Who Speaks for God —and Who Must Believe?

An essay on revelation, evidence, and the right to doubt

VERSION SIX

You claim to speak for the creator of the universe. Produce your credentials. Not your genealogy. Not the number of people who believe you. Not a book whose divine authority is the very matter under dispute. What evidence should persuade someone who has not already accepted your religion? When you ask humanity to organize its conscience around your message, you incur a burden that reverence cannot discharge. Your freedom to believe is not on trial. Your claimed authority over other people's consciences is.

The charge is precise: a claim of universal religious authority cannot establish itself by announcing its own divine origin. A revelation's local origin does not disprove its universal significance. Truth can emerge anywhere. But a tradition born somewhere does not acquire jurisdiction everywhere merely by calling itself universal. Neither birthplace nor bloodline settles the question. Evidence must do the work that proclamation cannot.

Biblical tradition connects Moses to Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, and Amram; the ancestry Christianity associates with Jesus follows the branch through Judah and David. Islamic tradition connects Muhammad through Ishmael, although the intervening genealogy is uncertain. These are branching traditions, not a straight biological procession from Moses to Jesus to Muhammad. Ancient genealogies could establish legal legitimacy and covenantal continuity as well as describe descent. Grant those functions. A genealogy still cannot demonstrate that God appointed the people it names. [1, 2, 3]

Abraham's conventional setting is the early second millennium BCE, though his historical identification remains uncertain; Muhammad lived approximately from 570 to 632 CE. Across roughly twenty-six centuries, these traditions locate exceptional divine commissions within related

sacred histories. What establishes those commissions? The age of the claim cannot answer the question of its truth. [4, 2]

Other civilizations were not waiting for permission to think. Egypt, the Indus world, and the intellectual traditions of India and China belong to human history on their own terms. Peoples from Japan to the Americas developed traditions outside these genealogies. No ancestry establishes moral superiority, and exclusion from another people's scripture establishes no inferiority. A religious pedigree cannot substitute for an ethical argument.

The claims differ, and each must answer for itself. Jewish chosenness commonly concerns covenantal obligations rather than universal conversion; Christianity makes Jesus universally significant for salvation; Islam affirms earlier messengers while assigning Muhammad a universal mission. Describing selection as a burden explains how believers understand it. It does not independently verify that God selected them. Describing salvation as universal explains its intended reach. It does not establish the savior's asserted power. [5, 6, 7]

John 14:6 presents Jesus as the route to the Father. What warrants that extraordinary claim? The Gospel's assertion establishes what the Gospel teaches, not what every human being must accept as true. Catholic inclusivism, expressed in Vatican II's *Lumen gentium*, allows salvation for those who lack knowledge of the Gospel through no fault of their own but respond to conscience and grace. That answers one accusation: ignorance is not invariably treated as a sentence of damnation. It leaves another untouched: what independently establishes that Christ is the source of the outsider's salvation? Explaining how an exception fits a doctrine does not authenticate the doctrine. [8, 9]

Quran 33:40 identifies Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, understood in mainstream Islam as prophetic finality. Quran 34:28 assigns him a

universal mission, and a hadith states that no prophet follows him. Those are the sources of the claim. Now establish its authority. How does an outsider verify that the creator of the universe appointed this particular man to speak with final prophetic authority to every future generation? Repeating "final messenger" merely repeats the disputed credential. A declaration that revelation has reached its final prophet cannot authenticate itself. [10, 6]

Moral insight did not cease in 632 CE. Shankara's eighth-century work demonstrates that major philosophical inquiry continued outside Abrahamic authority. Finality does not mean that later people cannot be good or insightful; the challenge is what entitles an earlier messenger to final prophetic authority over every later generation. A date of birth cannot disqualify an argument. A prophetic title cannot refute it. [11]

Buddha and Shankara need no Abrahamic certificate of admission to intellectual history. Buddha's teaching addresses suffering and liberation without making revelation from a creator its center. Shankara's Advaita develops an account of nondual brahman through reasoning and interpretation of the Upanishads. Their projects differ, and calling both "prophets" would obscure those differences. But a failure to fit your religious category is not an intellectual defect. By what independent standard do you pronounce either inferior to Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad? Agreement with your theology establishes agreement, not superiority. [12, 11]

Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and Zoroaster are not explicitly named and evaluated as teachers in the Bible or Quran, and neither scripture unequivocally names Shankara as a future teacher. The Quran names the Magians; that is not an appraisal of Zoroaster himself. These omissions do not prove divine rejection. They certainly do not prove the absent

teachers' inferiority. If a text supplies decisive guidance for all humanity, where is its explicit engagement with these major alternatives? [13]

Bring the argument down from ancestry to conduct. Jain ahimsa makes restraint toward living beings central to religious discipline, with especially demanding obligations for monks and nuns. Its concern extends beyond humanity. Here is a moral achievement that does not depend on an Abrahamic covenant. What does a sacred pedigree contribute that could make this restraint ethically negligible? If compassion establishes credibility, count it wherever it appears. Refusing to recognize it outside one's own tradition would expose the inadequacy of the criterion, not the outsider's moral failure. [14]

I know of no established historical evidence that Mahavira or Buddha ordered a massacre comparable to the killing commanded in Exodus 32. Anyone alleging such a parallel should produce it. Speculation about their hidden misconduct cannot answer a text that openly attributes killing to a religious authority. The comparison concerns identifiable teachings and acts, not an impossible census of every follower's innocence. [12, 14, 15]

Genesis 14 portrays Abraham leading an armed rescue of his captured relative. Exodus 32 portrays Moses communicating a command in God's name to kill within the Israelite camp, followed by approximately three thousand deaths. Quran 3:123 attributes the victory at Badr to divine assistance, within the tradition of Muhammad's leadership in armed conflict. These texts make concrete claims about sacred figures and violence. An armed rescue differs from killing for religious transgression, and scriptural portrayal differs from independently verified history. Those distinctions identify the questions to be answered. They do not dismiss them. [15, 16]

Who established that God issued the command attributed to him? What grounds justify the killing? Defense of victims, necessity, proportionality,

and responsibility for those harmed are proper subjects of examination. “God commanded it” cannot end that examination when the command’s divine origin is itself disputed. Invoking a leader’s political responsibilities likewise cannot justify every action taken under that title. A prophet’s title is not a moral acquittal. The more exemplary the conduct is claimed to be, the more searching its examination must become.

Compassion, protection of the vulnerable, and freedom from religious coercion outweigh sacred pedigree. A teacher who restrains harm deserves credit; one who invokes heaven to authorize harm owes an explanation. Christian pacifists, including Quakers, receive credit under the same rule. A standard that condemns persecution by outsiders but excuses equivalent persecution by one’s own authority has failed. [17]

In my judgment, the Dhammapada is the most nonviolent, compassionate, and rational religious book on the planet. I defend that judgment through its teachings. Verse 5 rejects hatred as a remedy for hatred. Verses 129–130 ground restraint in the recognition that others fear violence and cherish life as we do. Verse 223 answers anger with nonanger, wrongdoing with goodness, and falsehood with truth. These principles appeal to a condition we share: vulnerability to suffering. Their moral force does not require belief that one family has privileged access to the creator. [18, 19, 20]

Put those passages beside Exodus 32. Against the killing attributed to divine command, the Dhammapada offers restraint against killing or causing killing. I judge that principle ethically superior. Jesus’s instruction to love enemies earns approval by the same measure. It does not establish the separate assertion that access to God depends on him. A moral insight can deserve acceptance while its teacher’s supernatural credentials remain unproved. Likewise, admiration for the Dhammapada does not establish

its teachings about rebirth or other realms as scientific knowledge. Each claim must answer for itself. [15, 19, 21, 8]

Now confront the contradictions. Jesus cannot be divine and not divine in the same sense. Mainstream Christianity and Islam disagree on that proposition; Quran 4:171 rejects divine sonship and the Trinity. Both sides may appeal to revelation, but that appeal cannot settle which revelation is authentic. Logical coherence within a doctrine is only the beginning: a coherent account can still be false. Show how the disputed assertions correspond to reality. Confidence does not resolve a contradiction between rival claims. [22]

All three Abrahamic faiths make theological assertions. An assertion is not proof of truth, and repetition is not logical justification. Calling your God the only true God does not establish that other accounts are false. If your book is authoritative because God authored it, and God's authorship is established only because your book says so, the reasoning is circular. The conclusion has been placed inside the premise. A congregation can repeat that circle for centuries without turning it into independent evidence. Explain what warrants the claim outside the system that already accepts it.

