

DIVINE HIDDENNESS AND CHRISTIAN THEISM: A BIBLICAL THEODICY

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a Christian response to J.L. Schellenberg's argument for atheism from divine hiddenness. Utilizing the unique theological features of the Christian tradition, I aim to show that Schellenberg's argument does not undermine belief in Christian theism. The first half of the article focuses on differences between the theological presuppositions of classical theism and those assumed in Schellenberg's use of perfect being theology. In the remainder of the article, I present a biblical theodicy that pulls from the Old Testament and current trends in religious belief to argue that the experience of divine hiddenness should not be unexpected if Christianity is true.

KEY WORDS: Divine Hiddenness, Theodicy, Classical Theism, Perfect Being Theology, Old Testament

Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss the argument for atheism from divine hiddenness as it relates to Christian theism. While the hiddenness argument offers a compelling challenge to theism in general, I intend to demonstrate that the Christian tradition possess key resources for rebutting the force of the argument. I will attempt to show that Christian scripture a 'built-in' theodicy for addressing the problem of divine hiddenness and the silence of God. This theodicy is meant to show that 'some state of affairs that obtains constitutes a good for the sake of which God is willing to permit' humans to experience divine hiddenness (Weidner 2021: 26). This theodicy response does not discount the *experience* of divine hiddenness, but instead seeks to account for this apparent *reality*. Thus, I will argue that divine hiddenness is not incompatible with Christian theism, and should be expected if Christianity is true. If my argument is successful, the implication would be that the hiddenness argument offers no good reason to abandon Christian theism for atheism.

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In order to make this argument, it will be necessary to begin with introductory remarks about the hiddenness argument, along with some comments about a methodology for addressing the argument from a religious perspective. After this, I will articulate a classical understanding of the Christian God, and how this theological conception differs from the sort of God assumed in the hiddenness argument. Then, I will move on to offer a distinctly Christian explanation for the phenomena of divine hiddenness. In doing so, I will rely heavily on the biblical portrayal of God's covenantal relationship with the Israelites as presented in the Old Testament, and bring some of the principles found in the biblical narrative to bare on our contemporary religious landscape. My theodicy-oriented explanation will focus on God's hiddenness or silence as an intentional and communicative act in response to human error, both intellectual and moral, with the intention of bringing about greater goods (redemption, reconciliation, true religious beliefs, etc.) through the experiences associated with the apparent hiddenness of God.

The Hiddenness Argument and Methodology

The most famous version of the hiddenness argument comes from philosopher J. L. Schellenberg. His version, having been refined over several decades, finds its most updated and nuanced presentation in the following argument:

1. If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be. [Premise]
2. If God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a positive meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with *S* at *t*. [Premise]
3. If God exists, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a personal relationship with *S* at *t*. [1, 2 by Hypothetical Syllogism]
4. If for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a personal relationship with *S* at *t*, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, it is not the case that *S* is at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [Premise]
5. If God exists, then for any capable finite persons *S* and time *t*, it is not the case that *S* is at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [3, 4 by Hypothetical Syllogism]
6. There is at least one capable finite person *S* and time *t* such that *S* is or was at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [Premise]
7. It is not the case that God exists. [5, 6 by Modus Tollens] (Schellenberg 2015a: 24–25)

The argument is logically sound, and so Schellenberg's challengers must either reject the validity of one or more of the premises, or identify some informal fallacy committed in the argument. While it may be attractive for some to reject premises 1 and 6, I will concede that God is perfectly loving toward all finite persons and that there are legitimate examples of nonresistant-nonbelief in God. Instead, the explanation offered below will challenge premise 2 of the hiddenness argument and aim to show that God being *temporarily* not open to personal relationships with some finite persons is consistent with perfect divine love.

Before moving on, a word regarding methodology will be helpful. Schellenberg is not keen on the idea of theological meddling in the realm of philosophy. Religious traditions I will tend to qualify claims about God and divine love in accordance with supposedly "special" revelation that may conflict with human intuition. 'It cannot be overstated,' claims Schellenberg, 'that philosophy has no such prerogative' (Schellenberg 2015a: 22). According to Schellenberg, theology only muddies the waters, whereas 'Philosophy should take the concept of an ultimate divine reality and think for itself about what a *personal* filling out of such a concept amounts to' (Schellenberg 2015a: 22). He advises, then, that we not allow religion-dependent convictions to distract us from philosophical reflection on theism and the conclusions reached by the hiddenness argument.

