WHY DOESN’T GOD MAKE HIS EXISTENCE MORE OBVIOUS?

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In an influential book, Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason, J. L. Schellenberg has argued that God, if he did exist, would surely make his existence and ongoing presence in the world more obvious. Schellenberg summarizes his line of argument as follows.

A perfectly loving God would desire a reciprocal personal relationship always to obtain between himself and every human being capable of it. But a logically necessary condition of such Divine-human reciprocity is human belief in Divine existence. Hence a perfectly loving God would have reason to ensure that everyone capable of such belief (or at any rate, everyone capable who was not disposed to resist it) was in possession of evidence sufficient to bring it about that such belief was formed. But the evidence actually available is not of this sort.... The most obvious indication that it is not is that inculpable...nonbelief actually occurs. Hence we can argue from the weakness of theistic evidence..., or more specifically, from the reasonableness of nonbelief, to the nonexistence of a perfectly loving God. But God, if he exists, is perfectly loving. Hence we can argue from the reasonableness of nonbelief to the nonexistence of God.1

We can put Schellenberg’s line of argument in the following form:

(1) A perfectly loving God would desire a reciprocal relationship always to obtain between himself and every human capable of it.
(2) But a logically necessary condition of such a relationship is belief in God’s existence.

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(3) Hence, a loving God would bring it about that those not resistant to the truth are in possession of sufficient evidence showing that God exists. (From (1) and (2))

(4) Yet the available evidence is not of this sort, as evidenced by inculpable nonbelief.

(5) Hence, a perfectly loving God does not exist. (From (3) and (4))

In what follows I shall discuss how certain Christian writers have sought to account for the fact that God remains to some extent ‘hidden’ from us in this world. I shall then outline what I take to be three plausible kinds of responses the Christian theist might offer against the kind of objection Schellenberg raises.

**I. Does Inculpable Nonbelief Really Occur?**

Some Christian writers have not wanted to concede Schellenberg’s working assumption that inculpable nonbelief does in fact occur (premise (4)). John Calvin, for example, seemed to suggest that, whenever a person fails to hold the beliefs requisite for theistic faith, he does so as a result of willful spiritual blindness. Calvin maintained that all people have at least some beliefs about God. He maintained

that a sense of Deity is indelibly engraven on the human heart. And that this belief is naturally engendered in all, and thoroughly fixed as it were in our very bones....IThis is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one...which nature herself allows no individual to forget, though many, with all their might, strive to do so.²

At the same time, Calvin pointed to human sin in explaining why all people do not hold further religious beliefs essential to a proper relationship with God, such as the belief that we are bound to submit to God’s authority. He asks,

how can the idea of God enter your mind without instantly giving rise to the thought, that since you are his workmanship, you are bound, by the very law of creation, to submit to his authority?—that your life is due to him?—that whatever you do ought to have reference to him?³

Calvin then puts it to his readers that, for those who do not form these further religious beliefs, “it undoubtedly follows that your life is sadly corrupted.”⁴

Calvin is not alone in maintaining that beliefs essential to a relationship with God would inevitably follow from a life that was free from sin. Tertullian wrote that

the soul, be it cabined and cribbed by the body, be it confined by evil nurture, be it robbed of its strength by lusts and desires, be it enslaved to false gods,—none the less, when it recovers its senses, as after surfeit, as after sleep, as after some illness, when it recovers its proper health, the soul names God. The witness of the soul ist in its very nature Christian!⁵

More recently Mark R. Talbot has argued that, from the Christian perspective, it is entirely appropriate to assert the contrary-to-fact conditional: “Everybody would believe in God, if
it weren't for sin." Talbot goes so far as to claim that "Even unbelievers have some reason to think this is true." He defends this last claim by pointing to Christians who testify that only at their conversions did they recognize that sin had made them resistant to seeing certain truths about God. Talbot then contends that even unbelievers can recognize this testimony as evidence for the original contrary-to-fact conditional that all people would be theists, were it not for sin.

Is it plausible to suggest that all cases of theistic nonbelief stem from morally culpable, self-deceptive acts? Schellenberg certainly thinks otherwise and stresses the importance of a subject's conduct "in other epistemic contexts."

Has he shown himself to be honest, a lover of truth? Does he resist his wants when his head tells him he ought not to give in to them? We may also have reason to believe that S desires to have a well-justified belief that G or that not-G. If this is clearly so in some particular case, then (unless there is strong evidence to the contrary) we may surely conclude that S is not self-deceived in arriving at [theistic nonbelief].