Even establishing that God exists would not establish your right to govern me. You must still demonstrate that your scripture expresses God's commands, that you are authorized to interpret them, and that your interpretation obliges others. None of those conclusions follows merely from proclaiming the previous one. A claim about the universe cannot silently become a deed to my land, a claim upon my earnings, or authority over my family. Where the justification stops, the entitlement stops.

When a religious authority demands control of my mind, my property, and my family, I ask what entitles it to any of them. My civilization is not a memory you are licensed to erase. My willingness to listen is not an

agreement to surrender judgment. Women and children possess consciences and rights of their own; they are not assets for either a conqueror or a household head to dispose of. A claim to save people does not establish ownership of them. If you demand obedience before permitting examination, you have made submission the condition of the inquiry. Enforced obedience is not evidence of agreement.

The threat of hell supplies no missing evidence. Before eternal punishment can justify accepting your doctrine, establish that the punishment exists and that you know its conditions. A frightened person may comply without believing; a believer may remain frightened without possessing evidence. Psychological force is distinct from truth. Invoking a doctrine's terrifying consequences cannot authenticate the doctrine that makes those consequences credible. Fear does not discharge the burden of proof.

Reverse the demand. Suppose an authority invoking Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, or Shinto ordered you to convert under threat of violence and an asserted eternal punishment. This hypothetical tests authority; it does not attribute one doctrine of hell to these different traditions. Would its scripture, certainty, or claimed divine approval suffice? Whatever objection you raise, answer it when your own religious authority makes the equivalent demand. A principle that protects your conscience must also protect mine. Otherwise, you demand a privilege you refuse to grant.

An authority controlling belief, education, family decisions, and access to property can make dissent materially costly. Calling its opponents God's enemies can turn resistance to earthly power into alleged rebellion against heaven. Sincere conviction does not justify that power. Neither must a critic prove secret cynicism before challenging it. Can a person question,

reject, and leave without punishment? That is a direct test of whether conscience is respected.

Which religion should the outsider join, and which sect within it? Mainstream Judaism does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah; Christianity places him at the center of salvation; Islam honors him as a prophet while rejecting his divinity. Catholics and Protestants share central Christian beliefs while disputing substantial questions of authority, and Muslim traditions also dispute legitimate authority and interpretation. Partial agreement is not reconciliation. The seeker needs a method that can distinguish the claims before allegiance is demanded. A method that works only after conversion cannot justify conversion. Accepting the correct revelation because it calls itself correct leaves the outsider exactly where the inquiry began. [8, 22]

Disagreement is no crime, and criticism is not warfare. A Jew, Christian, Muslim, or atheist may reject another doctrine without persecuting its adherents. The indictment concerns coercion: Christian persecution of Jews, for example, and Almohad policies imposing conversion on Jews and Christians. Those histories identify authorities exercising power over dissenters. An accusation of persecution requires evidence of that exercise, not merely evidence of theological disagreement. [23, 24]

The history of conquest makes these questions concrete. In the 1493 bull Inter caetera, Pope Alexander VI invoked divine and apostolic authority to purport to grant the Spanish monarchs dominion over territories and their inhabitants while directing their Christianization. The document reserved existing Christian rulers' claims; it did not recognize an equivalent protection for the sovereignty of the Indigenous peoples whose lands it purported to distribute. Here the asserted transfer from heavenly authority to earthly possession is explicit. By what demonstrated authority could the pope give away another people's homeland? The document records his

claim to possess that power. It does not establish that the power was his. [25]

Put the same question to the beneficiaries of that grant. Would a declaration from an Indigenous religious authority have entitled its followers to take Spain, govern its inhabitants, and direct their conversion? If not, why should the papal declaration have conferred the equivalent right in the Americas? Invoking the superiority of Christianity returns us to the disputed premise. Military success establishes that a conqueror could impose his will. It does not establish that God authorized the imposition, that the conquered people forfeited their rights, or that the conqueror's theology was true. [25]

Australia's National Museum documents colonial violence and Indigenous dispossession, alongside government and missionary projects of Christianization. In New Zealand, the 1863 confiscation legislation targeted Māori communities deemed to have rebelled against the Crown. These are identifiable uses of state power. Where religious institutions participated, examine that participation; where a state acted for territorial advantage, identify that motive. Calling dispossession a civilizing enterprise cannot establish its justice. [26, 27, 28]

In the Philippines, Spanish conquest and Christian conversion were intertwined with military power and local alliances; the Library of Congress records Magellan offering weapons to those who would become Christian. In India, the East India Company turned a commercial enterprise into territorial rule through military power. Religious authorization and material ambition need not be mutually exclusive, but they require distinct evidence. Neither the language of salvation nor the pursuit of profit excuses domination. [29, 30]

