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Divine hiddenness and special revelation

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Abstract: **Next to the problem of evil, the problem of divine hiddenness is the most prominent single argument for atheism in the current literature. Most advocates of the problem target what can be termed 'generic theism', theism abstracted from any particular religious tradition. Correspondingly most replies are made from the perspective of generic theism. While understandable, this common structure to the dialectic can obscure possible replies centred on the doctrinal resources of particular religions. I argue here that Christian soteriology provides a good reason why God might refrain from making His existence rationally indubitable to all.**

Introduction

If God exists, why doesn't He make His existence obvious, so obvious that no one could rationally doubt it? God is supposed to love us, and one would expect that if God loved us He would make an explicit, open relationship with Him possible for everyone able and willing to engage Him in such relationship. After all, isn't such relationship-seeking a necessary part of love? Moreover, traditional theists (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, etc.) all maintain that our ultimate well-being depends at least in part on having a positive relationship with God.[1] So on both grounds (the relationship-seeking nature of love and God's loving concern for our ultimate welfare) one would expect God to ensure that anyone willing to believe would have a rationally secure belief in Him, at all times. Yet many of us don't, and seemingly through no fault of our own. Therefore either God doesn't exist or, if He exists, doesn't love us. Since God is supposed to be infinitely perfect, the latter option won't work and the former is the only way to go: theism is false.

While a number of authors earlier in the twentieth century provided valuable discussions of the problem,[2] its most focused advocacy began in the early/mid

1990s. Schellenberg (1993; 2007b), Drange (1993; 1998), Keller (1995), Maitzen (2006), and Marsh (2013) have all formulated versions of this argument, with some differences between them. Schellenberg's is the most robust, claiming that even a single instance of non-resistant non-belief (non-belief on the part of someone who is otherwise willing to believe in God) suffices to disprove theism. Drange and Keller adopt a weaker formulation, according to which it is rather the huge amount of such unbelief that disproves theism, while Maitzen's concern is the fact that whole cultures are ignorant of God, and Marsh's has to do with hiddenness and naturalistic evolution.[3]

The literature on the problem continues to expand, with many replies[4] and counter-replies[5] issued. Since most proponents of the hiddenness problem have intended it to apply as widely as possible (as with the problem of evil), they have targeted theism in general, 'generic theism', rather than the theism of some specific religious tradition(s). Correspondingly, most theists responding to the problem have done so from the perspective of generic theism.[6] This is understandable, but structuring the debate in this way runs the risk of overlooking potential replies arising out of special revelation. Here I want to explore one such reply, arising out of Christian soteriology.

The article is divided up as follows: in the next section I lay out a way in which the content of special revelation might serve in a reply to the hiddenness problem, using Christian soteriology as my example. The third section sees a treatment of a variety of objections. Finally I conclude by noting briefly how the present case might be integrated into a wider, cumulative case response. For, just as with the problem of evil, I am inclined to think that perhaps no one reply to the problem is wholly sufficient on its own accord, and that a set of compatible, interlocking replies might be needed for an effective defence of theism.

The prospect of tradition-specific replies

The proponent of the problem of divine hiddenness assumes that God could make His existence rationally indubitable to any non-resistant non-believer. I will grant that assumption for present purposes, though it has been disputed.[7] By what means might God achieve this result? Schellenberg has proposed that if God existed then He would ensure universal, rationally secure belief by providing a powerful, continuously available religious experience to all willing individuals, beginning from early childhood (Schellenberg (1993), 49):

> This experience, let us say, is non-sensory – an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present (and ipso facto, that God exists), (2) continues indefinitely in stronger or weaker forms and minimally as a 'background awareness' in those who do not resist it, and (3) takes more particular forms in the lives of those who respond to the beliefs to which it gives rise in religiously appropriate ways. . . . Since the experience is had as soon as a capacity for

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> personal relationship with God exists, we may suppose that it occurs quite early on in the life of each individual, in particular, before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken. We may further suppose that any investigations *subsequently* undertaken . . . fail to undermine . . . the beliefs formed by this experience.

One might argue that this is not the only possible way for God to ensure universal provision of rationally secure belief. Perhaps He could use a dramatic, public, worldwide miracle, like arranging the stars to spell out a Bible verse. However, Dumsday (2012a, 185) concurs with Schellenberg on the necessity of the latter's model (or something akin to it):

> Schellenberg may be correct in thinking that something like this model of divine self-disclosure would have to obtain in order to ensure that every living adult at all times had a rational belief in God. In fact, it might be needed even on the milder requirements of Drange, Keller, and Maitzen. If the large majority of people throughout human history and across cultures are to believe in God, it will not be enough that the arguments of natural theology be more convincing than they are now. Even in such a world (say, where the argument from design is more effective because scientists discover that the universe really is only 6,000 years old), there is no guarantee that people will be aware of the proofs. Perhaps there will be widespread ignorance of the relevant facts and reasoning. Or consider a world in which there are periodic global miracles. Here, van Inwagen's (2002, 28–31) point about such miracles carries some force, namely that they would still be attributable to a powerful demiurge rather than God. By contrast, a personal experience of the divine, one directly revealing certain attributes of God or aspects of His character on a personal level, might avoid this obstacle.

