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Review of Paul K. Moser's *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*

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Years ago my grandmother indulged in what its practitioners call ‘automatic writing.’ She would grip a pen, poise it over a piece of paper, and wait quietly. Her grip was supposed to be light enough that the spirits of deceased relatives could move the pen and thereby write messages, including replies to questions. I found this hobby of hers disturbing but fascinating, so I probed it. I had her ask the spirits questions whose answers only those unbound by the laws of physics could immediately discover: ‘What did I write on the piece of paper I’m hiding?’ and the like. The answers the spirits sent her were of course quite wrong and no better than her own guesses. My grandmother offered predictable excuses: the spirits concern themselves with spiritual affairs rather than mundane ones, they don’t like being tested, they don’t do parlor tricks, and they don’t waste their time trying to convince skeptics like me. If I expected to get straight answers, she scolded, I’d need to leave behind my prideful skepticism, ask the right kind of questions, and approach the spirits with trust and humility.

In *The Elusive God*, Paul Moser takes my grandmother’s attitude and applies it to skepticism about God. Religious skeptics, he says, should stop expecting God to provide what Moser calls ‘spectator evidence’ (2) of God’s existence and should expect, instead, only ‘absolutely perfectly authoritative evidence’ of ‘a divine authoritative call to volitional fellowship whereby one allows one’s volitional attitudes to be conformed to divine perfect love’ (10). I can hear Grandma now: ‘The spirits want to *guide* you, not convince you that they exist, and if you don’t want their guidance, too bad for you.’ Moser dresses it up in verbose, preachy, and

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repetitious prose, but it's just what the medium says when the skeptic at the table is spoiling the séance, and it's no more cogent.

Despite the importance he assigns to the notion of 'absolutely perfectly authoritative evidence' of the existence of 'the authoritatively convicting and transformingly loving God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus' (83), and despite the pages he spends repeating versions of the definition I quoted earlier, Moser tells us disappointingly little about how to detect such evidence. He suggests in various places that encountering such evidence involves a pang of conscience that reveals one's moral and cognitive deficiency before God. But how does a pang of conscience imply all the content in Moser's detailed Christian formulations? Does it feel any different from the pang of conscience a Buddhist might experience as the tug of karma? We're never told.

Moser's derision of 'spectator evidence' is disingenuous. In trying to convince the reader, he has no choice but to rely on spectator evidence himself, 'evidence of God's reality [that meets] *our* preferred standards of evidence' (38). For what other standards of evidence could we apply at a given time but our preferred standards? He writes as if somehow he's using God's standards of evidence rather than his own. In the book's only argument for God's existence, Moser unabashedly offers spectator evidence: the transformation some people seem to undergo when they get religion and thereby 'a new volitional center with a default position of unselfish love and forgiveness toward all people and of hope in the ultimate triumph of good over evil by [God]' (135). Moser cites himself as an example (135) but unfortunately doesn't elaborate on the example. Because spiritual transformation is the only theistic evidence the book offers, one would expect details about Moser's own transformation or, better yet, large-scale data about the transformative effect of religious conversions, along with reasons why theistic explanations of those data are better than naturalistic, social-psychological ones. But we get neither.

Moser also applies a double standard. He repeatedly scolds religious skeptics for what he sees as their epistemic arrogance on the topic of God's nature, purposes, and methods. But he allows himself dozens of pages of highly confident (if highly repetitious) claims about precisely what God wants and would demand, he corrects 'various biblical writers' who he says have misrepresented God's character (87), and he briskly rejects theological views held by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and Kierkegaard. In just one of many more examples, he claims that God's call to us 'would be respectful of human agency and thus rejectable and not coercive' (105). But who says our sovereign creator is obliged to respect the agency of us degenerate sinners? Why isn't this demand just as presumptuous as the skeptic's demand for evidence meeting 'our preferred standards'?

The book's theistic explanations of 'divine hiding' share the defect of all such explanations in the literature: they don't explain why God hides from some entire cultures much more drastically than from others. As Moser himself says, 'A perfectly loving God would communicate on a frequency available to *all* people who are open to divine rescue *on God's terms* [and] ... would seek *all-inclusive* community under the umbrella of divine unselfish love' (116, emphases in original). Yet he says nothing about why, for instance, God lets the Afghans (virtually all of

whom are monotheists) pick up his frequency so much better than the Thais (virtually none of whom are). God may hide, as Moser says, in order to ‘teach people to yearn for’ God, ‘strengthen grateful trust in God,’ ‘remove human complacency toward God,’ ‘shatter destructively prideful human self-reliance,’ and ‘prevent people who aren’t ready for fellowship with God from explicitly rejecting God’ (107). But none of those reasons would account for God’s hiding from the populace of entire countries while those lucky enough to inhabit other countries get the benefits and opportunities God offers to those who worship him.¹

In the short space allotted me, it’s hard to convey how bad this book is. It is, however, quite handsomely produced. If only Cambridge had taken as much care in vetting the book as in typesetting it.

References

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¹ For more on this unsolved problem, see Maitzen (2006, 2008)