Can a Christian be a Mycologist?

Reflections on Paul Moser’s “The Elusive God”

 In his 2007 book *The Elusive God*, epistemologist Paul Moser maintains that both Christian and secular philosophers have overlooked compelling evidence for God’s existence which is neither deductive nor inductive in nature.[[1]](#footnote-1) This evidence takes the form of a authoritative divine call, revealed by conscience through the power of God’s spirit, which offers a transformative gift on condition that one willingly surrender one’s will to God on His own terms without condition or reserve. Moser calls this *perfectly authoritative* evidence for God’s existence, available only to believers. He argues that this perfectly authoritative evidence is both exempt from skeptical critique and, being capable of being articulated as an undefeated best explanation for one’s experience of that call and subsequent transformation on having accepted it, sufficient to provide epistemic justification for the believer. Further, says Moser, this is precisely the sort of evidence for God we would expect a perfectly loving God to provide, if He was concerned to establish a genuinely transformative relationship with His creatures for their own good. As such, attempts by philosophers to provide what Moser calls “spectator evidence” for God’s existence that fails to challenge us to obedience and transformation in Christ is not only a waste of time but counterproductive to God’s aims for us. For this reason, we have no reason to suppose that God would make such evidence available to us since this would provide a pretext to rest with merely theoretical knowledge of God, allowing us to hold God at arm’s length as a merely philosophical posit, rather than to acknowledge God volitionally as our authoritative Lord and Master.

 Moser’s “Born Again” epistemology emphasizes that a perfectly authoritative and loving God will provide evidence for His existence only on His own terms, not ours, for our own sakes, and that we should not expect otherwise. God thus remains hidden to the skeptic, who demands neutral “spectator” evidence as a condition for belief, and hides Himself from those who are incapable of receiving that evidence as a live option and thus responding in willing obedience to the divine call to forgiveness and renewal in Christ. Nevertheless, according to Moser, the perfectly authoritative evidence provided by God through conscience and demanding our obedient acquiescence is non-coercive. Even in optimal conditions, we retain the free choice either to accept the transformative gift or to reject it. Those who do accept it will find themselves being transformed from proud, self-centered, “autonomous” individuals who have nothing awaiting them but physical and spiritual death into obedient, God-centered, individuals animated by agapeistic love, amply fitted out for the eternal life that God intends for us. In particular, this obedience takes the form of a life freely and willingly structured in accordance with Jesus’ love commands, which bid us to put love of God and our neighbor (even our enemies) ahead of everything else. For Moser, the centrality Jesus’ love commands requires that every aspect of our lives be lived in their perspective and under their aegis. This means that the practical demands of love of God and neighbor trump our own personal concerns, interests, and projects, since these have a tendency to monopolize our time and energy and in that way competes with the master project of transformation in grace to which God calls us. In a worst-case scenario, these projects and concerns, even though innocent in themselves, may even become idols that displace love of God and neighbor in our lives.

 In chapter four of *The Elusive God*, Moser applies the foregoing to the practice of philosophy itself. According to Moser, we can philosophize in either of two ways. The first, traditional, or “discussion” mode of philosophy takes philosophy to be an objective, neutral exercise in theoretical inquiry concerned primarily with the analysis of concepts and claims and the evaluation of arguments for and against answers to substantive philosophical questions. This sort of philosophy proceeds without any explicit recognition of a commitment to the perspective provided by perfectly authoritative divine evidence mediated by conscience and demanding willing submission as a condition for receiving the transformative gift of God’s grace. In the other, “obedience” mode, philosophical research and inquiry is undertaken with the explicit recognition of divine lordship under the aegis of Jesus’ love commands. More specifically, the Christian philosopher finds him- or herself to be a member of the community (or “church”) constituting the earthly manifestation of the Good News power movement initiated by Jesus and Paul and, as such, called to put his or her philosophic gifts primarily, perhaps even exclusively, to the service of God’s people. Before undertaking a philosophical research project, one ought to ask oneself (so to speak) “What would Jesus – or Paul – do?” Moser believes that neither Jesus nor Paul would approve of Christian philosophers engaging in close scholarship in the history of philosophy or philosophical theology, or in any sort of philosophical project unless it served the current needs of God’s people engaged in the overwhelmingly important project of transforming the world in accordance with God’s love. The practice of philosophy thus needs to be reimagined as a teaching ministry within the church and philosophical research projects limited to those that build up the body of Christ. To do philosophy in any context or for any other purpose wastes valuable time and energy that ought to be put to better use in engagement in a praxis centered in Jesus’ love commands. Apparently, for Moser a Christian can be a philosopher on no other terms.

