**THE ARGUMENTS FROM CONFUSION**

 **AND BIBLICAL DEFECTS**

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Many have said that God is hidden. This alleged hiddenness is particularly troublesome for evangelical Christianity, much more so than generally recognized, for it would render certain facts about the world and about the Bible very hard to explain on the hypothesis that the God of evangelical Christianity exists. Those facts would be best explained by appeal to the alternate hypothesis that that deity does not exist. Three evidential, epistemic, atheological arguments emerge from this consideration. One of them is the Argument from Nonbelief, which focuses on the fact that there is widespread nonbelief in the given deity. See my essay on that argument, above. The other two are the Argument from Confusion (to be labeled AC) and the Argument from Biblical Defects (ABD). AC focuses on the fact that there is widespread confusion among Christians regarding important doctrinal issues, including morality and salvation. ABD focuses on the fact that there are various defects in the Bible. The present essay is devoted to the latter two arguments.1

**I. THE ARGUMENT FROM CONFUSION (AC)**

According to evangelical Christianity, there are matters about which it would be very beneficial for people on earth to be knowledgeable. Included among them would be Gods nature, Gods laws, the nature of the afterlife, the requirements for salvation, Gods church and sacraments, and the status of the Bible. Let us call true beliefs about such matters G-beliefs. Using that definition, AC may be formulated as follows:

***Formulation of the Argument***

(A) If the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, then:

 1. He would love all Christians and want a personal relationship with them.

 2. People would need to have G-beliefs (among other things) in order to have the

 sort of relationship with God that he would want them to have.

(B) Therefore, if the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, then he would want all

 Christians to have G-beliefs.

(C) Thus, if the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, then he would probably

 prevent Christians from becoming confused or conflicted about matters that are the

 subject of G-beliefs.

(D) But some Christians are confused about such matters.

(E) And many Christians disagree with one another about such matters.

(F) Therefore [from D & E], Christians have not been prevented from becoming confused

 or conflicted about matters that are the subject of G-beliefs.

(G) Hence [from C & F], probably the God of evangelical Christianity does not exist.

***Discussion of AC***

AC is in a way intermediate between the Argument from Evil (AE) and the Argument from Nonbelief (ANB). It is like AE in that confusion is more clearly evil than is nonbelief, since it is disruptive among Gods own people. The nonbelievers referred to in ANB might be shunted aside as hopeless cases, but that outlook doesnt work with AC, as AC deals with the believers themselves. It is clearly a bad thing for *them* have false beliefs about important matters. Although AC is like AE, it is not just a version of AE, for it is also like ANB in that it focuses on what is essentially an epistemic problem, namely Gods hiddenness, i.e., the failure of God to clearly reveal himself. That failure produces both confusion among believers and nonbelief among nonbelievers. All three arguments, AE, ANB, and AC, are powerful evidential arguments for the nonexistence of the God of evangelical Christianity, though only AE is widely known. It is a difficult question which of them is the most forceful, though my own view is that ANB and AC should be placed ahead of AE in that regard.

The word confusion has at least two different senses. In one sense, a person is confused if he does not know his own mind and is undecided. In the other sense, we say that a group of people is confused about a given issue if its members hold conflicting positions on it. For example, if half the people in the world were to believe that the earth is flat, and the other half believe it is round, then we could say that humanity would be confused about the shape of the earth. The first sense of confusion applies to individuals, whereas the second sense applies only to groups. In the second sense, the group could be confused even if no individual in the group is confused. Where half the population believes that the earth is flat, each individual who believes that the earth is flat might be perfectly clear about his/her belief and thus not be confused. The person might be mistaken (i.e., have a false belief), but that is something else, not confusion. Yet, we could say of the entire population that *it* (the whole group) is confused on the matter.2

When the word confusion is used in AC, it overlaps both of the above meanings (or types of confusion). With regard to the first sense, individual (mostly liberal) Christians are confused about such doctrinal issues as morality and salvation because they realize that the Bible is inconsistent or unclear on such matters, and so they are unsure what the truth is and are more or less bewildered by it all. With regard to the second sense, Christians, as a group, are confused about such issues because of the sharp splits that occur within their ranks on the issues. Necessarily, large numbers of Christians must be holding false beliefs. As individuals, they need not be confused, but, because of the disagreements, Christians as a group can be said to be confused. It is certainly a problem for Christians to explain why their God permits confusion of both types. One way to construe AC is in terms of *facts* which are *unexpected* given the hypothesis that the God of evangelical Christianity exists. The facts are that some individual Christians are confused about important doctrinal issues and that Christians as a group are confused (in the sense of conflicted) about such issues, with the result that many large subgroups of them must be holding false beliefs. We need an explanation for these facts and the best one seems to include the hypothesis that the God of evangelical Christianity does not exist.