I think it best to ignore this advice. Schellenberg's argument may be aimed against theism in general, but most theists are not merely general theists. The majority of the world's theists situate their belief in God within a particular religious tradition (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.). Why should religious philosophers be prevented from bringing all of the conceptual resources their theistic tradition has to offer into the discussion? To reject certain theological convictions about the nature of God as false or irrelevant simply because they arise from the realm of religion rather than philosophy is to commit a genetic fallacy. Moreover, there does not appear to be any sort of 'generic' theism available to which Schellenberg could appeal to offer robust support for the premises of his argument. As Michael Rea points out,

Theism itself is not a religious tradition in its own right, and the various religions that are paradigmatically theistic... embrace very different conceptions of God... it is singularly implausible to suppose that there is any conception of either divine love or divine personality that could be considered a commitment of theism... (Rea 2015: 212).

And so, the religious philosopher is within his rights to reflect on the hiddenness argument, look to the conceptual resources of his religious tradition, and attempt to contextualize the argument in relation to his particular variety of theism. By attempting to disprove the 'God of theism,' Schellenberg misses the mark for Christian

philosophers that are not interested in defending a generic version of theism. If the Christian can account for the phenomena of divine hiddenness within his religious framework, then the hiddenness argument offers no compelling reason to abandon theistic belief. Below, I will argue that the Christian theist is able to accomplish this task.

The God of the Philosophers vs. the God of Christian Theism

What is the major difference between the God of the Schellenberg's hiddenness argument and the God of Christianity? Christianity has traditionally formed its conception of God primarily around the special revelation thought to be offered in the Bible. While philosophy and religious experience have also been influential, these have been viewed as subordinate or supplementary to what God reveals about himself in the Scriptures. Biblical scholars Duvall and Hays summarize the biblical portrayal of the Christian God in the following way:

The Bible certainly affirms God's transcendence and does not shirk from the tension between transcendence and immanence, yet as the biblical story unfolds and as God seeks to relate to his people, almost by definition... immanence takes center stage in how God reveals himself (although transcendence still hovers about continuously). (Duvall and Hays 2019: 8)

Christian theologians have sought to emphasize a balance between the biblical affirmations of God's transcendence and immanence. God is both one who is 'eternal, immortal, invisible' (1 Tim. 1:17) and 'heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain' (1 Kings 8:27), and in some sense intimately present in the Burning Bush (Exodus 3), at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), and during Pentecost (Acts 2). Michael Rea identifies that 'the claim that God is *both* transcendent and personal enjoys overwhelming support from the Christian tradition...' (Rea 2015: 216). Theologians as diverse as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, Luther, Arminius, Barth, and others have emphasized that God's transcendence and immanence are presented in such a way throughout Scripture that we must view the *personal* aspects of God in light of his transcendence.

Philosophers of religion, however, may not feel compelled to shape their doctrine of God around any supposed divine revelation. Methods such as perfect being theology, *via negativa*, and *via creatio* are used to say something meaningful about God by means of unaided human reason and experience. Philosophers working in a particular tradition may use such methods alongside their 'revealed' doctrine of God as well. Schellenberg makes great use of perfect being theology to frame the conception of God he discusses in his version of the hiddenness argument. He writes, 'when theists talk about God as a person, they mean that God is the *greatest possible* person.'

When they say that God exists, they should be taken to mean that the greatest possible person exists' (Schellenberg 2015b: 95). He goes on to write, 'The greatest possible person, whatever else it may be, has to be perfectly loving' (Schellenberg 2015b: 97). The method being employed here begins with one's intuitions about those attributes that are intrinsically good for an individual to possess and applies those univocally to God as the greatest or maximal exemplification of those attributes. Thomas Morris explains perfect being theology in the following way: 'God is thought of as having the greatest possible array of compossible great-making properties... And if God is being thought of singularly as *the* greatest possible being, he is thought to be the sole possessor of such an array of properties' (Morris 2002: 37–38). Schellenberg's hiddenness argument utilizes this strategy for coming to understand perfect divine love based on intuitions from analogous sorts of love, such as parent-child relationships or friendship (Weidner 2021: 11). 'What such examples suggest,' writes Schellenberg, 'is that if we want a principle about love and openness to relationship that is perfectly general and necessarily true, we will need to say something like this: the best love *normally* or *ordinarily* is open to relationship at every moment of its existence' (Schellenberg 2015b: 44). It is this use of perfect being theology, along with intuitions about perfect love based on human relationships, that underlies premise 2 of the hiddenness argument.

