided that anyone who did not write the final exam in purple ink had failed both the exam and the course. This explanation did not make the student any happier. He told the professor that his actions were wrong and that if the grade was not changed, he, the student, would report the professor's actions to university authorities, the campus newspaper, and local call-in radio programs. The professor listened for some time to the student's threats before saying this to him: "You really are not a relativist, are you? You do believe some things are wrong. We cannot do whatever we want. Your exam was the best in class. You got an A on it and an A in the course. Now be on your way." The point again is this: One may talk and even act like a relativist until someone treats him in terms of his own principles—then watch the relativist's reaction!

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<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), bk. 1.



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C. S. Lewis is correct in arguing that morality or the moral law is a means for showing us that there is something beyond sense experience. He says that the moral law is not simply a fact related to human behavior in the way that the law of gravity is a fact related to physical objects. The moral law is a real thing that is independent of us, not something that is made up by us. It is something beyond the ordinary facts of human behavior. Since something beyond the mere facts exists, what does this tell us about the universe? It tells us that there is something behind the universe that is more like a mind than anything else we know. This is insider's information. It is based on something other than scientific experimentation. We meet it in what we ought to do. Lewis cautions against assuming too quickly that this is the God of Christian theism. He does, however, think that we do have reasons for uneasiness when we realize that we have not always obeyed this moral law. It is at this point that we are ready for the introduction of the Christian view of reality. That is, there is a moral law, a moral lawgiver, the fall of Adam and the universality of sin, the need for a savior, the cross, and a resurrection. All of these things that are a part of the Christian story now make sense.

Finally, the external case for Christian theism includes *revelation*.<sup>17</sup> Christianity is one of a group of religions that claims to be based on a communication from God. While this claim is controversial today, orthodox Christianity has claimed that the Bible is a revelation from God. As such, it is authoritative where it speaks. This is drawn from what the Bible has to say about itself, as well as from external evidences that support that claim. An important element in support of the claim that the Bible is from God is the testimony of Christ himself to the Bible's authority. In both his words and actions it is clear that he thinks that the Scriptures are from God. He also authenticates the New Testament in advance by what he has to say about the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will lead his disciples into all truth (John 16:12–15).

It is also in this revelation that we come to know the central figure for Christian theism, the Lord Jesus Christ. We learn in the Scriptures that he is not simply a good man, but that he is God himself, the second person of the Christian Trinity. This was not simply something that Jesus' followers attributed to him because of his untimely death; it was something he claimed for himself (cf. John 8:58–59; 10:30–33). Jesus' claim to deity was

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of issues that make up this element of the cumulative case see Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 267–304; Paul D. Feinberg, "Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 142–45; Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence for the Life of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988); Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidence for the Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life, 1979); Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1977); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

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authenticated by his resurrection from the dead. It is in the Bible that we learn of Jesus Christ's resurrection and have the primary evidence for it. The resurrection is the crucial piece of evidence in the establishment of the deity of Jesus Christ, and it was verifiable through empirical evidence, such as the empty tomb and Christ's post-resurrection appearances. What is being asserted is this: Within the Christian revelation there are claims of an empirical sort that can be tested.

While the case for the divine origin of the Scriptures is also a broadly based argument, an important aspect of that argument is the testimony of Jesus Christ, who is himself God. For those who hold this view of the Bible, this is one of the most telling pieces of evidence. They cannot see how their view of Scripture can be anything less than that of their Lord.

This is not all that can be said about revelation. Apologists have thought that an argument from fulfilled prophecies supported the claims that the Bible was from God and that Christianity was true. Some have estimated that one-third of the verses in the Bible made predictions about the future. Even at this present time something like a quarter of the verses in the Bible have as yet been unfulfilled. The portion of predictive prophecy that has been fulfilled is taken to support the claim that the Bible is a revelation from God. It is in that revelation that Christianity's central truths are set forth.

The claim that there is a supernatural revelation from God, that it reveals the appearance in time and history of one who calls himself God, that that claim is validated by his resurrection from the dead, and that this God is able to control the future in such a way that he can foretell what will happen before it does, all require some explanation, and again the Christian explanation is the best on offer.

## SUMMARY

This, then, is the case for Christianity. It is a broad-based argument with many subjective and objective elements. They require some explanation and in some cases can be seen as reinforcing one another to strengthen the case for Christian theism. The case is like a lawyer's brief. The claim is that Christian theism gives the most plausible explanation of all the evidence.

At this point, opponents of Christianity might make this claim: Just as the Christian theist can make a cumulative case argument, so can the apologist for other religious points of view or for atheism. Some elements of the case would undoubtedly differ from the Christian case, but others would not. For instance, Islam would defend the Koran as a revelation from God. A Muslim could formulate an argument from religious experience just like the one offered for Christianity. And he would claim his view of reality is true.

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It is for this reason that there must be some tests for truth like those outlined in the previous section that can help adjudicate conflicting truth claims. It is my contention that Christianity passes these tests where other worldviews fall short.

