

Do the demographics of theistic belief disconfirm theism? A reply to Maitzen

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Abstract: In his article entitled ‘Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism’ (*Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), 177–191), Stephen Maitzen draws our attention to an important feature that is often overlooked in discussion about the argument from divine hiddenness (ADH). His claim is that an uneven distribution of theistic belief (and not just the mere existence of non-belief) provides an atheological challenge that cannot likely be overcome. After describing what I take to be the most pressing feature of the problem, I argue that a hidden premise causes Maitzen to overlook a Molinist solution. The upshot is a softening of the atheological import of the demographic data.

Introduction

Belief in God appears to be a rather lopsided phenomenon: large pockets of the world’s population are chock-full of believers, whereas other pockets are chock-full of non-believers. To use an example cited by Stephen Maitzen,¹ while Saudi Arabia is approximately 95 per cent Muslim (and so 95 per cent theistic) Thailand is 95 per cent Buddhist (and so no more than 5 per cent theistic). Patchy belief-patterns such as these, suggests Maitzen, would be very puzzling if a loving God exists and wants to enter into a relationship with everyone, but rather unsurprising given naturalism – which scores another point for the hypothesis of indifference and casts doubt on the existence of a being who loves all nations, tongues, and tribes equally.

More precisely, Maitzen suggests that the demographic data about belief in God (a) confound theistic explanation; (b) invite naturalistic explanation; (c) indicate that there probably isn’t any such thing as an innate *sensus divinitatis*; and (d) reveal ADH to be more severe, in many ways, than the evidential argument from evil. These are serious claims, though I will restrict my focus to (a). My proposal is that a hidden assumption, to be spelled out momentarily, causes Maitzen to overlook a Molinist account of the geographic disparity of theistic

belief: one that exemplifies God's benevolence towards those in non-theistic regions.

My formulation of the argument

The best way to unpack the assumption I am after is to put Maitzen's basic argument into premise form.

- P1 If a perfectly loving and powerful God exists, we should not expect to see an uneven distribution of theistic belief around the world.
- P2 But many people are seriously disadvantaged or advantaged by geographic factors, which largely determine whether they will come to believe in God.
- P3 Although no one has offered, or likely could offer, a theistic explanation for the striking differences just noted, the same data invite very plausible naturalistic explanations.
- C1 The demographics of theism defy theistic explanation and make it unlikely that a loving God exists.

Implicit premise

Maitzen's argument seems to require something like the following claim:

Hidden premise (HP) Had the individuals that make up non-theistic regions been born into a theistic context they would have been more likely to believe and thus to experience a loving relationship with God.

HP seems to be implied, first of all, by various naturalistic explanations Maitzen considers, which have it that the Dalai Lama, for instance, would very likely have been a Muslim or a Christian had he been born and raised in Mecca or in Rome. But even if that's wrong (perhaps Maitzen would deny the essentialist claim that the Dalai Lama could have been born elsewhere) his argument does, it seems to me, suppose that HP is a likely theistic view: those in non-theistic regions would have been better off had God placed them elsewhere in the world.

Now on the face of it the first part of HP is plausible enough. There is normally a strong correlation between belief and context, such that we can often say that we would have believed differently about x under circumstances y . But that only shows that more people might have become theists, which isn't sufficient for Maitzen's purposes. Since one might question the overall value of belief that does not result in proper affections toward God, what Maitzen requires is the second part of HP – which states that the relevant persons are disadvantaged in their ability to enter into a loving relationship with God.

The most vital question before us, then, does not concern the demographics of theistic belief *per se*, but rather whether a theistic context would have helped the

individuals in question to form a relationship with God. And although it is tempting to suppose that it would have, further reflection reveals the matter to be controversial: even granting that theistic belief is necessary for a loving relationship with God, it may not, in a good number of cases, render a relationship with God more likely. It wouldn't do so, for instance, for anyone who would refuse to display positive affections toward God, even had they been placed in a theistic context.

Of course, all things being equal, a theistic environment is a good thing – a gift or blessing which makes it more likely that one will come to love God. But why should we presume that all things are equal in the present case? That is, why should we assume that an alternate set of circumstances would automatically benefit many or most of those who have been born into predominately non-theistic regions? The supposition that it would, I suggest, requires that the following two claims are unlikely, given theism:

- (1) There are some persons who would refuse to love God no matter what geographic circumstance they found themselves in.
- (2) God has middle knowledge.

This is important because if (1) and (2) are plausible theistic claims, then God has good reasons to group together the individuals spoken of in (1) – reasons that, as we shall see, benefit these individuals.

