

The Possibility of
Resurrection
and Other Essays in
Christian Apologetics

Peter van Inwagen


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*To my stepchildren
Noël, Eamon, and Claire Lawless*

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Chapter Seven

*A review of Without
Proof or Evidence:
Essays of O. K. Bouwsma,*

*edited and with
an introduction by
J. L. Craft and
Ronald E. Hustwit*

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984)

This book is a rather miscellaneous collection of O. K. Bouwsma's writings on religious topics. (One of the pieces, an introduction to a collection of Nietzsche's letters, is only indirectly connected with religion.) Most of the papers—if that is the word for them—in the book have never been published. All of them are worth reading, especially for Bouwsma fans. (But the classic, inimitable Bouwsma voice, the voice of “Descartes' Evil Genius” and “The Terms of Ordinary Language Are . . .” is heard continuously and at full strength in only one of the papers, “Adventure in Verification,” wherein an epistemologically ambitious Greek climbs Mount Olympus to verify certain theological propositions. The classic voice is muted and is heard only intermittently in the other papers, possibly because Bouwsma takes Abraham and Moses and Saint Paul and even Saint Anselm more seriously than he takes Descartes or Grover Maxwell.)

In this book, one meets many of the same thoughts over and over again, twisted round one another, unexpectedly combined, and never presented twice in exactly the same way. I will concentrate on a few strands in Bouws-

ma's thought that one usually encounters as parts of the same tangle: his treatments of faith, defense, proof, evidence, obedience, revelation, and the Bible.

It is tempting to classify Bouwsma as a "Wittgensteinian fideist": He dislikes it when people raise the question whether religious beliefs are objectively true; he regards the concepts of "proof" and "evidence" as being wholly irrelevant to the life of the religious believer (and by the religious believer he always means someone who is a practicing Lutheran or Orthodox Jew or member of some other particular denomination); and he locates the tendency to raise questions about objective truth and, a fortiori, questions about proof and evidence, in certain mistakes about language. But unlike many who have been called Wittgensteinian fideists, he does not ascribe these tendencies to mistakes about "religious language," if that means the forms of words that believers use in talking with one another ('Pray for my husband'; '. . . I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed . . .'; 'Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world . . .'). These tendencies, rather, are a consequence of misunderstanding the language of Scripture.

We are like people who live in an enclosure, Bouwsma tells us. In the enclosure there are doors (so the inhabitants know about doors), and set in the outer wall of the enclosure there are things that look like doors but aren't, dummy doors we might call them. A lot of people spend a lot of time rattling the dummy doors or trying to pick their dummy locks. Some think that they have opened them. Others say that they have seen light through the chinks and cracks around the doors. Let us leave them to it. A most important fact is that we—let us say 'we'—have here with us in the enclosure the Bible. The trouble is, we don't know how to read it, or many of us don't. We don't know how to read the Bible because the Bible is God talking to us, and we don't know how to listen when God talks. The Bible is not (as some evidently suppose) a piece of primitive science or a work of fanciful history. It is a promise and a call. It is a promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ and a call to faith. It is also a sort of instruction manual for those who heed God's call and elect a life lived in faith. One of the mistakes made by those who do not know how to read the Bible is the idea that faith consists primarily in the acceptance of propositions, that faith is simply a certain sort of propositional belief. Faith, however, does not consist in propositional belief but in obedience. One of the most important aspects of the Bible is that it tells us many stories of lives lived in faith. That is the respect in which the Bible is an instruction manual for the faithful; it says: Faith is like this. The faithful whose stories are told in the Bible are just that cloud of witnesses partly enumerated in Hebrews 11. Of that cloud of witnesses Bouwsma particularly delights in Abraham and Moses—and that latter-day witness, Saint Paul.

It is rash to try to summarize Bouwsma's thought, but I am perverse enough to try. In a nutshell, his central thesis is that faith is obedience to

God and obedience to God logically excludes any search for (or even attention to) proof or evidence. Imagine this. The Lord says to Moses, "Go and gather the elders of Israel together. . . ." Moses reasons: "Let's see. The voice called unto me out of a bush that burns with fire and is not consumed. Therefore, there is probably a God and the voice is probably his and so I'd probably better do what it says." To act on such reasoning would not be obedience. (Perhaps it wouldn't be *disobedience*, but obedience is not the same as nondisobedience.)