##  II

 As impious as it may seem, I propose to offer a couple of critical questions of Moser’s “Born Again” epistemology without, I hope, putting my soul at too great a risk or exposing myself to charges of idolatry. On one central point, however, I want to register my agreement with Moser. I think that what he calls perfectly authoritative evidence of God’s existence is available to us and that it is sufficient for us to be epistemically justified in believing that God exists, at least in principle. Since Moser provides no phenomenology of our apprehension of this evidence, it is hard to know exactly what counts and what does not as evidence of this kind. What I do question is whether such evidence is exclusively necessary in order for us to possess knowledge of God’s existence such that no one can be a Christian unless we have an explicit, occurrent experience of receiving this perfectly authoritative evidence through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

 Consider the following personal testimony, given by the English theologian and philosopher, Austin Farrer (1904-1968):

 I should now like to ask how important it is deemed to be that the philosopher’s

 experience should fall into the form of an inward colloquy, with one part of his

 thought addressing another as though with the voice of God. I have a special and

 personal interest in challenging the colloquy-form, because of an obstacle I faced

 in my own adolescence. I had myself (at least this is the impression I retain) been

 raised in a personalism which might satisfy the most ardent of Dr. Buber’s disciples.

 I thought of myself as set over against deity as one man faces another across a

 table, except that God was invisible and indefinitely great. And I hoped that he

 would signify his presence to me by way of colloquy; but neither out of the scripture

I read or nor in the prayers I tried to make did any mental voice address me. I

believe at that time that anything would have satisfied me, but nothing came: no

‘other’ stood beside me, no shadow of presence fell upon me. I owe my

liberation from this impasse, as far as I can remember, to reading Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

Those phrases which now strike me as so flat and sinister, so ultimately atheistic,

*Deus sive natura* (God, or call it nature), Deus, quatenus consideratur ut constituens

essentiam humanae mentis (God, in so far as he is regarded as constituting the

being of the human mind) – these phrases were to me light and liberation, not

because I was or desired to be a pantheist, but because I could not find the

the wished for colloquy with God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Farrer did not respond to God’s hiddenness in his own case by ceasing to believe in God or abandoning the Christian faith. Instead, he left the Baptist religion and became an Anglican, eventually becoming an Anglican priest, chaplain, and Oxford don. In addition to his philosophical works, Farrer preached, wrote scripture studies and devotional works, and cultivated the friendship of other Christian intellectuals of his time, such as C. S. Lewis.

 In his philosophical theology, Farrer argued for and attempted to illustrate the possibility of a non-propositional apprehension of God by means of creatures. According to Farrer, God is not hidden at all. If what Christianity teaches of the dependence of creation of God on creation is true, then the God-relatedness of creatures enters into their very being. To the contrary: it is the very ubiquity of the relation of creaturely God-dependence that makes it all too easy for us to overlook God, if only for want of contrast. However, sustained reflection on just about any general feature of creaturely existence will carry us to an apprehension of the transcendent ground upon which that being depends, as well as a limited apprehension of an aspect of the divine perfection. Farrer does not suppose that this sort of mediated apprehension of God is a replacement for faith. Instead, the apprehension of God through creatures is a propadeutic, a *praeambulum fidei* that finds its natural complement in supernatural faith, which both completes and sublates it. Farrer may have underestimated the degree to which sinful human beings will resist this insight and the lengths we will go to evade even this sort of evidence for God. Nevertheless, I think that Farrer provides sufficient reason to believe that human beings have an inchoate or implicit apprehension of God that is capable of being brought to occurrent awareness in just this way. The fact that atheistic philosophers fight shy of such evidence, no matter how articulated, is sufficient proof that they do not perceive it as harmless “spectator evidence.” Quite the contrary, the demand for neutral evidence, and the subsequent resistance to it when it is supplied, appears to be part of the Freudian “reaction formation” used by the irreligious to insulate themselves from the need to consider the claims of faith. As such, Christian philosophers have a significant stake in challenging the irreligious on their own pitch and not just resting in our own privileged epistemic condition that others do not and will not share unless we can somehow reach them.