Let's assume then that preventing the prevalence of non-resistant non-belief would indeed involve God's provision of multiple, powerful religious experiences to every person on the planet (or at least every *willing* person, which, for the sake of argument, we will further assume includes the large majority of persons). My argument in this section is that Christian soteriology, if true, would justify God's refraining from providing them.

I expect many readers will already have inferred the particular doctrine I am thinking of: salvation by grace through faith. Christians believe they are saved from eternal death by repenting and placing their faith in Christ; by that means, they personally appropriate the redemption provided by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. This belief is a key part of the soteriologies affirmed by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist churches.

That is not to say that they agree on all points of soteriology – disagreements persist on such matters as the precise role of 'good works' in relation to this saving faith (though the extent of that disagreement is often exaggerated), the salvific role of sacraments such as baptism, etc. However, all 'small o' orthodox Christians are agreed that we cannot be saved by our own efforts alone, and that anyone, no matter how vicious a reprobate, can be saved from damnation simply by turning to Christ in repentance and faith. The vicious mobster who falls on his knees in real contrition and with genuine faith and is murdered immediately thereafter will still

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avoid damnation, even though he has done nothing in this life to make amends for his crimes – indeed, even if he has never done a single good deed for another person. In whatever ways Christians differ among themselves in their precise understanding of salvation, they all agree on this, which understanding of the radical nature of divine mercy in the face of total human unworthiness distinguishes Christianity from many other religious traditions (arguably every other tradition). Grace is thus an indispensable component of Christian soteriology. Numerous formal definitions of 'grace' could be cited, but consider the following Eastern Orthodox conception, from the glossary of the *Orthodox Study Bible* (Metropolitan Maximos et al. (2008), 1781):

> Grace = the gift of God's own presence and action in His creation. Through grace, God forgives sins and transforms the believer into His image and likeness. Grace is not merely unmerited favour – an attitude of God toward the believer. Grace is God's unmerited energy bestowed in the sacraments and is therefore truly experienced. A Christian is saved through grace, which is a gift of God and not a reward for good works. However, because grace changes a person, he or she will manifest the effects of grace through righteous living.

The precise meaning of 'faith' is of course subject to some debate, both inside and outside the churches. However, historically many theologians have understood the nature of faith as including (among other things) belief in the face of not-wholly-irrational doubt. Belief in the total absence of rational doubt is not faith but sight. For the biblical contrast, consider Hebrews 11:1: 'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not Seen' (NKJV). Or consider John 20:29, where Jesus addresses the apostle Thomas, who had doubted his resurrection: 'Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." '

Various other sources might be cited here, from various traditions; one prominent source worth mentioning is Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 2, art. 9, ad. 3. There he argues that the act of faith is meritorious (while still prompted by God's grace) in part because it is subject to our free will, and it is subject to free will because the relevant subject matter of faith is not liable to 'scientific demonstration' (a demonstration so sure that the assent of the individual must follow of necessity). It might also be pointed out that the common understanding of faith as involving *trust* implies the possibility of doubt (and, by implication, the possibility of not-irrational doubt). It would be counter-intuitive to say that one 'trusts' in some fact which one already knows beyond a rational doubt. For references to 'trust' in the understanding of faith, consider the following two passages: first, from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995, 47–48), part 1, article 3, chapter 3, which affirms that faith is a free act:

> Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed are contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason. Even in

> human relations it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other persons tell us about themselves and their intentions or to trust their promises …

For a relevant Eastern Orthodox source consider the definition presented in the glossary of the *Orthodox Study Bible* (Metropolitan Maximos et al. (2008), 1780): 'Faith = belief and trust in Christ as one's Savior … the effects of this faith are freedom from the power of the devil, the growth and maturity in virtue, and progress toward perfection and union with God.'

Consequently, if faith is required for salvation, and faith itself requires that there be some room for rational doubt, then at least from a Christian perspective we have an explanation for why God allows a state of affairs in which non-resistant non-belief can occur (and even flourish): namely, for the important end of preserving the possibility of our salvation.

Or at least, we have the *beginnings* of an explanation; certainly, by itself the preceding observation would not suffice to address the problem of divine hiddenness. For since the faith that is required for salvation is faith in Christ's divinity and sacrificial death, rather than faith in the truth of generic theism, this aspect of Christian soteriology cannot by itself explain God's allowance of non-resistant non-belief in the mere truth of theism. One might argue that God could reveal *His existence* in a rationally indubitable manner to all people (or all willing people) while still leaving the truth of *Christianity* open to rational doubt and hence a matter of faith. The fact that He has not done so proves He does not exist.