Why believe ACs premise (E)? Why believe that many Christians actually disagree with each other about aspects of God's nature or system of governance that have importance to their lives? My reply is to provide examples of such disagreements. One example has to do with whether or not God hates or despises certain people (homosexuals, for example, or abortion providers, or atheists, etc.). Such disagreements could (and do!) have grave consequences. It is possible to list many important moral questions about which there is no unanimity or consensus within Christianity.3 Such a list could be used in support of ACs premises (D) & (E), for whatever the correct answer may be to any of the questions, it is a G-belief, and all other answers that conflict with it would point to both sorts of confusion referred to within those premises. For each of the questions on the list, there would be both sorts of confusion among Christians as to the correct answer.

It is also possible to list additional areas of confusion within Christianity that go beyond those of morality.4 For each of such areas, I make these claims:

(1) The Bible does not supply any answer that is clear and authoritative on the matter.

(2) Christians, as a group, are confused with regard to the issue.

(3) The issue is an important one.

Possibly for some of the questions, one might say that the matter is not so important and that God might be willing to permit lack of clarity and lack of unanimity with regard to it. But even if that were so for some of them, there would be *other* questions that really are fundamental issues about which it really is important to get clear. I would put *those* examples forward in support of ACs premises (D) & (E), along with the examples mentioned previously. I would say, then, that the premises in question can be supported quite strongly. AC is a most forceful argument.

There are at least three defenses of Gods existence that might be raised against AC. They are called the Free-will Defense, the Afterlife Defense, and the Unknown-purpose Defense. According to the Free-will Defense, God permits Christians to be confused about important doctrinal issues because if he were to clarify matters for them and thereby cause them all to have G-beliefs, it would interfere with their free will, which he does not want to do. It is more important to him that they retain their free will than that they have G-beliefs.

There are several objections to this defense. I shall just mention one of them here and that is that it is simply false that educating people interferes with their free will. On the contrary, I would say that it does just the opposite: it enhances their free will. Knowledge is power. The truth shall set you free (John 8:32). For example, for Christians to be better aware of the nature of morality and salvation and Gods connection with those matters would open up more options for them and allow them to better realize their goals in life. It would be a win-win situation, with both God and the Christians getting what they want from the other. It is clear, then, that the Free-will Defense is a failure when applied against AC.5

The Afterlife Defense (AD) tries to belittle the problem. It grants that Christians are confused about doctrinal issues, but claims that all that will be rectified in the afterlife. Whats a little bit of confusion on earth when everything will be clarified in heaven as we embark upon eternal bliss? Such confusion is a relatively minor matter and can be considered negligible from the perspective of eternity, which is how God views matters. This would be a way of attacking ACs premise (A2) and would, in effect, be an argument that there are no such things as G-beliefs.

There are many objections to AD. First, there is good reason to say that the very concept of an afterlife is, in the end, incoherent, but let us set that issue aside for now. Second, AD seems to presuppose universalism, the idea that everyone will eventually go on to eternal bliss in heaven, but that is definitely a minority outlook. AD does not work well once it is granted that some people, perhaps even including some Christians, will *not* achieve salvation. One big problem, in *that* case, is that people who would have gotten saved if they had had G-beliefs, end up not getting saved because they are confused about important matters and lack G-beliefs. How could God permit *that* to happen? And finally, for AD to belittle Christians earthly confusion about doctrinal issues is, in effect, to belittle their earthly life itself. Why should God even put them here on this planet if their intellectual confusion and failure to acquire G-beliefs is such a minor matter as to be negligible? It makes their earthly life itself insignificant and meaningless. Since this is an unacceptable consequence of AD, we can infer that AD is another failure when applied against AC.6

Possibly the best of the defenses is the Unknown-purpose Defense (UPD). According to UPD, although God wants Christians to be clear about morality and salvation and have G-beliefs, he has some *other* desire (which is at present unknown to us) which conflicts with that one and which overrides it. This is a very attractive defense because people are inclined to view God as a being that is so far beyond humans in mentality that it would be utterly hopeless, and perhaps presumptuous, to speculate about Gods intentions or desires.