The grouping strategy²

Although Maitzen is concerned about differences in rates of theistic belief around the world, as mentioned in the previous section, the most pressing worry seems to be whether any individuals have been excluded from a loving relationship with God on account of their geographic circumstances. The Molinist strategy proposes a negative answer to that question, which goes roughly as follows.

First, it notes a group of persons who God knew would fail to reciprocate His love, regardless of the earthly circumstances in which they were situated. These individuals display what we might call a trans-cultural or trans-circumstantial unwillingness to accept God's love in their natural lives and so cannot really be robbed of the opportunity for a relationship with God. A bit more precisely, there are persons P that are such that, no matter what creative act God had performed, if Ps had existed, Ps would have freely rejected God in their earthly lives.

Second, the Molinist strategy suggests that those genuinely deprived of the opportunity to believe in God in this world belong to the group of persons just mentioned. (Notice that this does *not* mean that everyone who currently resides in non-theistic regions belongs to this group, for not everyone in non-theistic regions lacks genuine opportunity to believe in God.)

So why does God group the non-believers in question together? Knowing that these individuals wouldn't come to love Him short of something like a beatific vision, God sequesters them in order to secure their eventual conversion: since these are presumably only accountable for how they respond to God in the actual world, their lack of opportunity to believe is intended to keep them from developing negative affections toward God. God's decision for remaining at an epistemic distance, then, (which largely cashes out in terms of the geographic circumstances in which they are placed) is to keep these individuals innocent for a later time, when they will be in a position truly to love God – which, once again, might require a beatific vision, where divine love transforms them directly.

Now that the basic strategy has been presented, it should become clear that Maitzen is not thinking along Molinist lines when he writes as follows: 'Even if it gets [soteriologically] smoothed out in the end, why does the distribution of belief start out so lopsided and in just the kind of patterns we would expect if such natural forces as culture and politics alone were driving it?'³ By failing to consider the issue through Molinist lenses, Maitzen fails to see that a certain degree of lopsidedness, far from an oversight on God's part, may be the providential mechanism through which things get smoothed out in the end. As a result his claim that no theistic reply likely 'could overcome the challenge posed by the uneven distribution of belief around the world',⁴ seems premature at best: at least with respect to those who fail to believe on account of being placed in a non-theistic region, a theistic hypothesis seems to be within reach.⁵

So what about those non-believers who find themselves in theistic contexts? Why didn't God also hide these individuals away in order to quicken their conversion periods in the future state? One response is that it would have been unfeasible for God to do so. That is, given certain constraints God may not have been able to have done better with the grouping strategy than is reflected in the actual world. In particular, it seems likely that a certain amount of non-belief in various populations would function to encourage and maintain belief in those populations, such that without it there would have been less, perhaps much less, by way of genuine belief in the world. What's more, as long as God's final victory over evil is taken to mean that salvation will eventually be achieved by all I cannot see how any of this would be unfair to any of the individuals just mentioned.⁶

Objections

Before concluding, I will briefly consider two objections that have been put to me and which, I think, deserve a response.

First objection

There are some empirical data that challenge your proposed account. Missionaries do sometimes succeed in converting whole populations to one theistic religion or another,

in which case those populations can't be too inherently incapable or unwilling to believe. Your Molinist position needs to explain why such people convert at all.

The claim here is that certain missiological data pose a problem, but I can't see why Molinists should be surprised to find that certain populations convert wholesale. God could know via His middle knowledge that certain persons, if grouped together, would respond collectively to missionary activity, which is to say that the grouping strategy cuts in more than one direction. Indeed the lesson to be learned here is that we should never assume of any particular non-believer or group of non-believers that they will remain non-believers throughout their natural lives: we simply lack God's middle knowledge perspective on these matters.

Second objection

While your account is logically consistent with the data, I have my doubts about how well it stacks up against the naturalistic alternatives – which provide much less complicated and so more plausible explanations. Naturalism still makes the demographics of theistic belief much less surprising than theism.

The crux of this objection states that the Molinist strategy at best functions as a sort of Plantingian defence rather than a traditional theodicy or even something in between: it leaves us with a broadly logical possibility, but doesn't give us a serious hypothesis for why certain people fail to believe.

Response

Now I admit that the Molinist strategy is more than a little bit messy and I don't claim to have provided the whole solution to demographics puzzles here.⁷ Even so, we might expect a certain degree of messiness if God is trying to save the world through grouping tactics and has to deal with various constraints along the way. Indeed, it's not quite fair to say that naturalistic explanations are more straightforward than Molinist ones. For if a loving God exists (in which case reality is not indifferent towards us), and if humans are psychologically complex (in which case we may not always be easy to form relationships with), then theistic explanations by their very nature will have more to account for than their naturalistic counterparts. That is, while naturalistic explanations can stop after they have worked out the contextual details regarding belief-formation, theistic explanations further need to explore how God might use these naturalistic factors for the benefit of human beings.