If faith logically excludes any traffic in evidence and proof, can we therefore never *defend* our faith? ("Always be ready with your defense when you are called to account for the hope that is in you . . ."; 1 Pet. 3:15.) Yes, indeed. But for the faithful a defense is a confession of faith, a simple series of assertions about what God has commanded. The paradigm case is Saint Paul's defense of his actions before Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 26): "Then Paul stretched out his hand and began his defense. . . . 'I saw a light from the sky. . . .' 'Paul, you are raving. . . .' '[W]hat I am saying is sober truth'."

There is much in this that any Christian should agree with. Few Christians, if any, would say in so many words that the Christian faith can be proved. It has always been an article of that faith that it is a gift. The Christian (there are such) who amasses large bodies of evidence to prove to the unbiased inquirer that the faith is true or probable or more reasonable than its competitors (including atheism and agnosticism) would seem to be an imperfect adherent of that faith. Such a Christian is making a mistake. But there are other ways of looking at his mistake than Bouwsma's. I myself would say that his mistake was not about language but about people. Christians generally believe that we are ruined, defaced, twisted creatures; that we have made ourselves so by rebelling against God. (Bouwsma calls people who do not yet obey God "wild"—as in wild horses [p. 15]. But that is misleading. Wild horses are not in rebellion, either against God their maker or us their natural masters.) In particular, our minds and wills are twisted. How does a creature of deformed mind and will respond to evidence incompatible with the deformed picture of the world that is consequent on a deformed mind and will? We have a model in those whose minds and wills are even more twisted than is normal. How does the paranoid respond when shown good evidence for the thesis that his colleagues are not conspiring against him? How does the Nazi react to an offer to prove that Semitic and Teutonic blood cannot (contrary to official Nazi biology) be distinguished under a microscope? The questions answer themselves. How would fallen and unregenerate creatures react to good evidence that there is a God who acts in history and commands them to repent? Christ has answered this question: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead"

(Luke 16:31). (In context this means “though one rose from the dead before their very eyes.”) A preoccupation with evidence may be unchristian not because a desire for evidence is logically incompatible with Christian faith and obedience but because from a Christian point of view evidence would be of little practical consequence.

But when Bouwsma deprecates proof in religion, he is not, or not usually, thinking of those people who try to prove or render probable the whole of the Christian faith. His usual target is those people who offer arguments for the existence of God (those who attempt to pick the dummy locks on the dummy doors). The project of attempting to prove the existence of God seems to him to be incompatible with obedience to God. (Suppose someone in the land of Midian had said to Moses, “Careful. You don’t want to be taken in. What do you know about this voice, anyway?” Suppose Moses had responded with a brilliant version of the Ontological Argument. Would this have been a response of obedience?)

Attempts to prove the existence of God, unlike attempts to prove the faith as a whole, have been looked upon favorably by many great Christians. I am inclined to think that Bouwsma is right to regard a preoccupation with such arguments as unchristian, but, again, it seems to me that someone who thinks that he does God service by devising them is making a mistake not about language but about people. There is, of course, the old and valid point that metaphysical reasoning can be followed only by a few and the related point that owing to the ever-present possibility of discovering a mistake, real or fancied, in a chain of metaphysical reasoning, a faith built upon metaphysics is a house built upon sand. But if we may trust Saint Paul, there is a strong case for regarding metaphysical arguments as not only weak but as entirely useless. Unless I misunderstand Paul, he tells us that believers and unbelievers alike have available to them something much better than arguments for the existence of God, something independent of Holy Scripture and only indirectly connected with faith and obedience:

For that which may be known of God is manifest among men; indeed God himself has made it manifest. The invisible attributes of God, his eternal power and deity, have been perceived since the creation of the world, being understood through created things. (Rom. 1:19–20)

(Incidentally, Bouwsma says [p. 143] that there is no such thing as “God in general” but only “the God of the Christians,” “the God of the Jews,” “the God of the Muslims,” and so on. I expect he thought Saint Paul would have agreed. One wonders how he would rewrite this passage so as to make his and Paul’s agreement on this point fully explicit.) I interpret Paul as saying that the existence and attributes of the invisible God can be seen in his creation much as the “invisible” emotions of our fellows can be seen in their faces. But if this is true, unbelievers have nevertheless succeeded in convinc-

ing themselves that they have seen no such thing. Anyone who has been able to do *that* will have little trouble in brushing aside a mere metaphysical argument. A person who really did believe that other living, moving human forms were mere unconscious automata could not be restored to normality by being taught the analogical argument for the existence of other minds.