Nevertheless, I have various objections to UPD. One of them is that it merely appeals to the idea of mystery and so provides no explanation of anything. It is totally unenlightening. Another objection is that UPD is actually antithetical to the process of explanation. It makes huge portions of the Bible totally inexplicable. For example, all of the parts which play up the importance of morality and salvation would be rendered incomprehensible on the assumption that God has only limited concern that Christians are confused about those matters. Furthermore, all the verses that emphasize the importance of acquiring the truth would also be rendered incomprehensible. For example, why would God send his son to testify to the truth (as Jesus proclaimed at John 18:37) if the acquisition of the truth by Gods own people here on earth were to be overridden by some other divine purpose? It would make no sense. (As pointed out above, Jesus himself said, the truth will set you free) A similar point can be made regarding Gods command that people believe on the name of his son Jesus Christ (I John 3:23) and Jesus own command to his disciples that they spread the gospel message to all nations (Matt. 28:19-20) and to all creation (Mark 16:15-16). Such commands would be undercut and rendered unintelligible if God had some purpose which overrides his desire that people come to know the truth. Finally, consider all the claims of divine inspiration that are made in the Bible (such phrases as And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying ... and The word of the Lord came unto me, saying ...). In the Old Testament alone, there are 2,600 such claims of inspiration. Almost half the Book of Exodus and 90% of Leviticus consist of direct quotations from the words of God. Although the New Testament books only occasionally quote God directly, they were both claimed by the Apostles and recognized by the early church as authoritative revelations from God. According to II Tim. 3:16, All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is useful for teaching. It just does not make sense that God would do all that inspiring of Scripture for the purpose of instructing humanity if, indeed, he were to have some purpose which overrides his desire that humanity come to know the truth. We may infer that the unknown purpose God, an idea which would make much of the Bible incomprehensible, is not the God of the vast majority of Christians. On the contrary, they would say that God has revealed to us that the morality and salvation of his followers and their acquisition of the truth is a top priority with him. It is mainly to *their* God, the God of most Christians, that AC is directed.7

A further question is whether UPD might be used to defend against AC in the case of a more general Christian deity, one worshiped by so-called liberal Christians. Certainly it would be more forceful, as a defense, in such a context. Christians who are not Bible-oriented could say that although God has some concern about the confusion and conflictedness of his followers, he also has some unknown purpose which overrides that concern. However, to say that God lacks great concern about his followers unfortunate epistemic situation seems to imply that he also lacks great concern for humanity, lacks a strong desire for a close personal relationship with humans, and is not both omnipotent and perfectly loving. One would need to give up the sort of Christianity so prevalent in Western countries and, instead, go with some diminished view, perhaps something close to deism. That would be a kind of success for AC. Any Christian who is not willing to give up the idea of God as omnipotent, all-loving, and greatly concerned about humanity and desiring some close personal relationship with it, would have great difficulty in overcoming the Argument from Confusion.8

**II. THE ARGUMENT FROM BIBLICAL DEFECTS (ABD)**

***Formulation of the Argument***

(A) If the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, then the Bible would be God's

 only written revelation.

(B) Thus, if that deity were to exist, then he would probably see to it that the Bible is

 perfectly clear and authoritative, and lack the appearance of merely human

 authorship.

(C) Some facts about the Bible are the following:

 1. It contradicts itself or is very unclear in many places.

 2. It contains factual errors, including unfulfilled prophecies.

 3. It contains ethical defects (such as God committing or ordering atrocities).

 4. It contains interpolations (later insertions to the text).

 5. Different copies of the same biblical manuscripts say conflicting things.

 6. The biblical canon involves disputes and is apparently arbitrary.

 7. There is no objective procedure for settling any of the various disputes,

 especially since the original manuscripts of the Bible have been lost and there

 has been no declaration from God that would help resolve any of the disputes.

(D) Therefore [from C], the Bible is not perfectly clear and authoritative, and has the

 appearance of merely human authorship.

(E) Hence [from B & D], probably the God of evangelical Christianity does not exist.

***Discussion of ABD***

Much of what was said above about AC also has application to ABD, for the two arguments are closely related. In the case of ABD, the critical facts, which have to do with the Bible, are the ones listed in its premise (C). Since those facts would be unexpected on the assumption that the God of evangelical Christianity exists, they constitute evidence for the nonexistence of that deity. Much support for the facts is provided in the literature. It is certainly true that the original manuscripts of the Bible have been lost and that copies (of copies ...) of those originals, which do exist, conflict with one another.9 It is also true that interpolations have been made in the biblical manuscripts10 and that the biblical canon is arbitrary. Different Christian denominations have different canons. Also, it seems likely that the canon is incomplete (e.g., the so-called Q document is missing and probably some of Pauls letters have been lost.) It is also well known that different translations of the Bible conflict with one another and there is no clear guide as to how to resolve such conflicts. Space limitations prevent me from supporting all that here.11