## TWO OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

Before closing this discussion, I must address a couple of objections—one directed against cumulative case apologetics in particular, and the second against apologetics in general.

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### The Ten Leaky Buckets Objection

A common objection against cumulative cases arguments is that they are subject to the *ten leaky buckets objection*. It is argued against them that ten ineffective arguments, when combined, cannot make one good argument, just as ten buckets that all leak water cannot in combination hold water. This objection may be answered in two ways. First, such an objection may have force if the arguments are claimed to prove a conclusion. That is no longer the case here. These arguments point up areas in our experience that need explanation and seem to point to the existence of God. It is possible to offer explanations different from those given by the Christian theist. However, those explanations have to be as plausible and comprehensive as the one given by the Christian theist.

Second, in the kind of cumulative case that I am defending, the elements of the theist's case may tend to reinforce one another. Not all arguments may fail as proofs at just the same point. It is possible that one element reinforces an argument just at the point of its weakness. For instance, one may pose psychological explanations for someone's belief that he or she has a sense of God's presence because one thinks that God's existence is doubtful. But the theistic arguments may be advanced to show that God's existence is not contrary to reason. To use Plantinga's terms, it is rationally acceptable to believe that there is a God. Or put in terms of buckets, unless the holes in all ten buckets line up perfectly so that the water will spill out, one bucket may so reinforce another bucket so that the ten leaky buckets will indeed make a bucket that will carry water. The apologist is arguing that Christian theism is the best explanation of *all* available evidence *taken together*.

### The Postmodern Objection

One objection to the task of apologetics in general grows out of the current intellectual climate. At the heart of apologetics is a belief that truth exists. Apologists may differ over how to defend that truth, but they nevertheless agree that God's existence and Christianity are true. Further, apologetics presupposes that these beliefs are true not only

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for me, but for everyone who has ever lived. Belief in truth of this kind is not accepted by all today. We live in what has been called “postmodern” times, and one form of postmodernism rejects the belief that there is anything that might be called objective, absolute truth. If this form of postmodernism is true, then apologetics methodology is faced with a very different problem than the one discussed in this book. Therefore I would like to describe the objection and then respond to it.

A variety of views falls under the term *postmodernism*.<sup>18</sup> What unites them is their dissatisfaction with the modern view of the world. Modernity is the view of reality that grows out of Enlightenment thought, in which reason is exalted and supernaturalism is denied.

While proponents of each form of postmodernism would make the point a bit differently, their assessment of modernity would be strikingly similar. They would agree that in the modern view of the world the supernatural God of the Bible has died. However, in spite of the fact that modernity celebrated the death of this supernatural God, it tried to retain the Western ideas of self, truth, history, meaning, and value, which were based on this understanding of God. Nietzsche realized this could not be done and took the radical road of rejecting these ideas, causing him to become a hero in certain forms of postmodernism.

This radical form of postmodernism is called *deconstructionism* or *eliminative postmodernism*. It is called deconstructionism because of its heavy dependence on the French movement, of which Jacques Derrida is the most important figure, and its dependence on Martin Heidegger’s understanding of metaphysics. It is called eliminative because of views traceable to the American philosopher Richard Rorty. This form of postmodernism celebrates the death of the ideas mentioned above and does not seek to reinterpret them in postmodern terms.

Mark C. Taylor is certainly one of the better-known English-language advocates of deconstructionism.<sup>19</sup> He begins by setting out the consequences of the death of the traditional idea of God. He calls deconstructionism the “hermeneutic of the death of God.” In his view, the controlling, aloof deity of traditional theism is not replaced by some less repressive god, but is eliminated entirely. This means that there is no center that unifies human existence, no perspective to serve as a standard and judge for truth.

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<sup>18</sup> See David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, eds., *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

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What is left is only a multiplicity of perspectives, all having equal rights. No perspective is more normative than any other.

As might be seen from what has just been said, truth also dies. Taylor claims that there is no truth, not just that we cannot know what is true. With Nietzsche he declares there is no true world. When God dies, absolute relativism follows. There is no eternal truth, only never-ending flux.

The self dies, too, and no attempt is made to reconstruct it in postmodern terms. There is the elimination of any referent for language outside of itself. Linguistic signs only refer to other signs. Words do not refer to some "real," extralinguistic world beyond language. Our interpretation of these linguistic signs, on this view, are interpretations of other interpretations, not of some extralinguistic world. Moreover, if no real world exists, then truth as correspondence to that reality makes no sense. There is no intention of a writer in a text which interpretations seek to approximate. The text does not preexist its interpretations. History is no longer a directed process with some goal or *telos*. Taylor follows Nietzsche in eliminating the usual distinction between good and evil, and he encourages us to live beyond either of these. In the end, this way of thinking results in nihilism. It involves the subversion of everything that was once thought to be holy. It denies all meaning, all purpose, all ethical and aesthetic norms.