Bouwsma’s attitude toward faith and evidence, naturally enough, has consequences for his attitude toward revelation and knowledge. He suggests that the imparting of propositional knowledge to certain people is “telling secrets” and that God’s revelation does not involve telling secrets (p. 15). Even if we accept this tendentious characterization of the imparting of propositional knowledge, we shall find scriptural difficulties with this suggestion. (Bouwsma is, after all, trying to show us how to read the Scriptures.) One might cite Mark 4:10–11, but this passage is rather a dark saying. Consider instead the famous discourse in 1 Corinthians about the things revealed by the Spirit. Paul begins by telling the Corinthians something that Bouwsma’s picture of faith and revelation fits very well:

[When I was with you] my message and my preaching did not depend upon the persuasiveness of human wisdom, but were a demonstration of power and the Spirit; and this was so that your faith might not rest upon human wisdom but upon the power of God.

But he goes on to say,

But we do speak wisdom among those who are fully prepared for it. . . . [W]e speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the secret thing that God ordained before the ages for our glory. (1 Cor. 2:4–7)

But in any case we should not accept Bouwsma’s identification of the imparting of propositional knowledge with telling secrets. I have learned a great deal about the state of my health from my doctor, but he has never, that I can remember, told me a secret.

I will close by noting that one important aspect of the relation between faith and evidence is entirely ignored in these papers. I concede that the papers are (as I have said) a miscellaneous collection and that it would be absurd to fault such a collection for failing to be a comprehensive treatment of any topic. Still, I think the point is worth remarking on. One finds no mention in these papers of the fact that various people have attempted to *disprove* the beliefs of Christians and other theists. Unbelievers have, for example, attempted to demonstrate that the existence of God is incompatible with pain and suffering; that religious beliefs are the products of depth-psychological or economic forces; that religious beliefs are incompatible with known scientific fact; that critical studies of central biblical texts show these texts to be corrupt or historically unreliable or to have been intended

by their authors in senses that do not support the theological superstructure that later generations have raised on them. I cannot discover in these papers any suggestion as to how a Christian should respond to arguments offered as disproofs of theism or as evidence of the scientific or historical untenability of Christian belief. Let me offer a rather extreme example. Suppose a Christian is assured by a freethinking acquaintance (who has read it in *Godless Sunday at Home*) that the Gospels were made up out of whole cloth by unscrupulous priests circa 400 A.D. Shall he say, "Maybe so, but I still intend to regard them as a promise of eternal life and a call to obedience?" No, he can't say *that*. He may, of course, assume that his acquaintance is lying or mistaken and put the matter out of his mind. That's all right. One who felt obliged to investigate *every* challenge to his convictions would be hard-pressed to find the time to act on his convictions. But if he finds he can't put the matter out of his mind or if it looks to him as if there might really be something to his acquaintance's thesis, then it would seem that he must search out evidence and evaluate it.

Chapter Eight

A review of Universes

by John Leslie

(London: Routledge, 1989)

The cosmos appears to have been designed as an abode for life. This has been amply demonstrated by the marriage of cosmology and elementary-particle physics that is one of the most striking features of the current scientific scene. The universe evolved out of an initial singularity (or a "quantum fuzz" or a region of "imaginary time") some 15 thousand million years ago in accord with certain laws of nature. These laws contain apparently arbitrary numbers that are not determined by physical theory as it is currently understood but rather "have to be filled in by hand." One sort of example among many others would be the relative strengths of the various fundamental physical forces. (For example, electromagnetism is roughly 10^{39} times stronger than gravity. This ratio seems to be a brute fact. As far as theory goes, the exponent might have been 35 or 47 or any other number.)

In addition to the apparently arbitrary numbers that are contained in the laws of nature that govern the cosmos, the cosmos itself displays quantifiable and seemingly contingent features, such as its total relativistic mass, its very low initial entropy, and the number of "families" of elementary particles it contains. Many of these numbers have the following interesting feature: If they had been only very slightly different, there would have been no life. (Among the many untoward effects that a slight variation in the numbers could have produced are the following: a cosmos that lasted only a few seconds; a cosmos that contained no atoms; a cosmos that contained no stars; a cosmos in which all matter was violently radioactive.) It is very probable that future developments in theoretical physics will shorten the list of independent numerical parameters in the laws of nature and will thereby reduce the number of features of the laws of nature that could apparently have been otherwise. And it is possible that some of the features of