Kenya supplies a specific African case. On 6 June 2013, Foreign Secretary William Hague acknowledged to Parliament that Kenyans had

suffered torture and other ill-treatment at the hands of the colonial administration. His statement described detention without trial and harsh prison regimes during the Emergency, and announced a settlement covering 5,228 claimants. This is an acknowledgment by the British government, not merely an adversary's accusation. It establishes colonial abuse; it does not by itself establish that Christian doctrine caused the abuse. An accusation of religious authorization requires further evidence. No imperial claim to civilization excuses the abuse its own government acknowledged. [31]

The Almohad case places religious coercion directly at issue. Maribel Fierro's study identifies forced conversion of Jews and Christians as a policy of the early Almohad movement in the medieval Islamic West. Here the demand reached beyond political obedience into religious identity. A ruler's conviction that his faith alone was true supplied no evidence that coerced professions were sincere and no justification for compelling them. If Christian rulers had imposed the equivalent demand on Muslims, an objection to that coercion would apply with equal force. The identity of the persecutor cannot reverse the principle. [32]

Ottoman conquest ended the Byzantine Empire, and Anatolia's Greek, Hellenistic, and Byzantine histories cannot be erased by later rule. Neither can its earlier Hittite societies be erased by calling the whole region originally Greek. Conquest is a historical event to establish, not a theological verdict to celebrate. Ottoman victory did not authenticate Islam any more than Christian imperial victory authenticated Christianity. A changed frontier proves neither religion true. [33, 34, 35]

Taxila's Buddhist monasteries and the great monastery at Paharpur testify to the pre-Islamic inheritance of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Later religious identities cannot make that history disappear. But descendants of those populations do not become foreigners because their ancestors changed

religion. Protect the inheritance without making present inhabitants' rights conditional on returning to an ancestral faith. A defense of civilization cannot become another demand for compulsory belief. [36, 37]

Indonesia and Malaysia had substantial Hindu-Buddhist connections before Islam spread; UNESCO identifies merchants as carriers of both Indian religions and Islam. The Philippines preserves evidence of Hindu-Buddhist exchange, while Central Asia's Buddhist connections coexisted with Iranian, Chinese, and other traditions. Cultural influence establishes neither foreign ownership nor military occupation. Those societies possessed histories and agency of their own. A charge of conquest must identify the conquest, not merely a change in religion. [38, 39, 40]

What establishes revelation? A person reports a voice, vision, message, or overwhelming experience. Sincerity may establish that the person believes the report; it does not identify the experience's cause. Nor would an unsupported psychiatric diagnosis settle the question. The evidential gap lies between "I experienced this" and "the creator has authorized me to command you." An experience and its supernatural interpretation are distinct claims.

Historical events need not repeat in a laboratory to become credible. Testimony is evidence whose strength depends on proximity, independence, transmission, corroboration, and alternative explanations. The virgin conception and the conjecture that a Roman soldier fathered Jesus both require support; rejecting one does not prove the other. Neither becomes historical knowledge by being labeled a revelation. The critic owes evidence for a counterclaim just as the believer owes evidence for the original claim.

N. T. Wright's resurrection argument combines the empty tomb, reported appearances, and the transformation of early Christian belief. That is an

explanatory case, not mere scriptural self-endorsement. But each strand needs its own weight. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–8, Paul transmits a tradition of appearances, reports an appearance to more than five hundred, and includes himself among the recipients. This is evidence that Paul affirmed and circulated those claims. It is not five hundred independently preserved testimonies. Counting the people named in the report as separately available witnesses inflates the evidence beyond what survives. [41, 42]

Even granting an empty tomb would establish an absent body, not by itself the identity of the agent responsible. Granting sincere appearance reports would establish conviction and reported experience, not automatically a divine cause. Their combination may be stronger than either alone; its force depends on how well the proposed cause explains the evidence compared with alternatives and on the reliability of the underlying reports. Wright's appeal to the unusual development of Christian belief gives a historical phenomenon to explain. Unusualness does not establish supernatural origin. To call resurrection the best explanation, the argument must justify preferring divine intervention to error in reports, transmission, or interpretation; the novelty of the belief cannot settle that comparison. Nor would a resurrection automatically validate every institution later speaking in Jesus's name. [41]