Of course, one might try to formulate an analogous argument to that suggested above, and claim that God wishes to leave belief in His existence a matter of faith rather than sight. Perhaps such a state of affairs would be preferable, since faith is an important virtue (on the traditional Christian perspective) and it is good to be able to exercise important virtues in matters of great importance. Belief in God, even if not sufficient for salvation, is surely a matter of great importance, and perhaps a matter on which God wishes us to exercise the virtue of faith.

However, rather than attempt the formulation of such an argument, I would like to press ahead and develop further a reply based specifically on Christian soteriology. So let's pick up on the objection that God could eliminate non-resistant non-belief via Schellenberg's model of revelation (or something similar) while still leaving room for rational doubt as to the divinity of Christ and the significance of the atonement. How *exactly* would this work? One might worry that if God revealed His existence to everyone but refrained from mentioning anything about Jesus, people might see this as a powerful argument against the truth of Christianity. After all (they might say), Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation,[8] so if God was going to make a point of revealing Himself experientially to every (willing?) person on earth, surely He would take the time to point out that Jesus is His eternal son? But if God were to tell everyone, the normative route to salvation by grace *through faith* would seem to be blocked. So if God did not

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mention it, it would be taken (reasonably, it would seem) as a strong mark against Christianity, and if He did mention it, it would block the possibility of salvation. We seem faced with a dilemma, the importance of which would appear to justify God's remaining 'hidden'.

But wouldn't there be some way for God to finesse the situation, so as to sidestep the dilemma? For instance, perhaps He could tell everyone, in the course of these experiences, that they are fallen and in need of redemption, that a means of redemption has been provided, and that they are to seek it out in order to attain salvation.

Well, if He did that, and yet stopped short of revealing that vital piece of information (namely how salvation is actually attained), one can easily imagine many reacting with anger and resentment. In fact, another sort of hiddenness problem would emerge: surely a loving God would openly reveal the path to redemption to every non-resistant non-believer? And surely the fact that He refuses to do so is a sign that this being isn't really God? The Christian would of course be able to answer this problem ('He can't reveal it, lest the path to salvation itself be blocked'), but God's revealing His existence to all (using Schellenberg's model of self-disclosure) combined with His leaving out apparently key information would be likely to turn many away from serious consideration of that or any other answer. The resulting anger and resentment might in fact go even further, to the extent of breeding distrust and disbelief that the Being they are experiencing is really the God it purports to be.

Is it certain that those negative results would transpire? No. But a defence against the problem of divine hiddenness (unlike a theodicy for the problem, to import the 'defence vs. theodicy' terminology familiar from the problem of evil debate) requires only a live possibility, which the present proposal achieves.

Still, the advocate of the hiddenness problem might argue that while the scenario described could give rise to such problems, that would still be preferable to the present state of affairs, in which so many remain (through no fault of their own) ignorant of God's existence and of the need for redemption and of the existence of a means of redemption. Revelation may entail risks, but surely it is better to take those risks than to leave everyone in the dark.

In reply, the Christian can observe that this is a false dichotomy: it is *not* the case that God must either reveal Himself openly to all (along with the further information regarding redemption etc.) or reveal Himself to none. Other options are available, including the option that Christians believe God has actually taken: namely, the option of revealing Himself openly to a group of people (first the people of Israel, then the people of Israel plus the wider Church), who would then act as witnesses of that revelation, testifying to the wider world and passing down that revelation to succeeding generations. Such a strategy avoids some of the risks noted above, though it does give rise to risks of its own, most notably the risk that the members of the Church will be slothful or ineffective witnesses

(or, worse, by their words and actions actively dissuade people from considering the truth of Christian doctrine). Few Christians would deny that that is a risk that has often been realized. However, the blame for the individual failures of Christians lies at the feet of those Christians. Correspondingly, any anger or resentment about such failures cannot properly be directed towards God. By contrast, if God adhered to the sort of revelatory model advocated by Schellenberg, then *prima facie* it might seem reasonable to some to blame God for not revealing the path to redemption along with His existence. In other words, while the Christian model of revelation and propagation of the faith carries with it risks and problems of its own, those risks and problems are less likely to provoke *prima facie* reasonable resentment and anger towards God.

In response to this suggestion, an anonymous referee writes:

> I'm thoroughly unmoved by the claim that God giving us a partial revelation plus the indication that there's more to be discovered would cause a worse consequence than allowing some folks to be non-culpable non-believers. I don't think that even rises to the level of plausible defence. After all, the supposedly resentful folks would be culpable on this picture. Let them be resentful.

