

Reaction to “Disclosing the Hidden God: Confessional Lutheran Doctrine and Christian Apologetics” by Luke George Thompson

Pastor Thompson’s outstanding study defines apologetics as “the practice of reasonably refuting attacks on the Christian faith or the scholarly pursuit of reasonably integrating the Christian faith into fields such as philosophy, science, and history” (3). “Attacks” come from skeptics—either those outside the Church or, as Chemnitz put it, the Epicurean or Stoic living inside my own heart (fn 58). The skeptic’s objective is to discredit the claims of Christianity in order to avoid having to take them seriously.

If in apologetics my conversation partner is an unbeliever, this has two important consequences. For one, in any exchange with an unbeliever my hope is to see him or her converted to saving faith in Jesus Christ.¹ This makes apologetics a kind of handmaid to evangelism. Pastor Thompson is careful to circumscribe the role of apologetics in evangelism, for the reason that it is only the message of sin and grace, not empirical evidence or reasonable arguments, that ever converted anybody. In evangelism, the apologist’s objective is best limited to the negative one of getting skeptics to reexamine the case against Christianity and to question whether it is quite as rock-solid as they have been led to believe.

Second: although Christians are sometimes slow to realize this, skeptics tend not to be impressed with arguments that boil down to, “But that’s what the Bible says!”² For this reason, apologists appeal often to extrabiblical evidence and arguments, whether from philosophy, science, history, or archaeology. Herein lies the difficulty, another thing some Christians seem slow to realize: *a believer and a skeptic invariably evaluate the same evidence differently*.

A handy illustration is John Wisdom’s (yes, really) famous parable of the Invisible Gardener.³ You and a skeptic friend are hacking your way through a jungle when you come upon a clearing in which beautiful flowers are growing, along with some weeds. “There’s been a gardener at work here,” you say.

“Codswallop,” your friend replies. “This grew here by itself.”

The two of you design an experiment to test the “Gardener Hypothesis.” First, you set up watch to see if you can catch him at work. Weeks pass. No gardener appears.

“Just as I said—no gardener,” your friend says.

¹ This is not the case with my own Old Adam, of course, who can’t be “converted”—only killed.

² An example is the argument that the supernatural origin of the Bible is demonstrated by its amazing coherence and consistency, despite the fact that it was produced by some forty authors working independently in diverse locations over more than fifteen centuries; cf. Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1971, 18-20). In the first place, the premise that the authors of the Bible worked independently of each other is mostly false. Second, we accept the unity of Scripture *a priori* because it is what Scripture says about itself (Luke 24:44), not after it has been demonstrated to us empirically.

³ https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/4/26640833/john_wisdom_-_gods_1944.pdf. In order to better represent the skeptic’s point of view, the parable is given here in the modified form presented by Anthony Flew in “Theology and Falsification,” in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, Joel Feinberg, ed. (Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing, 1965), 48.

“Of course, there’s a gardener,” you say. “He’s just invisible.”

You both agree to more experiments involving electric fences, bloodhounds, motion-sensitive cameras, etc. Still, no proof of a gardener.

“I told you so,” your friend says. “No gardener.”

“There absolutely is a gardener,” you say. “Like I said, he’s invisible. He’s also intangible, silent, has no smell, and doesn’t conduct electricity.”

“Fine,” your skeptic friend says in exasperation. “But what exactly is the functional difference between your invisible gardener who leaves no trace and can never be seen doing anything, and no gardener at all?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘no trace’?” you say (We are now taking the parable further than it went originally). “Look at the flowers.”

“I am,” says your skeptic friend. “You, look at the weeds.”