The collective-testimony argument for Sinai contends that a national revelation would be harder to invent and transmit than a private one. Its vulnerability is a specific inferential step: a later community's acceptance of a national-origin account is treated as proof that the account could not have developed without the reported event. That requires evidence about transmission across generations. The impossibility of suddenly convincing eyewitnesses that they witnessed something they did not is not the impossibility of a tradition developing among later descendants. These are different situations. Pointing out that difference does not prove invention;

it defeats an argument that excludes development without establishing the necessary historical constraints. A reported national audience cannot substitute for independently documented continuity of testimony. [43]

Quran 2:23 challenges doubters to produce a surah comparable to the revelation. Developed arguments for inimitability examine eloquence, composition, and linguistic structure. The difficulty is the inference from unmatched achievement to nonhuman authorship. A work can be unique without being supernatural, and failure to produce an accepted rival does not prove that no human could have produced the original. A defensible test also needs criteria that permit an adverse result: if every proposed rival is rejected because the Quran is already assumed unsurpassable, the exercise cannot verify that assumption. Literary judgment can support a claim of excellence. Divine authorship requires an additional argument connecting that excellence to a divine cause. [44, 45]

Richard Swinburne's cumulative approach correctly allows several inconclusive considerations to reinforce one another. But evidence must not be counted twice: arguments resting on the same disputed assumption do not acquire independence through repetition. Alvin Plantinga's account of properly basic belief addresses warrant without inferential proof. Even if an individual's belief has such warrant, another person's obligation to accept it remains a further question. Neither account automatically establishes an institution's right to command dissenters. Personal warrant, public justification, and political authority are separate claims. [46, 47]

A universal claim must also answer unequal access. Language, family, education, and historical circumstance shape the opportunity to assess religious claims. Islam affirms messengers to every community, including unnamed messengers; it therefore cannot accurately be accused of denying all revelation elsewhere. But that assertion does not identify the unnamed teachers or authenticate their messages. An outsider still needs

grounds for recognizing the guidance claimed for them. An assurance that the answer exists is not access to the answer. [7]

What of the honest person who seeks God and receives no recognizable answer? J. L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness gives the challenge a precise form: perfect divine love should make relationship available to capable people who are not resisting it, while such relationship appears to require belief that God exists. Sincere nonbelief therefore calls the account of divine love into question. A defender can contest those premises; accusing every nonbeliever of rebellion does not answer them. Moral decency is not measured by whether someone reports a revelation. Silence supplies no certificate of the seeker's inferiority. Why must the person seeking an answer carry the blame for its absence? [48]

Catholic inclusivism, Jewish recognition of righteous people among the nations, and Islamic discussions of *ahl al-fatra* address responsibility without adequate access to guidance. They can answer the accusation that ignorance necessarily entails condemnation. They do not establish why access to a recognizable divine relationship remains unequal. If conscience supplies the guidance, what identifies it as divine? If grace operates unrecognized, how is that operation known? Accommodating outsiders within a doctrine does not authenticate the doctrine for them. [9, 49, 50]

Does clearer disclosure destroy freedom? Knowing that someone exists does not compel love or obedience. Does uncertainty develop character? Then explain the degree and distribution of the uncertainty, not merely one conceivable benefit. Does God have reasons beyond our understanding? Possibly, but an unknown reason is not a known explanation. You cannot claim ignorance of God's reasons as your defense and then present those reasons as established wisdom. Mystery

identifies a limit of knowledge; it cannot manufacture the knowledge the argument lacks.

My own preferences receive no exemption. Jain restraint does not prove Jain metaphysics; Buddhist compassion does not verify rebirth; Shankara's achievement does not authenticate every appeal to scripture. A standard abandoned when it reaches one's own convictions is allegiance disguised as inquiry.

The demand for submission has outrun the justification offered for it. Neither the threat of punishment nor possession of power closes that gap. An authority that answers examination with coercion substitutes the ability to punish for the ability to persuade. My conscience is not yours to commandeer. The right to preach is yours. The obligation to believe you is not ours.

If a perfectly loving God seeks all humanity, why should recognition of his guidance depend so heavily on contested claims inherited from particular histories? Why should the honest outsider face competing authorities that cannot settle their own central disagreements by an independently convincing method? Why should moral insight found elsewhere need recognition from those authorities before it receives its due? The claim is universal. The evidence must answer the people from whom belief is demanded.

Why?

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