I'd like to consider two possible replies to this concern. First, I'm not so sure they would be culpable. Granted, objectively speaking they are reacting wrongly, in so far as God has a good reason for not revealing the relevant information (how to be saved) to them. But in assessing moral blameworthiness, one needs to ask what would constitute a reasonable reaction from the point of view of the person in that situation. And in this hypothetical situation, confusion, anger, or resentment may not be irrational from the person's *subjective* standpoint, even if such responses lack an *objective* justification. Compare a situation in which a person is treading water after the capsizing of her ship, and passengers on a nearby boat (who clearly see her) refrain from throwing her a life preserver or from letting her on the ship. In this situation this person will probably feel confusion, anger, and resentment, and cannot properly be blamed for doing so, since in this situation these reactions are, from her subjective point of view, rational responses. Of course, it may be the case that her response is rational only because of her limited information. Objectively speaking the response may be unwarranted; perhaps she can't see the pirate ship closing in on the boat from the other side, and the passengers are afraid that letting her on board will get her killed, and that throwing one of the bright orange life preservers will just make her more visible to the murderous pirates. But in the situation her reaction is nevertheless understandable and seemingly not blameworthy.

Second, as an alternative response one might grant for the sake of argument that people who react to this partial information with anger/confusion/resentment are in fact culpable for this reaction. Nevertheless, God might yet have adequate justification for not revealing Himself in this way. After all, on the Christian view God is so loving that He wants to pursue relationship even with the culpable,

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the resistant non-believers.[9] Consequently He might want to refrain from taking courses of action that would further alienate them. In fact, it is conceivable that God might actually be *more* concerned for the welfare of the culpable non-believers than the inculpable – after all, they are more badly in need of help and at greater risk of failing to develop a positive relationship with God.[10] As such, it is possible that He refrains from certain revelatory strategies that would benefit non-resistant non-believers while at the same time worsening the status of the culpable. And it may well be that to inform people of His existence and of their sinfulness/need for salvation while at the same time leaving out the solution to those problems would constitute just such a revelatory strategy, while the revelatory course that (according to Christians) God is actually pursuing does not have that feature. Of course, this sort of point sits uneasily with Schellenberg's formulation of the hiddenness problem, focused as it is solely on the non-resistant non-believers. That may be reasonable if approaching the problem from the point of view of generic theism, but from a Christian perspective such a focus is too narrow.

At this point it is worth bringing in an important general-purpose counter-reply suggested by Schellenberg, a counter-reply intended to defeat a whole host of responses to the problem of divine hiddenness:

> Many serious objections to the divine hiddenness argument … have this in common: they concede that God has reason to make some sort of relationship with the Divine available but refer us to some additional reason they suppose to be available to God – usually expressed in terms of some great good God would or might seek to realize – in virtue of which God might permit nonresistant nonbelief for some time for some or all created persons, despite the Divine motivation to make Divine – human relationship at all times available to individuals … Various goods we know of might be enumerated and considered in doing so – such goods, for example, as moral freedom, serious responsibility … But discussing all the issues that arise in connection with such goods would obviously take a great deal of time. Fortunately, there is a way around that. First, let's notice that if the most fundamental spiritual reality is a personal God, then all serious spiritual development must begin with what I have emphasized, namely, personal relationship with God. Second, such relationship with an infinitely rich personal reality would have to be the greatest good any human being could possibly experience, if God exists. But then, one wants to ask, why this talk of some *other* good, for the sake of which God might *sacrifice* such relationship? (Schellenberg (2007b), 210; emphases in original)

The proposal here is that many existing replies to the problem fail to identify an adequate justification for God's remaining 'hidden' – after all, if relationship with God is the greatest possible good persons can possess, a good God would not allow that relationship to be sacrificed, or even delayed, for some other good.

The response laid out in this section sidesteps this general-purpose counter-reply, since the good it points to – salvation from damnation – is in fact sufficiently important to justify the delaying of explicit relationship. Salvation is, in the long run, a necessary condition for engaging in a positive relationship with God, such

that if Schellenberg's preferred model of divine self-disclosure could conflict with it, God is justified in not following that model. Putting the point a bit differently: if salvation from damnation is needed, in the long run, for positive relationship with God, and faith is a necessary condition for that salvation, and faith entails the possibility of rational doubt in the truth of Christianity, then God has adequate reason (even on Schellenberg's criteria) for remaining 'hidden'. What allows the Christian to evade Schellenberg's counter-reply is, very specifically, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

The aim of this section has been to present one example of a potentially effective tradition-specific reply to the problem of divine hiddenness. It could well be that other theistic traditions can supply replies based on the distinctive content of their own claims to special revelation. I do not wish to rule out that possibility, and in fact work along these lines has already appeared in the literature.[11] I look forward to seeing what non-Christian theisms might be able to put forward in this context.

Having laid out the suggested reply, I would like to turn in the next section to the consideration of some further objections.

Additional objections

(1) Maybe Schellenberg's model of divine self-disclosure would be problematic, in so far as he conceives God as being cognitively available to all willing individuals at all times. If we all lived in continual communion with God, and God in His day-to-day interactions with us never mentioned anything about Jesus, then that might well give people reason to doubt the truth of that supposed revelation, thus leading to the dilemma laid out above. But what if we adjust the model somewhat, such that God gives everyone a series of powerful religious experiences early in life, sufficiently convincing to forestall rational non-belief, but with a definite endpoint. That would provide rationally overwhelming evidence for theism, but its temporally limited nature would also make us more accepting of the idea that God was not intending to reveal *all* theologically important truths to us in that limited timeframe. In other words, the dilemma may not arise if one simply tweaks the model of revelation.