If any form of postmodernism like deconstructionism is true, then there can be no task for apologetics, and discussions about methods for defending the faith are meaningless. Therefore, every apologist must face this challenge squarely. Has truth died? Is all meaningless? Is the only way to victory to embrace such a world willingly and in so doing overcome it? I think not. Yet criticisms of views like that of Mark Taylor are difficult. Because of his radical relativism, he would reject the idea that any meaningful criticism can be made of one position from the perspective of another. While it is possible to point out inconsistencies, it is impossible to criticize a position because it does not correspond to the facts. There simply are no facts for deconstructionism. Two systems of belief are incommensurable. No neutral center of reality exists from which to judge systems of belief. Thus, it will be very difficult to criticize deconstructionism in terms of the two most important criteria that I have set out as tests for truth, consistency and correspondence or empirical fit. As long as one is careful not to describe beliefs in contradictory ways, one is safe from criticism, because there are no facts to fit.

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The method I have set forth does, however, provide a way out.<sup>20</sup> One of the tests for truth was livability. I said that while some systems of belief might escape theoretical tests, they must be capable of being lived out practically. In the case of deconstructionism, theoretical tests are simply rejected as inappropriate because they are outside the system. But let me set out a response that Mark Taylor and deconstructionists cannot escape in terms of the test of livability. Some facts must be universally acknowledged *in practice*, irrespective of what is said in theory. These facts are *hard-core commonsense notions*. Their defining characteristic is that they cannot be denied without following them in practice.

The strategy of this critique of deconstructionism is to demonstrate that those who verbally deny things like belief in truth and good and evil continue to act in ways that presuppose them in practice. Such an approach has this important advantage when made against deconstructionism: its criticisms are *internal*, not *external* to the system. They do not rest on what is claimed to be a misguided understanding of facts, but rather on the demonstration of inconsistencies between explicit and implicit affirmations. Thus, there is a way beyond complete relativism through hard-core commonsense notions. These notions show that there is a real world and that there are transperspectival facts.

Taylor repeatedly makes the claim that there is no real world beyond consciousness, yet he appeals to an “insight” that “relationships constitute all things.”<sup>21</sup> This insight into the “nature of all things” then becomes a critical norm from which he is able to reject the modern view that things are independent of their relationships. In doing this, Taylor gives implicit testimony to the realist’s claim that our interpretations of reality are formed by our contact with a reality that is independent of our interpretations.

Consider also what Taylor has to say about truth and what he does in practice. Taylor is quite clear that there is nothing like truth as correspondence with reality. If this is so, then his book is filled with statements that we should not take as truth claims in any traditional sense. He argues against systems of belief that try to master reality. In his arguments against such systems, he declares that reality is unmasterable. In defending a position that denies the distinction between good and evil, he asserts that “creation and destruction, life and death, are forever joined.”<sup>22</sup> From what he says, it is clear that he believes that these ideas are true in the sense that they correspond to reality. Taylor argues that there is nothing like eternal truth, because “the play of appearances never

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<sup>20</sup> See David Ray Griffin, “Postmodern Theology and A/theology: A Response to Mark C. Taylor,” in Griffin et al., *Varieties*, 29–61. For a thorough critique of postmodernism from an evangelical perspective, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 48–49.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 91, 168.



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stops and hence cannot be fixed.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, in making this claim, one cannot escape the conclusion that Taylor thinks that this principle is an eternal truth. He claims that truth itself is an illusion, but he encourages closer inspection in examining certain matters. It would seem that this closer inspection would lead us to a better approximation of the truth. Furthermore, Taylor cannot be read without taking statement after statement in his book as a truth claim.

Taylor’s treatment of other authors is another example of this kind of practical inconsistency. He refers often to figures like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Derrida. In what he says about them, it is clear that he believes that they were actual persons and that they wrote texts prior to his discussions of them. Moreover, he thinks that his interpretation of their texts is an accurate understanding of what they wrote. And unless it is possible to distinguish between what they meant and how they are interpreted, then it is impossible to know what is claimed when he talks about “a creative ‘misreading’ of an antecedent text.”<sup>24</sup>

In summary, Mark Taylor and deconstructionism make claims explicitly that they cannot follow in practice. This shows that while they may deny a number of hard-core commonsense notions, they in fact testify to their truth. Deconstructionism is not a livable system of belief. Since this is the case, truth in the sense needed to do apologetics is possible. We must take seriously Christian theism’s claim that it is the best explanation of all the evidence. There is an independent reality. Good and evil do exist. Jesus Christ entered time and space. He died and rose again so that we might be forgiven of our sins. This is not just some interpretation of some interpretation. It is true regardless of how it is defended. Therefore, the discussion of methodology in this book is significant. It is not meaningless.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology*, xviii.

<sup>25</sup> Feinberg, P.D. (2000). “Cumulative Case Apologetics”. In S. N. Gundry & S. B. Cowan (Eds.), *Five views on apologetics* (pp. 147–172). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.