One final point: although I suspect that the Molinist strategy offers an initially plausible theistic account of the demographics of theism, it may be sufficient that such a story might be true. That is, even if the distribution of belief in God turns out to be much more probable on naturalism than on theism, so that philosophers can do little more than conjure up just-so stories vis-à-vis God's

ways, there is still the question of whether this would count all that much against theism. In the first instance there is the rather difficult issue of whether theism is as probable as ontological naturalism on the whole – if it is, the demographics of theism in themselves presumably wouldn't disconfirm theism. But even if theism could be shown to be improbable with respect to what we know inferentially, including the demographics in question, this would not necessarily count all that much against belief in God. To use Plantinga's phrase, as long as theistic belief can be had in the basic way, it may not require a degree of evidence or explanatory power that is superior or even equal to that of naturalism; it might be sufficient that theism weren't vastly improbable with respect to our public evidence. Thus, if Maitzen wants to suggest that the geographic version of ADH rationally undermines theistic belief in addition to presenting theism with a puzzling phenomenon, he ought to consider whether it carries more epistemic weight than all of the inferential and non-inferential grounds in favour of belief in God.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the most urgent question surrounding the disparity of theistic belief around the world is whether those dissuaded from belief in God on account of their geographic circumstances would have been more likely to believe and to develop love for God under different circumstances. Although Maitzen implicitly assumes the answer to be 'Yes', Molinists should have deep misgivings here: if there are individuals whose unwillingness to love God transcends their geographic circumstances, then God would know this ahead of time and would have reason to soften their condition by grouping them together in the actual world. What this means, in other words, is that Maitzen's worry about certain isolated groups is ultimately reducible to a worry about individuals that a middle-knowledge analysis can arguably come to terms with.

As for whether or not the above account stacks up against the naturalistic alternatives that Maitzen favours, this remains to be seen, though surely it is premature to conclude that demographics of theism 'confound theistic explanation', let alone provide a defeater for theistic belief.⁸

Notes

1. Stephen Maitzen 'Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism', *Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), 177–191.
2. Although this is in part pre-figured by William Lane Craig's middle-knowledge response to the soteriological problem of evil, significant differences between the two approaches will present themselves in due course.
3. Maitzen 'Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism', 184–185.
4. *Ibid.*, 177.

5. Of course many questions remain. Leaving aside the current dispute about the tenability of Molinism, it may be that upon further reflection (1) will turn out to be too strong. In that case, Molinists might consider defending a slightly weaker formulation of (1), such as (1*), which proposes that for each individual there is some world in which she would have come to believe in and love God short of experiencing the divine directly, but that these worlds were relatively few in number and that none of them contained more good-making properties overall than the actual world.
6. As for whether the eventual responses of non-believers would be free, I am inclined to think that the answer is yes. But even if that's wrong, there is still the prospect that God would transform the wills of non-believers directly, providing them with a degree of grace that is irresistibly attractive. Now I am aware that many Molinists, including Craig, would find such a notion problematic, though I have yet to see these adequately defend the idea that human freedom is ultimately more valuable than salvation or that a loving God would actualize a world in which a good portion of the population – perhaps most of the human race – would remain perpetually lost. To be sure, while Craig notes in a different context that the actual world might contain an optimal balance between the saved and the lost, the fact that so many remain lost on his view would arguably keep him from adequately responding to Maitzen's version of ADH. For it is one thing to say that God uses the grouping strategy as a means to secure the salvation of those He currently hides from, and quite another thing to imply that all of the individuals He genuinely hides from in this life have been known from eternity to be without salvation. In the former case, one can say with full confidence that God is perfectly loving, whereas in the latter case this becomes much more difficult and, some might say, unfeasible. For this reason, I invite more Molinists to consider that all will be saved and to approach the argument from hiddenness from such an outlook. For Craig's view see, William Lane Craig 'No other name: a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), 172–188.
7. Some might wonder, for instance, whether a God with omnipotence at his disposal couldn't actualize a world in which everyone was converted during their natural lives (viz. a world void of any essences that require a post-mortem conversion). If such a world were feasible and preferable to the one under consideration, then the Molinist strategy would be in trouble and the question would become why God didn't make better use of His middle knowledge.
8. I want to thank Stephen Maitzen, Thomas Flint, and Klaas Kraay for their helpful comments.