First, it is worth noting that Schellenberg would not employ that reply, since it concedes that God might properly refrain from making a positive relationship with Him available to all willing individuals at all times. Mere belief in God is important for Schellenberg, but only in so far as it is a necessary condition for engaging in a positive relationship with God, which he takes to be our greatest good (on theism)

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and to involve by definition a conscious awareness of God (Schellenberg (2007b), 201). Ongoing positive relationship with God therefore entails ongoing conscious awareness of God (or at least ongoing access to conscious awareness of God). This idea is crucial to Schellenberg's formulation of the hiddenness problem, and accordingly was incorporated into my summation of the problem in the introduction.[12]

Still, as the present objection notes, one might weaken the formulation of the problem of divine hiddenness, and maintain that a good God need only ensure that we all have adequate evidence of His existence (evidence sufficient to forestall rational doubt) rather than continuous access to relationship with Him. Perhaps what is centrally important is preserving the possibility of engaging in such a relationship at some point, and rationally secure belief in theism is a necessary condition for this.

However, my dilemma proceeds even on this modified version of the hiddenness argument. True, if a person has had only one or two powerful experiences of God, that person will perhaps be more open to the idea that there are important truths about God, and about the God–human relationship, that God did not get into in those experiences. Indeed, turning from the hypothetical to the actual, many people are in fact converted to theism through such an experience and only later become Christians. But if *every person on earth* has several powerful religious experiences, sufficient to convince him or her of the truth of theism, but no persons (or comparatively few people) are told about Jesus in the course of these experiences, then that would very likely be interpreted as a large strike against Christianity. And yet if God avoided that eventuality by telling everyone about Jesus, the possibility of rational doubt about Christianity might be precluded, thereby blocking salvation by grace through faith. So the dilemma stands.

(2) But some people do in fact have religious experiences that are explicitly of Jesus or explicitly involve Jesus in some way. Wiebe (1997) provides an in-depth look at contemporary case studies of Christocentric religious experiences, and many, many others appear in other literature (both recent and historical) on visions, near-death experiences, etc. On the present account, is it the case that the people having these experiences have no hope of salvation, since their belief in Jesus is now a matter of *sight* rather than *faith?* Or for that matter think of the twelve apostles and other supposed direct witnesses of the resurrected Christ. Are they barred from salvation? Either they are (which is, from the Christian perspective, absurd), or salvation is not via faith, or faith does not entail the possibility of rational doubt. Any of these alternatives would cause serious problems for the defence outlined above.

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The commonality of such explicitly Christian religious experiences is an important and underreported fact; that fact (especially when combined with further facts concerning the commonality of theistic experiences more generally)[13] should serve to mitigate the problem of divine hiddenness somewhat (or at least the 'evidential' versions of the problem propounded by Drange (1993) and others) by indicating that God may not be so 'hidden' as the problem supposes. Still, one might think that while such experiences may help in a way, they also cast doubt on my suggested reply.

Consider though that people's reactions to such experiences can vary widely. Let's look first at an experience explicitly of Jesus, found in Wiebe (1997, 82):

> Hugh Montefiore, now retired, was an instructor in the NT at Cambridge University and later a bishop of the Church of England. He was brought up in the Jewish faith, and as a child never attended Christian worship or read the NT. He credits his conversion to Christianity to a vision he experienced at sixteen years of age. The figure that appeared to him said, 'Follow me,' and 'knowing it to be Jesus' (this is how he described the effect of this experience to me), decided to embrace the Christian faith, although he says he has not ceased to be a Jew. Only later did he discover that the invitation 'Follow me' was in the NT. When I spoke to him in 1993 some fifty-seven years had elapsed since the incident, so he was not able to remember many of the details on which I wanted to query him. He said that the import of the experience still had validity for him. 'For me it has total reality,' he said.

The bishop's response to this experience was to place faith in Jesus. It led to a major change in his life and he persevered in it. Now, one could argue that, having had the experience, he had no room for rational doubt, and hence my suggested reply to the problem of divine hiddenness is problematic. However, that idea is not at all reflected in typical sceptical responses to this and other religious experiences: namely, they are typically dismissed as hallucinatory, or else those providing the testimony are dismissed as liars. Certainly the first reaction was open to Montefiore himself; he could have subsequently questioned the reality of the experience and rejected it as mere illusion. Or he could have accepted the reality of the experience but dismissed it as inconsistent with his previous religious beliefs and thus not of divine origin (demonically inspired, perhaps). Or he could have had the reaction recommended by Ray Palmer (one of the founding fathers of modern science fiction) and related by his recent biographer Nadis (2013, 215):

> Even if Jesus Christ appears before you, and commands you to kneel to him, first insist that he prove that he is indeed Jesus Christ – and should he be able to do this to your own satisfaction, recognize that you are no less an individual than he is … Only you have the right to dictate your destiny. You are your only master.