You and I look at the world and sees a beautiful, intentional, carefully designed and lovingly tended creation that is a symphony of praise to its Creator’s wisdom, power, and goodness. An unbeliever looks at the same world differently. You and I see evidence of wisdom and goodness everywhere; skeptics find the evidence ambiguous at best. As they will point out, it is fine to believe in divine wisdom and goodness when you’re sitting down to a holiday meal surrounded by your loved ones. When you walk through the oncology unit in a children’s hospital, it’s a different story.⁴

“But what about creation’s complexity? What about ‘intelligent design’?” In the first place, your skeptic friend argues, the “design” and “order” that you and I see could be due to our brain’s innate capacity for seeing patterns where none exist. In the second place, even where there is order in the material world, the existence of a Somebody who ordered it does not necessarily follow. Order could be an inherent property of matter, not something that’s there because a Somebody put it there.

Now you think you have him. “We have arrived at the real question,” you say. “*Why* is matter ‘there’? Why is there something rather than nothing at all?”

“Did it ever occur to you,” your skeptic friend answers, “that you are begging the question? To ask ‘Why?’ is to assume there’s a reason. That there is a ‘reason’—intentionality, purpose, meaning—is precisely what I deny.”

⁴ Cf. the phrase scratched into a cell wall at the Mauthausen concentration camp: *Wenn es einen Gott gibt, muß er mich um Verzeihung bitten* (“If there is a God, he needs to ask me for forgiveness.”). “A Defective Covenant: Abandonment of Faith among Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust,” *International Social Science Review* 90 (2015), <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1094&context=iss>.

If you are beginning to feel like this could go on almost forever, not only could it—it has. The problem is the gardener’s invisibility, the believer’s insistence on (and endless extrapolation of) which in the parable seems desperate and contrived.

The genius of Pastor Thompson’s paper is that he shows why it is neither. A gardener who remains invisible is exactly what a Lutheran should expect from *Deus absconditus*, the Hidden God—or, in the paper’s terminology, a God who wears “masks.”

The “masks” Pastor Thompson identifies include nature, the inscribed law (and conscience which evaluates a person’s behavior on that basis), various instances of God’s supernatural (perhaps “extra-ordinary”) intervention in his creation, and preeminently God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. Each is a case of God revealing and hiding himself simultaneously, in the kind of paradox that Lutherans find intuitively appealing. The value of the paradox lies not in its homage to our Reformation heritage, however, but in its explanatory power.

Take one example. True and valid (if not saving) knowledge about God can be obtained by contemplating nature, the problem being that fallen humanity actively suppresses what can be known from nature so that in the end all this accomplishes is to increase human culpability (Rom 1:18-20). To complicate things further, scientific models do a remarkable job of explaining what we observe in nature without any recourse to “God” whatsoever. We do see God in nature, but it is God wearing a mask, and your skeptic friend cannot see him at all.

If masks are God’s preferred mode when interacting with his creation, we might ask how hard we really ought to work at peeling them away. If the point of apologetics is to serve as a handmaid to evangelism, isn’t the real objective to put an end to your skeptic friend’s entire metaphysical filibuster? Might it be better to confess—not “defend,” *confess*, which is a different thing—“I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” confessing also our faith that God at this moment is present and active in his creation in more ways than we can imagine? Might it not enhance our credibility with our interlocutor to acknowledge the masks God is wearing, explaining that difficulties in seeing God at work are exactly what Lutheranism predicts—when we worship a God who became invincible by becoming helpless, who pleased his Father by being forsaken by his Father, who gained glory by enduring shame (John 12:23-24), who beat death by dying?

A final thought, suggested by a point lurking in a footnote (fn 58). Here Pastor Thompson questions (gently, as is his wont) whether we ought to keep quoting Adolph Hoenecke’s opinion of the moral proof for God’s existence, since the argument as Hoenecke encountered it is nothing like the form it takes today. I hear an implicit call for us to update both our libraries and the weapons in our apologetic arsenal. Apologetics today is not your father’s Oldsmobile. For this reason, and not only for this insightful and edifying essay, Pastor Thompson—and others in the brotherhood who are on the front lines in this field—deserve our thanks. From them we have much to learn.

K. Cherney
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