 III

 My second critical question arises from reflection on another passage that came to mind while I was working my way through Moser’s chapter four, which finally brings me to the topic mentioned in the title of this essay. In this case, the author was another epistemologist who was also a Christian, Michael Polanyi:

 I first met the question of philosophy when I came up against the Soviet ideology

 under Stalin that denied justification to the pursuit of science. I remember a

 conversation I had with Bukharin in Moscow in 1935. Though he was heading for

 his fall and execution three years later, he was still a leading theoretician of the

 Communist party. When I asked him about the pursuit of pure science in

Soviet Russia, he said that pure science was a morbid symptom of a class society;

 under socialism the conception of science done for its own sake would disappear,

 for the interests of scientists would spontaneously turn to the problems of the

 current five year plan…The mechanical course of history was to bring universal

 justice. Scientific skepticism would trust only material means for achieving

 universal brotherhood. Skepticism [about the value of pure science] and utopianism

 had thus fused into a new fanaticism.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I am strongly inclined to think that Polanyi would have had something similar (though perhaps less purple) to say about Moser’s proposed strictures concerning the practice of philosophy by Christians. If so, I must report that I am strongly inclined to agree with him. Let me explain why, by illustrating the point with a story. The story is fictional but not at all beyond the realm of real life possibility.

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 For as long as Frieda could remember, mosses, mushrooms, lichens and other fungi had fascinated her. Growing up in the foothills of the Cascades in rural western Oregon, she found them everywhere within easy walking distance of her childhood home. At the local library at the age of seven, her mother pointed out to her the *Little Golden Field Guide of Non-Flowering Plants* by Dr. Herbert S. Zim. She eagerly read the book from cover to cover, learning that while mosses were plants fungi were not, and that lichens were actually symbionts – a species composed of two other species, a fungus and an algae, cooperating to protect and nourish each other. She decided that she liked lichens the best.

 When she was eleven, her devout Evangelical Protestant parents took her to her first revival meeting. She answered the altar call, opened her heart to Jesus, and accepted Him as her personal savior. After that, she never had any serious doubts or difficulties in her Christian belief and became a lifelong churchgoer, belonging to a number of nondenominational Bible congregations during her youth. At the same time, her interest in fungi, especially lichens, continued unabated and by the time she was ten she had read all the available books on the she could order through interlibrary loan at her small town library and could identify every species of mushroom, fungi, and lichen in western Oregon at sight.

 At sixteen, her autodidactic knowledge of fungi so impressed her high school biology teacher that he told her that there was an actual branch of natural science, *mycology*, which dealt with them. Further, he told her that she could study this science if she decided to go to college. Frieda hadn’t thought about college; she’d always made good grades in school to please her parents, but had always assumed that she would end up being a farmer’s wife. The idea of going to college grew until it became a settled idea in her mind. To her surprise, her parents and even her minister gave her their blessing. After studying biology at Corvallis, where she excelled, Frieda applied for graduate school at the few universities where serious mycology programs were offered. She was accepted into a fine school with a full scholarship.

 Frieda excelled in graduate school as well, making steady progress toward her Ph.D., which earned her honors and a position at an even more prestigious university as an associate professor of biology with a mycology emphasis. Her teaching and research were outstanding, earning her first tenure, then steady promotion to full professor by the time she was in her early forties. She never married, but did not regret her life of celibate spinsterhood, which left her with all the time she needed to pursue her research. She lived simply in a small apartment near the university, where the bulk of her worldly possessions consisted of souvenirs and photo albums associated with her numerous field expeditions to the many exotic and isolated places where lichens are to be found. Despite this, she remained on good terms with her family, taking time to visit them, and had many friends with whom she worked, went to dinner, movies and concerts, etc. when she was at home. She also active in her church, serving on committees and singing in the choir, as well as helping out in her church’s charitable endeavors. When she was in the field, she always brought a Bible with her and wherever feasible she made contact with other local Christians and met with them for prayer, worship, and fellowship.

 By the time she was in her fifties, Frieda had established an international reputation in the field of mycology. Her work was respected and she was awarded a number of prestigious awards, honorary degrees, and lectureships, although she always insisted it was her love of the work that motivated her tireless scholarly efforts. She was riding the crest of the wave – then one day a Christian philosopher friend, knowing that she too was a Christian, encouraged her to read a life-changing book called *The Elusive God*. Frieda found much to agree with and approve of in Moser’s book. However, when she had finished chapter four she was in a state of shock because of what she had read - life changing, indeed! Although the book specifically discussed philosophy, she could see an immediate and obvious application of Moser’s teachings to her own situation. Despite being a lifelong Christian, she was surprised to discover that her work in mycology had been taking place in “discussion mode” in a manner indifferent to the lordship of Christ. However, when she tried to envisage mycology in what Moser called the “obedience mode” she found it virtually impossible. So far as she could see, there was no way that the science of mycology could be used in any but the most indirect and tenuous ways to build up the kingdom of God or address contemporary problems within the “Good News power movement.” It had never occurred to her that there was any tension between her Christian faith and her commitment to the search for scientific knowledge in her chosen field. After having read Moser, however, it seemed to her that if Moser was right, mycology was one of those things that Jesus and Paul, had they known about it, would have disapproved and even regarded as potentially idolatrous. Surely, it could not compete in importance with the task of winning the world for Christ.