If the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, then none of the facts in question would be expected. Instead, it would be expected that Gods revelation to humanity would be free of defects and perfectly preserved. God would not permit the original manuscripts to get lost. He would not permit mistakes to be made in the writing, copying, or translating of the Bible. He would guide the selection of the canon in a way that would not give rise to disputes. He would see to it that the Bible is perfectly clear, especially with regard to important ethical and doctrinal issues. Gods own people would not then be confused or conflicted about such issues. It is only by way of such guidance that Gods aims, as formulated in the Bible and proclaimed by most Christians, might have a reasonable chance of being realized. Since the facts in question cant be easily explained on the hypothesis that the given deity exists, and are best explained on the basis of the alternate hypothesis that the deity does not exist, they thereby constitute good objective evidence for that alternate hypothesis.

ABD is the converse of the Argument from the Bible, which argues for Gods existence from the alleged harmony and consistency of the Bible and alleged fulfilled prophecies.12 This shows the pivotal role played by the issue of biblical errancy. If the Bible is errant, it is evidence that the Christian God does not exist, whereas if the Bible were inerrant and were to contain amazing fulfilled prophecies, then that would be evidence that the Christian God does exist. I was led to this result in part through the pioneering work of Niclas Berggren.13

One of the most important issues is the requirements for salvation (in other words, What must I do to be saved? a question once put to Jesus.) The Bible contradicts itself on that matter. Consider, for example, repentance. According to Luke 13:3, one must repent in order to be saved. And yet there are passages which state or imply that everyone who is in a certain group will be saved, where no mention is made of repentance. For example, in John 3:16 it says whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.14 There is no mention of repentance here. Furthermore, according to Matt. 25:46, the righteous (i.e., charitable people) will go away to eternal life. There is nothing in the description of them (verses 34‑40) that implies repentance. All those who have done good are said to be saved (John 5:29).15 Thus, some biblical verses say that repentance is necessary for salvation but other verses imply that it is not necessary.16

Even aside from contradictions, there is simply the matter of biblical clarity. If there are wide disagreements on how to interpret a passage, then we can be sure that the subject being interpreted was not given in a clear enough manner to get everyone to understand it. People would have better understood God's message if it had been presented in a more straightforward manner. For example, if it were to say somewhere in the Bible: Here is the list of things you *must do* in order to be saved..., followed by a clear list of actions, then there would be considerably less confusion over what a person must do to be saved. And if Jesus had said, for example, Abortion is *always* wrong in all circumstances, then that would greatly reduce the number of Christians who think abortion is acceptable under certain circumstances.

Consider an analogy. Suppose I am trying to tell a six‑year old that he must not play with matches, but I use advanced technical terms or poetic language and he fails to understand what I am saying. He goes on to burn the house down. The fault would lie with *me*. People would say I did not explain myself well enough to be understood. Obviously, if I am trying to get children to understand me, I should make my language as simple as possible to avoid confusion over what I meant. There may be nothing about my explanation that is generally unintelligible. The six‑year old may simply be too immature to understand my message, which would be perfectly clear to an adult. So, objective standards of clarity are not relevant here. What is relevant is that I need to explain myself in a way that the particular people I am addressing would understand. Both AC and ABD are claiming that God has not explained matters clearly enough for Christians to understand him, and the best evidence of that is the fact that there are sharp divisions among them regarding important points of doctrine. Although the fault may lie partly with the readers, it lies mainly with the author. He could have made the message perfectly clear to the readers, but failed to do so.

It might be objected that ABD is blunted by the fact that most Christians are not worried that the requirements for salvation are confusing or even contradictory and feel assured about their own salvation Nevertheless, they should be bothered that there are other Christians out there who *are* distressed regarding salvation (both for themselves and for others, especially loved ones). They should wonder why God would permit there to be such distress among his own followers. Furthermore, even if the given objection were to deflect the force of ABD with regard to the harm caused by confusion to Christians themselves, it fails to address the harm to God. The Christian God is supposed to really care about the salvation of his people and to have gone to a great deal of trouble, with the crucifixion and all, to let them know just what they need to do. Even if some Christians think they know the correct requirements for salvation, they should still be bothered by other Christians inability to see things their way and by Gods apparent unwillingness to set matters straight. According to the Bible, there can be nothing more important regarding a person than his/her salvation.17 So it is hard to see how God could be content to just leave it up to each person to figure out the requirements for salvation on an individual basis. Mistakes there would be too tragic for a loving God to allow. That whole idea runs counter to the great theme of God revealing his system of governance by way of Scripture. There is an inconsistency between Gods apparent concern regarding salvation and his present hiddenness with regard to it. And the given objection fails to address that inconsistency.

