CHRISTIAN SKEPTICISM?:
CAN WE REALLY KNOW GOD?
by
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I

Suppose we assume that God exists. Indeed, let us suppose that the God of Christianity exists and reveals himself to us in history and in the Bible. Now Christian theologians have traditionally distinguished between God as God is revealed and God as God exists in the divine essence.¹ We can know the first—so they say—but cannot know the second. God as revealed is said to be the omnipotent, omniscient, and loving creator and the Father of Jesus Christ. But—so many theologians since Pseuo-Dionysius insist—we know nothing, or virtually nothing, about God’s essence. This is because God is also said to be transcendent, unlimited, incomprehensible, inscrutable, and ineffable. That is, God in essence is beyond our ken.

The question that I want to raise here is one that so far as I know is not often asked, viz., what is the relationship between these two? That is, what reasons do Christians have, if any, for holding that God as revealed corresponds to or is a reliable representation of God’s essence? Maybe God in God’s essence (let’s call this GE) is importantly or even radically different from God as revealed (which we can call GR); maybe revelation tells us nothing at all about GE.² I am not asking whether GR can tell us everything about GE or even everything that we might want to know about GE. Nobody in the Christian tradition to my knowledge thinks that it does or can. Rather, the question is: do we have any reason to suppose that GR is accurate to GE, captures for us actual knowledge of GE?³
Christianity is based on the assumption that in some sense GR is reliable, that God really is as God has been revealed to be. But how do we know this? How do we know that this assumption is rational or justified? It might end up being a matter of sheer trust, not based on any evidence. But of course sometimes in life trust is warranted and sometimes it is not, and we will naturally want to know whether it is warranted in this case. The theological stakes here seem huge. Thus Thomas Torrance (following Karl Barth) says: “If there were no such bridge [between GE and GR], the Gospel would be finally detached from reality, empty of truth and validity and its account of the saving acts of God would be no more than a mythological projection out of human fancy…”4 This is why we cannot just ignore the issue before us and decide to concentrate on GR and not worry about GE. We naturally want to know whether our opinions about God are true.

A bit later I will test some possible solutions to this conundrum. But first I want to discuss three different ways of imagining the possibility that GR does not correspond to GE, that GR is not a reliable representation of GE. They are: (1) In revealing God to us (as GR), God is doing God’s best to tell us as much as it is possible for us to know about GE (given the world, our fallen state, and the kind of creatures that we are), but it just can’t be done. That is, it is logically impossible accurately to communicate to finite, ignorant, and fallen human creatures (since theologians hold that our sinfulness has affected our cognitive faculties) anything about the essence of a transcendent being who is infinite in power, knowledge, and love. (2) God has it within the divine power to make GR adequate to GE but God knows that it is actually better for us not to be given accurate or reliable information about GE; accordingly, God does not provide us with information
about GE. (3) God is systematically lying to us about GE. (The second and third possibilities are similar in that both agree that God is misleading us. The essential difference is that on the second, God does the misleading for a benevolent purpose while on the third possibility it is for a malevolent purpose.)

I will argue that the first two are not promising ways of trying to understand the skeptical possibility that GR gives us no reliable information about GE. They can be considered briefly. The third way, however, raises troubling issues that we will need to discuss in some detail.

II

(1) The first possibility—that we human beings simply cannot receive any accurate or reliable information about GE—seems true in part. It certainly does seem difficult to imagine finite and limited creatures like human beings fully grasping the essence of a transcendent and unlimited being. This is presumably what Christian theologians have in mind when they deny that we can know God’s essence. Thus Thomas Aquinas wrote, “We are unable to apprehend [the divine essence] by knowing what it is.” And Nicholas of Cusa declared that God is above all the concepts that any human can frame; accordingly, he spoke to God as follows, “The intellect knoweth that it is ignorant of Thee because it knoweth Thou canst not be known.” And John Calvin wrote, “[God’s] essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception.”

What seems to be affirmed here is that humans cannot fully understand God or cannot understand God in anywhere near as fully a way as we can understand other creatures like, say, pigeons or fruit flies. That point seems entirely sensible. But does it
follow that we cannot receive or grasp any reliable information about GE at all? Indeed, it seems that theologians are in fact trying to assert something about GE when they say things like, “God is mysterious,” or “God is transcendent,” or even “God is ineffable.” Aren’t such statements—despite the fact that they amount to negations—intended to be reliable representations of God essence? Accordingly, the first possibility does not seem promising.