Contrary to Schellenberg and others, the Christian theist will likely resist the unqualified use of perfect being theology to make sense of God's nature and actions. Christians will also be hesitant to reason from parental analogies to understand divine love. Even comparisons of between God's love and parental love found in the Bible (Psalm 68:5; Malachi 2:10; Matthew 23:9; James 1:7) ought to be understood as analogous rather than univocal. They offer an anthropomorphic accommodation to communicate a limited understanding of a God who is utterly beyond our intellectual grasp. C.J. Dempsey, highlighting the insights of feminist interpretations of metaphorical language for God in the Old Testament, explains, 'Whatever the metaphors for God may be, caution is needed to keep the metaphors from beings taken literally. Metaphorical language for God is historically, culturally, socially, politically, and theologically conditioned, oftentimes used polemically' (Dempsey 2021: 246). Mark Sheridan makes a similar point in analyzing patristic interpretations of Scripture's depiction of God, 'Only children would read the text literally... when the divine plan involves human matters, it assumes a human mode (*tropos*) and accommodates itself to human language' (Sheridan 2015: 31). The same sort of interpretational principle for understanding passages that describe the immaterial God as having hands or engaging in physical movement apply to those passages describing God as a father, husband, or mother throughout Scripture (Sheridan 2015: 64).

As mentioned above, Christian theism is revelation dependent, and considers the transcendence of God as an essential starting point for conceiving anything about God. As Rea points out, 'one very plausible consequence of even a very modest doctrine of divine transcendence is that we have no revelation-independent conception of divine love' (Rea 2015: 224). Though perfect being theology has been useful to theologians, intuitions will need to be subjected to and corrected by what God says about God's nature and actions. Veronika Weidner recognizes two forms of perfect being theology in the tradition: classic perfect being theology and personal perfect being theology (Weidner 2021: 37). The former being consistent with the classical theism outlined above, and the latter being the method utilized by Schellenberg and others. The relevance of this distinction to the hiddenness argument is that 'if the view that God is a personal perfect being is not the primary claim shared by all elaborations of theism, then the hiddenness argument (even if otherwise sound) does not prove that the God of theism does not exist, and thus does not prove that theism is false' (Weidner 2021: 37). To prove that the God of personal perfect being theology does not exist would do very little to undermine the belief in the God of traditional Christian theism, as the classical understanding of God rests on assumptions significantly different from the theism Schellenberg writes against. Thus, one's understanding of perfect parental love, friendship, or any other intimate bond between finite beings cannot be applied univocally to God's love for human beings in a way that would support the truth of premise 2.

A Lingering Problem

Although a proper understanding of classical Christian theism may undermine the persuasiveness of the hiddenness argument, a problem still remains when we examine the way in which the Christian God claims to relate to finite beings in Scripture. Perhaps, if we keep in mind God's transcendence and allow revelation to guide our understanding of God, it is reasonable to think that divine hiddenness is compatible with the existence of a God who is not only perfectly loving, but *love itself* (1 John 4:8). While it is certainly reasonable to think that an explanation of this compatibility is far beyond what finite human minds could understand (Nagasawa 2015: 258), many religious believers will feel that some explanation should be and is available. This feeling, rather than reflecting ignorance of God's self-revelation, can easily emerge from reading various passages of the Bible. Throughout the Christian Scriptures, God leads us to believe that there is an openness to a redemptive relationship with all human beings. St. Peter writes, 'The Lord is not slack concerning His promise... but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). St. John declares that '[Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole

world' (1 John 2:2). Even in the Old Testament, where God's covenantal focus on the nation of Israel seems to imply that God is not particularly concerned with all people, subtly shows God's intention to bless the entire world through the Hebrew people. Renewing the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 22, the Angel of the Lord states, 'in your offspring shall *all the nations of the earth* be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.'

So, although we have a plausible account of why we shouldn't expect to fully understand how a transcendent God loves and relates to human beings, Christian theism retains an uneasy tension with the phenomena of divine hiddenness. There is, however, a crucial difference between the hiddenness of the Christian God and the God of unrestricted perfect being theology.

On Schellenberg's view, God *must* be open to a relationship with any capable person at any time and *cannot* do anything to hinder the initiation and flourishing of that relationship. He makes this point clearly in an earlier presentation of the hiddenness argument, written in the form of a dialogue:

So the *possibility* of some form of personal relationship is always going to be there. Now someone might say that we have to understand talk of God's love different here. But... I think such a claim forgets that these features of love are precisely those (or among those) that we consider to be great-making properties. (Schellenberg 2002: 43)

On the contrary, Christian theists have good reason to believe that God may *temporarily* be closed off to relationships to certain finite persons and may, for a time, *intentionally* make it difficult or even impossible for a relationship to exist between God and certain human beings. This temporary closedness is expressed as God's hiddenness or silence. If it is the case that a loving God can have a good reason to be temporarily closed off from personal relationships with humans, then the phenomena of divine hiddenness will not be incompatible, or even unexpected, with the existence of the Christian God.