Or consider a contemporary example of the experience of a dramatic religious vision later rejected: the well-known case of the American pornographer Larry Flynt. A long-time atheist, he temporarily came under the influence of evangelist Ruth Carter Stapleton (sister of US president Jimmy Carter). During this time he had an experience in which 'not only did a figure that he took to be God come

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to him visually and acknowledge Flynt's being, he also saw himself in a wheelchair – an incredible foretelling of events that were just months away from becoming a reality in Flynt's life' (Dracos (2003), 133) Soon thereafter Flynt was shot by a sniper and crippled for life. Later, a friend, prominent atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair, convinced Flynt that his vision had been a mere hallucination and he became an atheist once again. Yet to this day, though he remains an atheist he also maintains that he really had the experience.

In other words, having one (or even several) dramatic religious experiences does not guarantee belief. And many secular philosophers of religion argue continually that we have good reason to doubt the veridicality of any such experience. As such, one might think that grounds for rational doubt remain, even for those who today see Jesus face to face. So they can still have genuine faith; perhaps it is faith with more evidential support than that had by many others, but still faith.

Turning from contemporary religious experiences to the biblical accounts, one might argue that the twelve apostles at least had incontrovertible experiential evidence of the risen Christ (think of Thomas' turnaround). Are they thereby barred from salvation?

The experiences of the apostles in relation to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith (at least as I am interpreting 'faith') is complicated by the fact that they already had faith in Christ before the resurrection appearances – they had already accepted him as the Son of God. The crucifixion was a trial to their faith, and the resurrection put an end to that trial, but the resurrection appearances were not what supplied that faith in the first place. Ah, one might reply, but that faith was itself the product of continually witnessing powerful miracles etc. (or so Christians believe). True, but many of Jesus' critics also witnessed the miracles, but rather than reacting in faith they claimed that Jesus performed the miracles via demonic power. For instance, Matthew 12:22–24 reads:

> Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, 'Could this be the son of David?' Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, 'This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.' (NKJV)

For another striking example of this pattern of rejection, see the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John.

It is also worth noting that not all witnesses of the resurrected Christ were moved to faith. Just before his account of the Great Commission, Matthew (28:17) relates that: 'when they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted'. This short passage is really quite striking; first, it is yet another powerful instance of the gospel authors' willingness to relate embarrassing truths about the early Church, which instances tell in favour of their reliability; second, and more important for present concerns, it indicates that at least some witnesses to the resurrected

Jesus felt there remained room for rational doubt. The resurrection still called for a free choice to exercise faith, both in its reality and in the specific significance claimed for it by Jesus. This freedom is also on display when Matthew (28: 11–13) tells of the reaction of the Temple authorities to the report of the frightened tomb guards:

> Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them, "His disciples came at night and stole him away while we slept." And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.'

The authorities, faced with compelling testimony from hostile witnesses, chose to give it no credence and attempt a cover-up.

At this point, I suspect that some readers might protest that even if a vision of Jesus left room for some doubt, *they* would certainly believe in such a circumstance. So why doesn't Christ grant such an experience to *them*? In reply, it might first be noted that this assumption some have that belief would follow a powerful religious experience is open to question, given how many people have such experiences and yet fail to believe, or believe for a time and then reject the experience as illusory. Second, granting for the sake of argument that most people would in fact willingly believe when faced with such an experience (which may be one way to flesh out our granting of an assumption made by most proponents of the hiddenness problem, namely that most non-belief really is non-resistant), and granting that in consequence any such person could make such a demand, we are immediately faced with a problem: even if, on an *individual* basis, such an experience leaves room for rational doubt (and hence the exercise of faith), nevertheless if such experiences were granted to *all* non-resistant non-believers then the overwhelming weight of common testimony would quickly render belief in Jesus a matter of sight, not faith. If 90 per cent of the population were granted such experiences (or 80 per cent or 70 per cent or whatever the percentage of non-resistant non-believers is claimed to be) then the truth of Christianity would in fact be immune from rational doubt due to the overwhelming weight of that collective testimony. Hence belief in Christianity would no longer be a matter of faith, and the path to salvation would be blocked (according to Christian soteriology). In other words: one might complain that one has not been granted such an experience, and that one would willingly believe (even while not rationally *compelled* to do so) if only it were granted. One suspects that this might be a complaint shared by a great many. And yet if God responded positively to all such complaints, the opportunity to exercise saving faith would be precluded. So while God can (and seemingly does) grant such experiences to some, Christian theology provides a clear reason why God does not provide them to all (or even just to all non-resistant non-believers, the class Schellenberg is chiefly concerned with).