(2) The second possibility is that God could, if God wanted to do so, convey to us accurate information about GE, but for our own benefit chooses not to do so. The author of the mystical classic, The Cloud of Unknowing (a late fourteenth century English monk whose name is unknown to us), seems to suggest as much. Speaking apparently to a younger monk, he wrote: “But now you put me a question and say: ‘How might I think of Him in Himself, and what is He?’ And to this I can only answer thus: ‘I have no idea.’ But with your question you have brought me into that same darkness, into that same cloud of unknowing, where I would you were yourself.” Humans can understand other creatures and even some of the works of God—so the author allowed—but he went on to insist, “No man can think of God himself. Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought.”8

So the idea is apparently that in ruling out the possibility of human knowledge of God, God opens the possibility of love of God. And it is clear that the author of The Cloud of Unknowing held that love of God is the way that we are to approach God and even, as he says, hold to God. That is why the author wrote that he wanted the younger monk to be in the same state of ignorance (of GE) that he himself experienced.
Another way of arguing that knowledge of GE would be spiritually dangerous to humans is to claim that in knowing God’s essence we could be “possessing God” in some sense or having some sort of claim on God. Karl Barth seems to argue along these lines. Even though Barth argued against Luther that there is no “hidden God” who is somehow different from (what I am calling) GR, he insisted that in revelation, God is not “delivered up” to us. Human knowledge does not “contain” God or reduce God’s freedom. Otherwise, God becomes a creator or idol.⁹

Perhaps there are other ways of arguing that God deliberately keeps us ignorant of GE and that this is in our best interest. But the point we are considering here does not seem convincing. For one thing, it is clear that we can love things that we know, e.g., our friends or loved ones, and it is hard to see why having some knowledge of GE rules out or is an impediment to love of God. Indeed, it seems much harder to love something that we do not know than something that we do know. Moreover, it is not easy to see why we would be “possessing God” in some theologically untoward sense if we were to know something of GE. Nor is it easy to see why human knowledge of GE, as opposed to GR, would reduce God’s freedom or make God into an idol. It seems that as long as one holds that there is continuity between GR and GE, knowledge of GR (which of course Barth insists that we have) would do the same.

(3) The third possibility is that God, in revealing the divine to human beings, is systematically misleading us about God’s own nature. And this notion naturally makes us immediately think of Descartes’ famous “Evil Genius” from his Meditations on First Philosophy. In order to rationalize his policy of methodical doubt, Descartes raised the possibility that
an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. How do I know that he has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless I possess the perceptions of all these things and that they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them?

A bit later he wrote:

I will then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but rather some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me.¹⁰

So Descartes’ radical idea—at least at this point in the development of his philosophy—was that nothing at all that he once believed can be trusted; the Evil Genius could fool us about anything. Accordingly, everything must be doubted. (Of course Descartes did not believe that the Evil Genius actually existed; the hypothesis was instead a graphic way of motivating Descartes’ strategy of doubting everything that can be doubted.)

Now in the present essay we are concerned not with methodical doubt in pursuit of a stable epistemological strategy vis-à-vis knowledge in general, as Descartes was. Our concern is with the theological problem raised by the possibility that via revelation God systematically misleads us about the nature of the divine. Still, it might prove helpful to think a bit longer along Cartesian lines.

Let us raise the extreme possibility that God is deceiving us in the following (to Christians, anyway) highly radical way: Suppose that God has hidden from us the fact that in his essence God is what I will call the Anti-Christian God (or ACG, for short). This God, let us say, is remarkably ecumenical and tolerant of all sorts of human beliefs religions, sects, or practices—except Christian ones. At death, God receives into eternal bliss all human beings, regardless of gender, race, beliefs, good or bad deeds, etc.—except Christians, whom the ACG hates. All those who have believed and behaved
Christianly (e.g. by attending Christian religious services, etc.) he sends immediately to eternal damnation.

It is clear that the Evil Genius, as conceived by Descartes, does not trade in what we would ordinarily call “illusions.” These are cases—like a stick in water that looks bent, like an oasis or a lake that seems to appear on the horizon in the desert, or like the lady who is apparently sawn in half by the magician—where careful investigation can fairly easily reveal to us what has gone wrong and why things are not in fact as they appear to be. The Evil Genius is much cleverer than that. He wants to fool us at a far deeper level; he wants to cause us to hold firmly to false beliefs that we think are overwhelmingly warranted. So he creates illusions so cunning that no investigative strategy that we could possibly undertake could reveal the truth to us. For example, he shows me what looks and seems like an ordinary ball point pen—and will still seem to be a ball point pen no matter what I do to or with it—and then chuckles because he knows that the “ball point pen” is really a very, very, very cleverly disguised cantaloupe.