The Hiddenness of the Covenantal God

In Christian Scripture, we see many examples in which God's relationship to human beings is far more complicated than simply being open to and engaging in personal loving relationship. God, especially in his relations with the people of Israel, is consistently having to interact with humans as they tragically misunderstand, ignore, and rebel against him while engaging in idolatry. Correcting these mistakes often involves more than simply communicating the truth and waiting for people to respond correctly. In many cases, God spoke through prophets who, despite proclaiming the truth about God and rightly condemning the people's sin, were often ignored and

persecuted. Additionally, God's *redemptive* and *eschatological* plans for humanity involved elevating long term goods over the short term. In order to bring people into intimate, mature, and long-lasting relationships, God would refrain from revealing himself for a time, and even allow them to suffer a great deal by withholding his presence.

This pattern of withholding divine presence in order to bring about certain future goods is especially clear in God's dealing with the Israelites. Summarizing the narrative of the Old Testament scriptures, biblical scholar N.T. Wright states, 'This pattern – God intending to live among his people, being unable to because of their rebellion, but coming back in grace to do so at last – is, in a measure, the story of the whole Old Testament' (Wright 2012: 88). For example, throughout the book of Judges, God routinely turns away from his people and subjugates them to great suffering in response to their idolatry, only to use this as a means to deliver them and bring them back into relationship with him. Duvall and Hays identify the cycle that runs through the book of Judges: 'the people worship idols, a foreign power invades and oppresses Israel, God raises up a judge to deliver Israel, often empowering that judge through the Spirit of the Lord; then the people turn to foreign gods again' (Duvall and Hays 2019: 61). Unfortunately, this example presents a disappointing pattern in which God seems unable to sustain his people in a continuing relationship with him. However, as the Old Testament narratives continues to unfold, it becomes clear that God has further plans to relate to his people, and that the cycle of disobedience, judgment, and deliverance is intended to communicate something about God to the immature Hebrew people.

In 1–2 Samuel, God's presence with Israel is focused primarily on the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. This is a place where the transcendent God is said to dwell in a particularly intense way with the people, so much so that the presence must be hidden away in the deepest chamber of the Temple. God's dwelling in the midst of the people in this way signifies their holiness and unique relationship with God, fulfilling in part what was promised by the Mosaic covenant: 'You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine' (Leviticus 20:26); 'And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Leviticus 26:12). At this stage in Israel's history, the nation has been organized under a central government, secured itself as one united people, and renewed its covenantal relationship with God. However, things soon go wrong. In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelite army brings the Ark into battle against the Philistines without first consulting the Lord. It seems 'they assumed that they can manipulate God to give them a similar victory' to that of Joshua, who led the Israelites into the land generations ago (Duvall and Hays 2019: 69). Despite all revelation to the contrary,

the Israelites had come to imagine God as a deity who could be controlled by using the very objects of worship God had given to them. As a result, God allowed the Philistine army to prevail and carry the Ark away, signifying the loss of divine presence as a consequence of their idolatrous mistake (1 Samuel 5). In this way, God becomes effectively 'hidden' from the Israelites such that they are incapable of having a mutual, reciprocal, and personal relationship with God. Despite the loss of God's presence, this episode represents how God's intention was to temporarily cut himself off from the Jewish people in order to correct their theological errors and restore them to a proper relationship. Through the loss and eventual restoration of God's presence in the Ark, the Israelites learn that 'the power presence of God cannot be manipulated or controlled... God's presence brings wonderful blessings of peace and prosperity on Israel, but only on his terms' (Duvall and Hays 2019: 69). Moreover, the God of Israel teaches an important lesson to the Philistine aggressors in the story. The Philistines, incorrectly believing that they had defeated the God of Israel and could claim the covenantal blessings by bringing the Ark into their own land, were afflicted with a plague of tumors, and the Philistine god Dagon was effectively 'executed' with the supernatural destruction of the idol representing him (1 Samuel 5) (Duvall and Hays 2019: 69). The Philistines eventually pay tribute to the God of Israel and return the Ark to the Jews (1 Samuel 6). This gives us a clear example in which God intentionally withdraws his presence, temporarily removing the possibility of having a personal relationship with the people he loves, with the purpose of improving their understanding of God's character and overall improving the relationship between them.

A similar theme runs through what is perhaps the most tragic event in the biblical history of Israel, the Babylonian Exile (2 Chronicles 36:17-21). Following the steady spiritual decline of Israel and Judah after the reign of King David, the Jewish people are overwhelmingly given up to sin and idolatry. The exile comes as 'divine retribution, the warning and then the implementation of banishment from God's relational presence as a result of disobedience and sin' (Duvall and Hays 2019: 84). Not only would the majority of the people be removed from the Holy Land, but the symbols of God's presence in the land (the Temple and the Ark) were permitted to be destroyed. The prophet Ezekiel, who was led into exile with the rest of the Judah, 'experiences the shock of seeing the divine glory rise up and leave the temple (Ezekiel 10:18-22)' (Moore 2012: 168). The exile serves as God's indictment on the Israelites for their failure to uphold the terms of the covenant that conditioned the relationship between them. By giving themselves over to wickedness and idolatry, the people had effectively removed themselves from God's loving presence and wrecked their relationship with God. In order to communicate the seriousness of the offense, God

brought judgement on the nation through a literal removal from the presence of God in the Holy Land.