But surely God could provide them to more people than He does? Well, as noted earlier, survey data indicates that powerful theistic religious experiences are already quite common across the population, and distinctly Christian experiences are also widespread. But it does have to be a balancing act: on the one hand, if God grants too few such experiences there may end up being inadequate experiential witness to the truth of Christianity, inadequate, that is, to sustain rational faith; on the other hand, if He grants too many then there will be no room for faith. And there may be no precise cut-off point for the balancing act to function, nor perhaps always a reason why person A has such an experience and person B does not. Indeed, van Inwagen (2006) argues that in balancing acts of this sort there is no precise cut-off point. (He develops this notion in relation to the problem of evil and to why some are spared certain natural evils but not others; however, it seems applicable here.) Although we will inevitably be left wondering why a particular individual lacks such experiences, on this view the only answer is 'because someone has to'. There is a reason why *some* people lack such experiences, but there may not always be a specific reason why some *particular* person lacks it. This general point, if correct, might also help to address some of Schellenberg's (2007b, ch. 10) especially troubling cases of hiddenness. For instance, he cites cases where someone falls away from the faith, where the provision of a dramatic experience might have halted the fall; but if God granted such an experience to every person undergoing a crisis of faith, every time, then there would soon be no room for faith. Again, it is a balancing act, and it is by no means clearly apparent that God is handling that balancing act improperly.

(3) Let's say you're right: Christian soteriology supplies the dilemma laid out in the suggested defence. Surely then it is open to the proponent of the hiddenness argument to say that God should simply have chosen a different path to salvation, one resting not on faith (where faith is understood as entailing the possibility of rational doubt) but on something else.

This objection takes us into some deep theological waters, deeper than I can hope to cover here. I will note, however, that many Christian theologians have maintained that the incarnation and cross were absolutely essential for our salvation (i.e. God could not have redeemed us any other way than by dying for us, as in St Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*), and that faith is necessarily the means by which Christ's sacrifice is subjectively appropriated. In fact, it is universally agreed that our good works or moral character cannot save us, that faith in Christ and His sacrifice is absolutely essential. Disagreements do arise concerning the issue of whether faith entails the possibility of rational doubt (which dispute in turn depends in part on extremely complex debates concerning the nature of rationality, debates by no means restricted to theology and actively taken up by analytic epistemologists[14]), but even there many theologians accept the interpretation

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employed here. Of course, the theological literature on all these points is beyond voluminous and I will not attempt to engage with it. Suffice it to say that many Christian theologians would deny the opening premise of the present objection, namely the idea that there are alternative routes to redemption and to the appropriation of that redemption.

(4) This response to the hiddenness problem grants that the truth of theism can be a matter of rational doubt. But is that really consistent with Christian theology? After all, consider Romans 1: 18–21, which states:

> The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that all men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.'[15]

First, it is worth noting that Schellenberg and other prominent proponents of the hiddenness problem reject entirely the soundness of arguments arising from natural theology. One strategy for responding to the hiddenness problem would be to dispute this claim. However, most of those attempting to reply to the problem, including those who support traditional natural theology (like me) typically grant their view on this, for the sake of argument. Otherwise the dialogue on hiddenness might languish in perpetual stalemate in consequence of an intractable disagreement concerning the soundness of traditional theistic proofs. To move the discussion forward, then, I and most others opt to bracket the issue of the soundness of those proofs.

Second, arguably the passage from Romans does not entirely block a Christian from maintaining that there can be rational doubt in theism. For it is not entirely clear whether this passage is meant to indicate that all people *at all times* have a knowledge of God, or if instead Paul's reference class is more limited. This possibility is, I think, raised in the last verse of the passage cited in the objection; moreover, a bit later in the same chapter, Paul writes of how people who originally had a knowledge of God gave it up, and God allowed them to drift into a state of ignorance. 'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator . . . Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done' (Romans 1:25, 28). That is, the widespread knowledge of God was lost, even if in some sense it remained naturally available.

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Perhaps those who initially gave up this knowledge were morally blameworthy in a special way for doing so, but it may be that their descendants, born into this depraved state of affairs, through no fault of their own (or at least a lesser fault) lack a rationally indubitable belief in God. And perhaps, given their fallenness, this lack is not an entirely bad thing. Certainly Romans 1 has to be squared with Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17. Like the passage in Romans, Paul makes reference to idolatry and a lack of knowledge, but the emphasis is different. Here is what he says in Acts 17:24–31:

> The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your poets have said, 'we are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice ...

The picture painted to the Athenian philosophers does not contradict the one presented to the Church at Rome, but it is quite a different angle on the same state of affairs. Here, Paul seems to allow that idolaters might be such out of genuine ignorance. Perhaps this ignorance finds its ultimate origins in sin, but that is not the emphasis in this passage.