Following O. K. Bouwsma, let’s call illusions that can be detected or figured out “thin illusions” and the type of illusions we are imagining the Evil Genius to be producing “thick Illusions.” Bouwsma offers a classic response to the thick illusion strategy of the Evil Genius. He first points out that we normally use words like “illusion” or “deceived” or “fooled” in contexts where it is possible to discover that one is mistaken, i.e., in the context of thin illusions. He next argues that if the illusion is so cleverly constructed that nothing I can ever do will show me that the ball point pen is really a cantaloupe, i.e., no matter what I do it will still look and behave like a ball point pen, then I am not being “fooled” in believing that it is a ball point pen. I should not be bothered in
the slightest if the Evil Genius were to own up and tell me that the thing I am looking at in my hand and writing with is not really a ball point pen but just a thick illusion of a ball point pen. The word “illusion” has lost all sense. Finally, Bouwsma suggests that in the present scenario the Evil Genius has outsmarted himself; he thinks he is fooling me but he is the one who is being fooled because he mistakenly thinks he is “fooling” me.

But, unfortunately, Bouwsma’s clever response to the thick illusion strategy of the Evil Genius is not available to us as we wrestle with the gap between GE and GR and the possibility that God is the ACG. For one thing, we can easily imagine that the Evil Genius one day reads Bouwsma’s essay, realizes his mistake, smacks himself in the head, and then sets out to amend his ways: he might decide to eschew thick illusions and instead start deploying what we might call semi-thick illusions. These are illusions that are incredibly difficult to detect but can be detected, but only with the greatest effort and with the use of the most sophisticated investigative methods. Then Descartes’ Evil Genius hypothesis will not have been refuted. But, more importantly, in the present context there does not appear to be any sort of linguistic barrier (like our normal use of words like “illusion”) to rule out the possibility that God, in GR, is systematically fooling us about GE. It might still be the case that we have no idea of GE; it might still be the case that the ACG exists.

III

I will now discuss four possible reactions to the conundrum that we are discussing. The first two amount to possible bridges that might be built from GR to GE. They are: (1) Jesus Christ is the bridge; and (2) via human reason and GR, we can triangulate on GE (so to speak) and at least arrive at some reliable information about GE.
The third and fourth reactions are more radical. (3) Christians should change their notion of God; and (4) the problem cannot be solved, i.e., our belief that GR accurately represents GE is perhaps an assumption that we must make if we are to be Christians, but there is no warrant for it.

(1) The bridge is Christ. It might be argued that Jesus Christ, who is the preeminent revelation of God, and who is (as Christian creeds insist), both truly divine and truly human, is the needed guarantor of the reliability of what we learn about God by revelation. After all, he is said to be “the one mediator between God and humankind” (I Tim. 2:5). Speaking of Christ, Thomas Torrance says, “he is in himself what he reveals of the Father and what the Father reveals of himself in the Son he is in himself as Father.” Accordingly, Christ imparts to us knowledge of GE.

Now this argument is certainly sufficient—or so it seems to me—to convince most Christians of the reliability of GR. But that is because most Christians already make the assumption mentioned above, viz., that GR is accurate and reliable. They find the idea of God lying to us distasteful and blasphemous. But in the absence of that assumption, as for example based on our ACG hypothesis, the idea of Christ as the bridge between GE and GR does not seem convincing. If the ACG exists, he could falsely convince us that Christ is the bridge, but only as a part of his strategy of producing more Christians for him to punish in the afterlife.

(2) Triangulation. The idea here is that different lines of evidence can converge to show us at least some things about GE, just as GPS can locate a radio signal on the surface of the earth by triangulation from two or more satellites in earth orbit. Or perhaps a better model would be orthographic projection in mechanical drafting. It is impossible
accurately to depict a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface like a piece of paper. But what can be done—and what drafters often do—is to depict the object from different angles and perspectives, thus showing its true configuration.

This notion of triangulation might be metaphorically applied to God in the following way: in the Christian tradition we have various (as we might say) sources of information about God, some perhaps more reliable than others: (1) natural theology (what we can learn about God by our own reasoning abilities); (2) what we can learn by thinking about the meaning of God’s revelatory actions in the world (e.g., the Exodus, the incarnation of Christ, the resurrection of Christ); and (3) what we can learn from God’s revelations in words (e.g., the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the Old Testament prophets, the teachings of Jesus). And if all sources of information tend to converge and give us a coherent picture of God (as theologians usually say that they do), then by a sort of triangulation we have learned something about God, indeed about GE. For example, if it is clear from two or maybe even all three sources that God is not the ACG, then we can know that God’s essence does not include a determination to send all Christians to hell.