Yet even this most terrible manifestation of God's judgment toward his covenant people is not divorced from divine love and a desire to restore the relationship that was lost. Immediately after the author of 2 Chronicles documents the seventy-year exile, he informs the reader that God was active in the exilic prophet Jeremiah and King Cyrus of Persia (2 Chronicles 26:22-23). After a period of harsh judgement and punishment for sin, the people had learned to be faithful to God in exile, without the cultic institutions which they were so prone to abuse. The prophets during the exile, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel, taught the remaining Jews to repent for their sins and consecrate themselves to their Lord. After seventy years, God compelled King Cyrus send the Jews back to the land to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. B.T. Arnold explains that 'the long awaited return from exile in Babylonia is described as a miraculous event comparable to the crossing of the Red Sea (Is. 51:9-11)' (Arnold 2012: 57).

The post-exile prophets Ezra and Nehemiah record the return and reconstruction of the Temple, but the resulting situation 'seems to be a far cry from the glorious return and restoration under a Davidic king that was prophesied in the prophets and implied in the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7' (Duvall and Hays 2019: 87). Not only is there an obvious absence of any Davidic king and continued foreign rule by the Persians (and eventually the Greeks and Romans), but God's intense relational presence is apparently no longer found in the restored Temple. As N.T. Wright observes, 'The whole of what we call the Second Temple period, roughly 580 BC onward, is characterized by this sense of divine absence; God is gone, and he hasn't come back' (Wright 2012: 89). It is reported in Ezra 3:12 that 'many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid...' This apparent lack of God's presence among the post-exilic community sheds light on the New Covenant prophecy given by Jeremiah during the exile:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it one their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least

of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

So, in the exile narrative, we have a clear example in which God intentionally breaks off the possibility of open relationship with his people. Though this punishment comes as a consequence of sin and idolatry, God intends to restore his people back to a right relationship with him through it. God effectively purges the theological errors of his people through the exile, making it clear that he is not the sort of God that cannot be manipulated, defeated, or ignored. Additionally, God continues to withhold his relational presence from the Israelites in order to prepare them for a future covenantal relationship that will be greater than the one that existed between God and pre-exile Israel. This will ultimately be fulfilled in the greatest manifestation of God's presence among his people: the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

These examples from the Old Testament are meant to show that God not only has good reasons for withholding his presence at times, but that he can perform some of the most loving redemptive acts through the experience of divine hiddenness. A loving God would not be content to leave people with erroneous and immature beliefs about himself. And simply communicating propositional truth to contradict human error would be insufficient to bring about meaningful, lasting change. As Weidner points out, modern cognitive science seems to suggest that mere propositional evidence is rarely sufficient to change people's beliefs about God (Weidner 2021: 21). With these examples in mind, I will, in the next section, explore how the intentional hiddenness of God in Christian Scripture may help illuminate contemporary experiences of divine hiddenness.

Reasons for Divine Hiddenness

Based on the examples of God's interactions with the Israelites outlined above, we can begin to see a pattern that will help us make sense of why God permits the experience of divine hiddenness and silence. God cares about the ways in which we come to have knowledge about him and the quality of our relationship with him. As Peter Van Inwagen recognizes, 'the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence* does not entail the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence and He does not care why anyone who believes in Him has this belief* (Van Inwagen 2002: 31). For the Israelites to continue to believe in God and persist in the minimal requirements of the Jewish religion was clearly insufficient to qualify as a meaningful, loving relationship (Amos 5:22). Mere cognitive assent is not enough, because a loving personal God like the God of Christianity desires internal transformation and deep, lasting intimacy with his people. It seems, then, that God will at times withhold his presence, close himself off to a reciprocal relationship with his people, and allow

them to suffer the consequences. However, as shown above, this is always done for the purpose of rebuking and correcting the religious errors of those God's people, and restoring them into a greater relationship than that which existed before. Based on this Old Testament pattern, the following principle arises: At a time, t , it could be that believing in God for a bad reason or engaging in religious activity with poor motives is ultimately a worse state of affairs than not believing in God at all. In other words, it would be better for God to prevent a relationship with a person at t if that person's current disposition is such that he would develop mistaken, immature, and/or immoral reasons for believing in and worshipping God.