 After much prayer and consideration, Frieda made a decision. She opted for early retirement and decided to devote herself to Church work in skid road, signing on to be street corner preacher and volunteer at a Gospel mission downtown recommended to her by her pastor. However, although Frieda threw herself into the work with abandon, the results always seemed to be inversely proportional to the effort she expended. Her sermonizing, even by street-corner preacher standards, was universally regarded as being of poor quality. Her attempts to minister to the denizens of the neighborhood who came to the Mission seeking free food and a bed in the shelter were equally ineffective. Her academic training and background had left her ill prepared to deal with the Mission’s clients, most of them alcoholics or drug addicts with mental problems, and chips on their shoulders buoyed by a good dose of other-blaming self-pity. She had known people like this in academia as well, but they had degrees and professional appointments that allowed them the privilege of denial. The clients at the Mission had no *curriculum vita* to hide behind, and had to live the pain of their wasted lives in full view of the public that saw them sleeping in public parks and doorways. When the time for her quarterly review arrived, the Mission board thanked her for her efforts but told her that her services were no longer needed. Frieda could only agree.

 As a Christian, Frieda believed that we should wish not harm on those who harm us, and seemed to remember that Plato had argued the same thing centuries before Jesus was even born. At any rate, she held no grudge against Moser. However, she did decide that her decision to leave the university was objectively wrong. At the time she retired, she still had a number of good ideas for research projects in mycology, but now that she was *emerita* and no longer had access to labs, grant money and university-supported travel funds, there was no practical way for her to pursue those research projects. Whatever truths she might have learned would have to be delayed or deferred indefinitely while a perfectly good scientific mind simply went to waste.

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 If scientists were universally to adopt an “obedience mode” in their pursuit of scientific research, it is doubtful that most scientific research would happen at all. That very likely means that when some scientific question arose of interest to the community of faith, the background research, infrastructure and methods required to mount a credible scientific research program would be unavailable to us – unless graciously supplied to us by non-Christian scientists. Further, it would distort the very process and ideal of scientific research, which is to understand the natural world as it really is, not simply as a means to reinforce an ideological perspective or to solve practical problems of its implementation in real-life contexts. Real science cannot be premised on such a foundation, and I would suggest, neither can philosophy.

 All creation is God’s creation, all truth is God’s truth, and none of God’s truth is trivial. If God thought lichens worth creating they are not to be despised, and neither are those who study them rather than directly participating in Christian ministry. God has bestowed (indeed, *gifted*) various kinds of talents and abilities to human beings, such that some people by talent, training, and interest, are well suited to various forms of work. This includes scholarly work in pursuit of theoretical knowledge for its own sake in a manner that respects the reality and integrity of the subject matter being investigated. Where the course of research takes us, and what questions will emerge at a particular time as salient cannot be predicted in advance or ruled out of consideration *a priori*. To extract isolated examples of seemingly abstruse or useless questions out of their proper context in complex treatments of important subject matter or the long-standing manuscript traditions without which their significance can be understood was Pascal’s favorite trick, as rhetorically effective as is fallacious, and Moser is not wise to follow his example.[[4]](#footnote-4) If God has bestowed these talents uponus, then we have a mandate to employ and develop them for their intended purpose in accordance with the natures of their objects, without being hampered by misplaced ideological binders. In so doing, we glorify God, even if we fail directly to advance the agenda of the Good News power movement or building up the body of Christ as much as we might if we had chosen differently.

 So, then, can a Christian be a mycologist? A ballet dancer? A hard-working, dedicated plumber? I certainly hope so – and if these, why not a philosopher?

1. Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision*, Westminster, Dacre Press, 1948, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension, Chicago, Ill, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See his notorious, and in important respects unfair, treatment of casuistry in his *Provincial Letters*, especially letters VI-VIII. On this issue, see Albert Jonson and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, Berkeley, CA, The University of California Press, 1988, especially 231-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)