There are various points that could be made about this proposed bridge between GR and GE. But the most important is the fact that even if the triangulation seems to work, we have not ruled out the possibility that we are deeply mistaken about God’s nature—indeed we have not ruled out the possibility that God is the ACG. This is because we can imagine the ACG orchestrating or rigging the triangulating sources of information precisely in order to convince more people to be Christians so that he can punish them.
(3) **Christians should change their notion of God.** One possibility, of course, is that the problem we are discussing can be resolved by altering those aspects of the Christian concept of God that cause it. The properties that are responsible for our conundrum are the claims that God is unseen, ineffable, inscrutable (incomprehensible), and transcendent. Can we change them?

If **unseen** means essentially and thus always unseen, Christians reject that notion already because they believe that God became a man in Jesus Christ and walked on earth. If **ineffable** is to be taken literally—we cannot put into words who or what God is, cannot say anything true about God—then I would reject the idea that God is ineffable because it leads to self-referential incoherence. When people say, “God is ineffable,” they are trying to say something meaningful and true about God, which you cannot do if God is ineffable. (Doubtless there are less radical senses in which God is ineffable.) Perhaps, then, Christians can afford to give up on these first two putative divine attributes.

But the other two, God is **inscrutable** and God is **transcendent**, can hardly be given up by those who have no desire to make Christianity into a new and different religion. Of course Christians hold that via revelation we can understand at least something of God’s nature and actions in history. But surely this leaves a huge area of ignorance. And unless we want to make God like the non-transcendent gods of the ancient Greek pantheon (they were much more powerful than humans and did not have to die, but in most other respects were like us), we must never give up on the idea of God’s transcendence. That God is unlimited, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, etc. are notions that cannot be discarded. And as long as we retain such notions, the gap between GR and GE still yawns.
Accordingly, the problem we are discussing will disappear if we go this third route. But assuming that we do not want to deny inscrutability and transcendence, we need to go on to the fourth reaction to our conundrum.

(4) *The problem cannot be solved.* This fourth reaction is not a proposed solution to the problem; indeed, it amounts to an admission that the problem cannot be solved; there is no bridge from GR to GE. The bridge is something that Christians must simply posit; it is a matter of trust or maybe a sheer leap of faith to hold that GR and GE are congruent. It is a presupposition of all Christian faith, practice, and rational discourse about God—but it cannot be proved.

IV

In the title of this paper there appears the word “skepticism.” What we have arrived at is a kind of skepticism that is, as we might say, internal to Christianity. That is, this skepticism is created by Christianity’s own theological commitments; it is not motivated by anything external like lack of evidence for or compelling arguments against its claims.

To be clear, I am certainly not saying that the existence of the ACG—or of any major incongruence between GR and GC—is probable. So this is not a skepticism that must involve lack of belief; I certainly hold that GR is reliable. But I do not see how I or anyone else could prove it. This is a skepticism that involves admitting that a certain theological problem cannot be solved. But then does the problem we have been discussing amount to any sort of serious apologetic difficulty for Christianity? I do not think so. As noted above, the conviction that GR accurately represents GE is an
assumption that you must make if you want to be a Christian. It cannot be proved; accordingly, like other items in the Christian creed, it must be taken on faith.¹⁴

¹ A similar point is often made via the distinction between the “immanent Trinity” and the “economic Trinity.”
² The distinction between GE and GR is in some ways similar to the famous distinction make (in an entirely different context) by Kant between the noumenon (the thing as it is in itself, which we cannot know) and the phenomenon (the thing as we experience it). See Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), pp. 74, 87, 149. But I should state that I am not raising a general epistemological question (e.g., “How do we know that the pencil as we experience is the way the pencil really is?”) but an issue that emerges from the specifically Christian notion of God.
³ For the sake of clarity, let me note here three important areas that I am not going to explore in the present paper: (1) I will not explore revelations or purported revelations in the context of others religions beside Christianity, although I suspect the question I am asking can be raised in those contexts too; (2) I am going to pretend that what has been revealed by God about God (i.e., GR) is all of a piece; that is, I will ignore the fact that most theologians hold that revelation via God’s deeds and words in history is progressive; (3) I will not explore the fascinating question of theological predication, i.e., whether we can speak of God only negatively, or analogically, or even unequivocally; this despite the fact that the question of predication is closely related to the issue that I am considering.
¹² The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 78.
¹³ I owe this point to Professor Scott Cormode.
¹⁴ I would like to thank Professors Scott Cormode, Christine Helmer, Anselm Min, and Alan Padgett for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.