I propose that this principle provides a good explanation for why God often appears to be hidden or silent to believers and nonbelievers today. This explanation is a theodicy, in which God permits a non-desirable state of affairs as a means to bringing about a better state of affairs than would have obtained if he had not. Similar to the Israelites, modern Christians have poorly informed, immature, and even blasphemous beliefs about God. As Paul Moser explains,

Oversimplifications of God (for example, as merely sentimental, friendly, harsh, or distant) can be similarly obscuring, in a way that enables us to make a self-controllable idol of 'God' (where 'God' is not the true God) ... Our knowledge *about* God and quest for it threaten to become idols if divorced from reconciling, filial knowledge of God as Lord. (Moser 2002: 129)

The idea that correcting these mistakes might be a loving motivation for God to withhold himself from believers can be found in the writing of St. John of the Cross in the 16th century: 'God very rightly and discreetly *and lovingly* denies this satisfaction to these beginners. If he did not, they would gall into innumerable evils... This is why it is important for these beginners to enter the dark night and be purged of this childishness' (cited in Coakley 2015: 229). The language St. John of the Cross uses, often referring to 'the dark night of the soul', echoes the haunting warning of the prophet Micah to the leaders of Israel, "Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you... the sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them... for there is no answer from God' (Micah 3:6-7). This retraction of relational presence, however, serves as an informative act by God to correct religious errors and ultimately bring about the best sort of relationship he could have with individuals.

In what ways do religious believers today engage in a sort of idolatry that might warrant God's temporary absence as a means to rebuking and correcting these false beliefs? According to Pew Research, religion, particularly Christianity, has been in sharp decline over the past several decades in Western culture. One survey revealed

that, as of 2019, ‘65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians... down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009’ (Pew Research Center 2020b). Research focused on the shifting religious landscape in Germany reveals an even more dramatic change. ‘Protestants represented a majority (59%) of Germany’s population in 1950, with Catholics as a sizable minority (37%) ... Over the next 60 years, the share of Protestants fell 30 percentage points, while the share of Catholics dropped 7 points’ (Pew Research Center 2020c). Although theistic religion remains dominant despite this decline, with Christianity as the most popular expression, the picture becomes bleaker when examining the specific theological beliefs of Christians in the West.

Research conducted by Lifeway Research revealed the following about American Christians: 23% disagree with the statement that God is a perfect being; 65% agree that God accepts the worship of all religions; 55% agree with the Arian heresy that Jesus is a created being; 51% believe that Jesus is not God; 36% agree that God always rewards faith with material and monetary blessings; and 54% agree that religious belief is a matter of opinion rather than objective truth (Lifeway Research and Ligonier Ministries 2020). A similar survey in the United Kingdom showed that just 22% affirm that God is a perfect being, and only 20% agree that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a real historical event (Lifeway Research and Ligonier Ministries 2018). When it comes to Christian morality in areas such as sexual ethics, Pew Research reveals that

Half of Christians say that casual sex – defined in the survey as sex between consenting adults who are not in a committed romantic relationship – is sometimes [32%] or always [18%] acceptable. Six-in-ten Catholics (62%) take this view, as do 56% of Protestants in the historically black tradition, 54% of mainline Protestants and 36% of evangelical Protestants. (Pew Research Center 2020a)

What these statistics demonstrate is that something more than a decline in religious belief has occurred in our culture. Even those who continue to identify as Christian have, in many ways, departed from an orthodox understanding of the Christian faith. I think, given this data, it is fair to say that in the religious imagination of Western Christians, many have erected an idol in the place of the Christian God. Analogous to the ancient Israelites, a large portion of the church has turned from the covenantal God of Christianity, while still maintaining the external signs of religious adherence. The god that has risen to popularity in the West is one that overlooks sin, respects the unrestricted autonomy of human beings, is largely concerned

with making people happy as a reward for their hard work, and makes few demands on what one ought to believe and how one ought to worship.

Paul Moser insightfully diagnosis the problem as *cognitive idolatry*. ‘Cognitive idolatry denies God’s supremacy in recommending ways of knowing God. Just as God is properly supreme in the area of recommending ways of human *action*, so also God merits supremacy in prescribing ways of *knowing*’ (Moser 2002: 130). Moser writes elsewhere, ‘Many people proceed as if we have a right to know God on our preferred terms. This is, however, nothing more than a self-serving assumption. Nothing requires that God supply knowledge of God on our preferred terms’ (Moser 2002: 126). It seems that cognitive idolatry has been a consistent issue throughout the history of Christianity, and plagues the religious thought of many Christians today. Moreover, positive religious experiences can serve to reinforced mistaken ideas about God. Recognizing this danger, Porter and Rickabaugh point out that ‘because spiritual formation existentially validates our views of the spiritual life, it is loving of God to withhold formation from us when to bring about our formation would only confirm and reinforce a distorted understanding of himself, ourselves, and what a maturing relationship... actually involves’ (Porter and Rickabaugh 2018: 127). And so, in order to protect people from their own tendency toward cognitive idolatry, God places conditions on the experience of his relational presence to some extent, so as to not validate mistaken religious belief.