In conclusion, like AC, ABD presents good objective evidence for the nonexistence of the God of evangelical Christianity. Believers in that deity need to explain why he would permit the Bible to have come to be the way it is, with all its defects and apparently human authorship, and thus far they have been unable to do so. The best hypothesis available to us, then, given the facts, is that that deity does not exist.

**NOTES**

1. This is the first treatment of AC and ABD in print. An earlier version of them, combined into a single argument called The Argument from Confusion, appeared on the Internet in 1999 in my debate with Doug Wilson at: [online], www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore\_drange/drange-wilson/index.shtml.

2. It might be objected that instead of saying of a group that it is confused, it would be more apt to say that it is *conflicted* and that I should be calling the argument the Argument from Conflictedness. The matter of which label to use is not particularly important, but there are reasons for sticking with the term confusion. First, conflictedness is a slightly more awkward term. Second, there is still confusion in the sense in which individuals are bewildered, and there the word is quite apt. And, third, confusion is even appropriate for conflicted groups, for people do sometimes call them confused.

3. For example, questions about exceptions to the biblical commandments (e.g., Is killing in self-defense or in defense of loved ones permissible?), about which laws of the Torah are still applicable today, about the rights of women, children, and animals, about divorce and various sexual practices, etc. There are hundreds of them.

4. For example, which biblical verses are divinely inspired and which of them are to be taken literally? In what way and to what extent is human history divinely predestined? What is Satan? What are heaven and hell? What is the relation of Jesus to God? What are the requirements for salvation? What will the Second Coming be like? Again, there are hundreds of such issues.

5. For further material related to the Free-will Defense, see the discussion of it as applied to ANB which occurs in section III of my essay The Argument from Nonbelief, (above, in this volume). There is a more extensive treatment of the topic in chapter 5 of my book *Nonbelief & Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

6. In my essay The Argument from Nonbelief, above, AD, as applied to ANB, is represented by the Future-Kingdom Defense, which is discussed in section II. A more extensive treatment of the topic is given in chapter 9 of *Nonbelief & Evil*.

7. See the discussion of UPD, as applied to ANB, in section IV of The Argument from Nonbelief, above. For a fuller treatment of the topic, see chapter 11 of *Nonbelief & Evil*.

8. Similar considerations can be raised in connection with the application of ANB to the God of liberal Christianity and to God in general. On those topics, see chapters 13 and 14 of *Nonbelief & Evil*.

9. In his book *Polluted Texts and Traditional Beliefs* (Gordo, AL: The Flatwoods Free Press, 1998), A. J. Mattill, Jr. supplies hundreds of examples of such conflicts.

10. This is amply supported by Patricia G. Eddy in her book *Who Tampered With the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Winston-Derek Publishers, 1993).

11. Biblical criticism is an enormous topic. There are thousands of sources in print. Let me just mention two here: A. J. Mattill, Jr., *The Seven Mighty Blows to Traditional Beliefs*, 2d ed. (Gordo, AL: The Flatwoods Free Press, 1995) and C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995). There are also thousands more on the Internet.

12. On the Argument from the Bible (and biblical errancy in general), see appendix D of my book *Nonbelief & Evil*. An expanded version of it appears on the Internet at: [online],

www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore\_drange/bible.html.

13. His essay The Errancy of Fundamentalism Disproves the God of the Bible is at: [online], www.infidels.org/library/modern/niclas\_berggren/funda.html.

14. See also John 6:40, 11:25, Acts 16:31, Rom. 10:9. Furthermore, whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Rom. 10:13).

15. For additional verses implying that people who are very moral and charitable are guaranteed salvation, see Matt. 19:16-17, Mark 10:17-21, Luke 10:25-37, 18:18-22, John 8:51, Rom. 2:5-7,10, and Jas. 2:24. These also imply that believing in Gods son is not necessary.

16. For additional examples, see my article Biblical Contradictions Regarding Salvation, *Free Inquiry* 14 (Summer 1994): 56-57. An expanded version of it appears at: [online], home.earthlink.net/~writetdrange/contradictions.html.

17. Matt. 10:28, 16:26; Mark 8:36‑37; Luke 12:15‑21.