Conclusion

I hope I have shown that the special revelation posited by Christianity supplies a distinctive and promising reply to the problem of divine hiddenness. But, as noted in the introduction, I also suspect that taken by itself it is not fully satisfactory. As with the problem of evil, the best approach is probably a cumulative case combining multiple compatible and interrelated strategies of reply. The response offered here could certainly figure in such a larger, cumulative case, being compatible with a great many of the existing replies referenced in the introduction. For reasons of space I cannot illustrate that compatibility here, and so I leave it as an exercise for those readers familiar with the existing literature.[16]

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Notes

1. An anonymous referee raises the question whether it is really the case that the theisms of the major world religions here mentioned hold to this idea that God loves us and seeks relationship with us, asking 'Would Maimonides think God loves us in that way? Would Avicenna?' Indeed it is interesting to wonder whether Schellenberg is correct in holding that any well-formulated theism must accept this view of God's love and human well-being. However, for reasons of space I cannot take up these issues here (i.e. the conceptual issue of whether any well-formulated theism involves these, and the factual question of whether, if indeed that is the case, the theisms embodied in all of the major monotheistic traditions are well-formulated).
2. See for instance Hick (1981), McKim (1990), Mesle (1988), Penelhum (1983), O'Hear (1984), and Morris (1992).
3. We see here an analogue with the problem of evil, where Schellenberg's formulation is akin to the logical problem of evil, and the others to the evidential problem. Also, it is worth noting that while Keller rejects traditional theism, he is open to alternative models of God (specifically, process theology) and employs the problem of divine hiddenness more in support of such an alternative model (one on which God is not omnipotent and so may not have the power to reveal Himself to all) rather than atheism *per se*. Likewise Marsh (2013) develops his case not as an explicit argument for atheism, but rather as an argument that the evidential support for theism is undermined given the truth of evolution.
4. See Aijaz & Weidler (2007), Azadegan (2013a; 2013b; forthcoming), Cullison (2010), Cuneo (2013), Dumsday (2010a; 2010b; 2012a; 2012b; 2013), Evans (2006; 2010), Henry (2001; 2008), Howard-Snyder (1996), King (2008; 2013), Marsh (2008), McBrayer & Swenson (2012), McCreary (2010), McKim (2001), Moser (2008), Murray (2002), Oakes (2008), O'Connell (2013), Poston & Dougherty (2007), Rea (2009), Swinburne (1998; 2004), van Inwagen (2002; 2006), Tucker (2008), and Weidler & Aijaz (2013).

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5. See especially Cordry (2008), Lovering (2004), Maitzen (2008), Trakakis (2007), and Schellenberg (1996; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b).
6. Certainly there are exceptions here; authors making extensive use of specifically Christian doctrines as part of their replies include Dumsday (2010a; 2013), Henry (2001; 2008), Oakes (2008), and Moser (2008), while Azadegan (2013b) draws on Shiite mystical traditions in one of his responses.
7. For instance, King (2008; 2013) disputes it, arguing that there are inherent barriers to revelation, even for an omnipotent God. This of course provides for an entirely different strategy for addressing the problem of divine hiddenness, one for which I have a good deal of sympathy.
8. Many theologians (of varying denominations) would claim that this exclusivity need not rule out the possibility of salvation for non-Christians; it does however mean that if non-Christians are to be saved, it will be via Christ's sacrifice, appropriated by repentance and faith. This may imply the need for post-mortem opportunities for that appropriation, at least for those who never had an opportunity to hear the Gospel (and, perhaps, for those who heard it but through no fault of their own were unreceptive to it). Of course, that idea is itself relevant to divine hiddenness, in so far as it might be taken to imply that non-resistant non-belief will in all cases be merely temporary.
9. For instance, in Titus 3:3-7 St. Paul writes:

> 'For we ourselves were once also foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (NKJV)

10. It's worth recalling here the parable of the lost sheep. In Matthew 18:11–14, Christ says the following:

> For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (NKJV)

11. Once again I draw the reader's attention to Azadegan's (2013b) valuable work on hiddenness from the perspective of Shiite mysticism.
12. Consider Schellenberg's own recent (2007b, 204) formalization of the problem, which also brings this out quite explicitly. The first premise of that formalization reads: 'Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful conscious relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such a relationship (able to do so just by trying).'
13. For a summary of relevant survey data collected by sociologists and psychologists of religion over the past forty-five years see Spilka et al. (2003), 299–312. A representative example: in a 1978 study Hay and Morisy sampled 1,865 people in Britain. Thirty-six per cent responded affirmatively to the question, 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' For further data and analysis see also Hay (1994). With respect to multiple such experiences across a single lifetime, Fenwick (1996, 170) writes that 'although about a third of all people have had the experience, only 18 percent have had it more than twice and only 8 percent "often" and more'.
14. For an entry point to this literature see Mele & Rawling (2004).
15. My thanks to an anonymous referee for this objection.
16. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my colleague at Concordia, John Maxfield, for helpful comments and advice on a previous draft, and to an anonymous referee at *Religious Studies* for the same.