This sort of idolatry is sufficiently similar to that of Israel recorded in the Old Testament. The Jews had become lax in the moral demands of Mosaic Covenant, worshipped false gods, and continued to engage in the bare minimum expectations of the sacrificial system without any inner disposition to true repentance or worship. These and other problems made it necessary for God to withhold his relational presence from Israel in condemnation of their religious errors and abuses, and allow them to suffer the consequences (Micah 3:1-7). What I am proposing here is that God could continue to utilize this pattern of withdrawal, correction, and redemption, and that this might explain the phenomena of God’s apparent hiddenness today. Relating this back to the hiddenness argument, the biblical portrayal of how God interacts with people undermines premise 2 of the argument. It is not the case that ‘for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a positive meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with *S* at *t*’. If what is described above is true for the Christian understanding of God, then at least for Christian theism God has good reason to, in some instances, be closed to a personal relationship with some finite persons. As Moser explains, ‘God refuses, for our own good, to become a mere idol of our cognition, speculation, or entertainment. We exhibit self-destructive arrogance in assuming that we can have proper knowledge

of God without undergoing deep, even painful, moral transformation' (Moser 2002: 138). In Hud Hudson's novel, *A Groteque in the Garden*, the angelic character Tesque points to this sort of reasoning when he states,

Finally, if I were forced to take sides with these guesses from your theologians and philosophers, I would hold that with those who say He wants your rebellious kind to fully appreciate how awful things are when (with His absence) He reluctantly grants your fallen request to exist on your own terms without obedience to Him, all for the purpose of properly preparing you to cooperate in reconciliation through His mysterious plan of atonement, a plan the details of which I cannot understand... (Hudson 2020: 32)

Objection 1

One might naturally wonder why God goes through all this trouble in order to correct human ignorance and idolatry. Surely, being omniscient and omnipotent, God could make himself known in more obvious ways that don't require the pattern of presence, rebellion, absence, restoration, and so on. This is correct. God could choose to disclose revelation and teach his people in whatever way he chooses. However, the point remains that God retains the prerogative to teach people in whatever way he sees fit. Though God could put on miraculous displays to constantly remind each person of his presence and regularly intervene in very obvious ways to correct theological errors, it could simply be the case that God has decided that this is not a preferable means of instruction. Additionally, if we accept the common distinction between knowledge *de dicto* and *de re*, it is easy to see that God would prefer to lead individuals to *de re* knowledge of himself. Schellenberg resists the idea that there could be anything to be gained by God's temporary hiddenness that could not otherwise be had through an open relationship with God.

For any good improving the lives of finite persons that might seem to require God to be for a time closed to relationship with us, there has to be a way for us to achieve that good, or a good of that type, in and perhaps precisely *through* relationship with God... no one could ever become more acquainted with such finite goods than by becoming more fully acquainted, and in a personal way, with God. (Schellenberg 2015b: 47–48)

Taking knowledge of God to be one of these goods, I would agree that any knowledge *de dicto* can be made available in and through relationship with God. However, if God sees our *de re* knowledge of himself as valuable, and part of that experiential knowledge involves knowing what it is like when God is absent and how serious the sin of idolatry is, then such knowledge is only attainable if God withholds a loving relationship with humans for a time.

Is the sort of knowledge described above intrinsically good to have and conducive to deeper interpersonal relationships? I think so. One of Schellenberg's preferred analogies for divine love, parent-child relationships, illustrates this well. Imagine a bratty pre-teen, John, who, due to his own foolishness, underappreciates his mother and all the many loving acts she performs for him. John decides one day, in a fit of unwarranted anger, to run away from home. John doesn't get very far in his escape attempt, and sets up a temporary shelter in the woods behind his house. The mother, seeing this, decides not to intervene and allows John to 'run away'. She has, after all, repeatedly told her son all that she does for him and how much she loves him, but he has failed to comprehend this fact. John stations himself so close to the home that the mother can see him from the back window. The mother can keep a close eye on John and provide for him if needed, while remaining at a distance so as to not further upset him. Over the course of the next day or so, John comes to realize that many of the services he took for granted are no longer available to him. No one prepares his breakfast in the morning; his clothes have not been washed and begin to stink; no one is around to kiss him goodnight; and all of the other wonderful deeds mothers do for their children are now absent from John's life. As a result of this experience, John humbly returns from his childish escapade and apologizes to his mother. Over the next few weeks, John's relationship with his mother improves as he has become more appreciative of all that she does for him and realizes how much his mother loves him.

In this analogy, John comes to learn *de re* what his mother had been trying to communicate *de dicto*. This came about through a temporary absence of any personal relationship. John comes to see just how awful his life is without his mom, and that experience contributes to a better relationship with her. And for the mom's part, though she did allow John to go off on his own, she was able to observe and protect her son while he was off on his own (analogous to God's omnipresence). This analogy is meant to demonstrate that experiential and personal knowledge requires the sort of interpersonal interaction that comes as a result of not only presence, but absence as well. And it is the same lesson that can be observed in the biblical passages discussed above. It is often the case that we do not truly understand the value of other people until they are no longer with us. If we can apply this analogously to human relationships with God, the experience of God's hiddenness and how awful things are without him can serve as an informative experience through which God improves our knowledge and our relationship with him. As Sarah Coakley points out, 'what *appears* to be divine "hiding" is actually a unique form of divine self-disclosure for the purposes of redemption; but the recognition of this redemptive undertaking involves a transformative process of human response that is both subtle and enormously demanding' (Coakley 2015: 230).

Objection 2

It could be objected that, while this explanation for divine hiddenness may be applicable to those who have access to God's special revelation and the meet the necessary preconditions to comprehend and respond to it, this still leaves unanswered the problem of nonresistant nonbelievers. However, I think the principles outlined above can be adapted to these cases as well. Recall that I defended the idea that, at a time, t , it could be that believing in God for a bad reason could be a worse state of affairs than not believing in God at all. Given possibilities about future contingents that only God can know, it could be that these bad reasons will eventually manifest themselves in religious immaturity, idolatry, clerical abuse, or even apostasy. This provided justification to think that God cuts off relationships with humans in order to course-correct the trajectory of their spiritual development, similar to what he did with the Israelites.

It seems easy to imagine that, having perfect counterfactual knowledge, God could choose to hold off on even initiating a relationship with a particular person if he knows that, were the relationship to begin at $t-1$, the result would be disastrous, whereas beginning the relationship at some later $t-2$ would yield more positive results. However, the objector could point out that there are cases in which individuals die without ever having received revelation from God or been prompted to seek a relationship with him (i.e. remote villages without access to Scripture or missionaries). These are troubling cases, and I can only offer a brief and speculative solution here.

Schellenberg argues that God must *always* be open to a relationship with all humans at any time. I have argued that God often is open, but can sometimes be *temporarily* closed off to, relationships with all humans. I think Schellenberg and I would agree that God is at least obligated to be open to a relationship and make himself known to each human at *some time* during his/her existence. This evidently does not always occur during each individual's life on earth. So, I propose that something like the possibility of post-mortem conversation might fill in the gap here for Christian theism. Though a departure from the majority opinion in the Christian tradition, the idea that God could reveal himself (or at least provide some evidence that could be acted upon) in the afterlife and permit human conversion after death would deal with this issue of nonresistant nonbelievers.

Jason Marsh has proposed an argument along these lines, speculating that God knows some individuals are conditioned in such a way that they would not freely believe in God unless they had access to something as clear and decisive as the beatific vision of God in the afterlife (Weidner 2021: 34). Therefore, God waits to make himself known until after the conclusion of their earthly life, thus making it possible for them to respond to God in the best possible circumstances. And if something like

Molinism is true, God could have actualized a world in which all those nonresistant nonbelievers who fit this description make up those people groups who lack sufficient resources for coming to belief in God in this life. Another view of postmortem conversion has been offered by James Beilby in his recent book, *Postmortem Opportunity*. He argues from a distinctly Arminian standpoint that since God desires all to be saved, and being saved requires an opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel, and some people do not receive a premortem opportunity to do so, God will provide a postmortem opportunity for them (Beilby 2021: 78–79).

A fuller explanation and defense of post-mortem conversation is necessary if it to be taken seriously as an option for Christians, but cannot be provided within the scope of this essay.

Conclusion

My response to the problem of divine hiddenness is two-fold. First it challenges the assumptions of Schellenberg's conception of theism, demonstrating that his argument (at best) would only undermine belief the God of personal perfect being theology. This, of course, leaves Christian theism unaffected. Second, I have articulated a theodicy that attempts to account for the hiddenness and silence of God for Christian theism, taking the biblical narrative of God's dealings with the Israelite people as a primary example of why God might have morally sufficient reasons for allowing the experience of divine hiddenness among believers and nonbeliever. This theodicy falls into the 'Axiarchism' family of responses to anti-theistic arguments, in which 'God allows the occurrence of a state of affairs insofar it adds to the moral or aesthetic value of the world overall' (Weidner 2021: 35). I have shown that God can bring about an overall better state of affairs by being temporarily closed to personal relationships with certain humans than he could by always being open to personal relationships. Moreover, I have shown that it is precisely through divine hiddenness that God can impart certain *de re* knowledge that would be unattainable otherwise. In sum, I have articulated a theodicy demonstrating that divine hiddenness is neither incompatible, nor unexpected, with the truth of Christian theism.

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