Schellenberg's point here in support of inculpable nonbelief is that, if a nonbeliever has shown himself to be an earnest seeker of truth in non-religious contexts, then we have no reason to suppose that he is willfully (and culpably) 'blinding' himself to the truth in religious contexts.

In response, the Christian theist might point out that there are different reasons why a person might seek to hold true, well-justified beliefs. A person might seek to do so because he desires to fulfill his obligations toward his creator and wants to make sure he knows of all such obligations he has. If this is the case, then the person can indeed hardly be accused of self-deceptive resistance to the truth about God. On the other hand, a person may in some instance seek to hold true, well-justified beliefs simply out of a general desire to know lots of facts or because he likes to think of himself as an eminently rational person. If this is the case, then it is far from clear that the person who seeks after truth in non-religious matters will likely also be open to the truth on religious matters.

If God does exist and does seek to relate to us as lord, then his commands may fix for us any number of obligations—obligations that may reach into such important and personal areas as one's finances, vocational choices and sexual behavior. Given that the kind of behavioral implications stemming from religious questions seem (at least potentially) far greater than with any other question, it seems unclear just how reliable one's attitude toward the truth in non-religious contexts will be in predicting one's attitude toward religious truths. For religious questions have implications for areas of life in which all people have heavy personal interest; and the greater one's personal interest in a subject matter, the more impetus there is for self-deception.

Despite this possible response by the Christian theist, Talbot's contrary-to-fact condition to the kind of objection Schellenberg raises. First, even if we suppose that, without sin, all people would form certain general beliefs about God, such as the belief 'that God exists', it surely remains implausible to believe requisite for specifically Christian message about Jesus Christ represents an
obvious example where it is more than sin that prevents one from forming Christian beliefs. Second, even if we grant that all people's failures to form Christian beliefs do stem somehow from sin, the Christian theist will still need to say more if she is to rebut the charge that nonbelief undermines God's perfect goodness. Thomas V. Morris explains.

Human-defectiveness theories...still fall short of what is needed. For any such accounts, as typically developed, may explain why we do not see the ordinary handiwork of God in creation and in his normal providential governing of the world as manifesting him, or why we don't experience his indwelling presence spiritually in any sort of regular or continuous way, but they do not offer any explanation of why God does not do more extraordinary, dramatic miracles to demonstrate his existence and governance.⁹

Thus, even if we grant that some sort of spiritual blindness is affecting the way in which a person assesses the evidence available to her, and even if we grant that, without this spiritual blindness, she would form specifically Christian beliefs, we will still want to know why God has not provided more positive evidence for her consideration.

This last point can serve to make Schellenberg’s original line of argument even stronger. Premise (3) in Schellenberg’s original line of argument was this:

(3) Hence, a loving God would bring it about that those not resistant to the truth are in possession of sufficient evidence showing that God exists. (From (1) and (2))

However, even if all nonbelievers are “resistant to the truth” about God in that they resist the evidence they do have, we can still ask why a perfectly loving God would not do more to overcome this resistance by providing more evidence for them to consider. Thus, we might change premise (3) of Schellenberg’s argument to the even more forceful

(3) Hence, a loving God would bring it about that those not resistant to the truth (to the extent that no amount of evidence would leave them unconvinced) are in possession of sufficient evidence showing that God exists. (From (1) and (2))

With this adjusted understanding of Schellenberg’s third premise, we are free to remove the reference to inculpable nonbelief from his fourth premise. Thus,

(4) Yet the available evidence is not of this sort, as evidenced by inculpable nonbelief.

becomes simply:

(4) Yet the available evidence is not of this sort.
available to them, the Christian theist may still be asked to explain why a loving God would not provide the kind of evidence that would surely convince even the most resistant toward the truth.

Would it be possible for God to provide evidence of this sort? In David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* the character Cleanthes imagines how God might seek to remove doubts that he exists and has communicated messages to humankind.

Suppose...that an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any which human art could ever reach; suppose that this voice were extended in the same instant over all nations and spoke to each nation in its own language and dialect; suppose that the words delivered not only contain a just sense and meaning, but convey some instruction altogether worthy of a benevolent Being superior to mankind—could you possibly hesitate a moment concerning the cause of this voice, and must you not instantly ascribe it to some design or purpose?  

Cleanthes goes on to remark that a person who objects to theism may still reject this conclusion, reasoning that the ‘voice’ may well be the product of “some accidental whistling of the winds.” It seems more plausible, though, to suppose that most non-theists would form theistic beliefs upon witnessing such a dramatic event. N. R. Hanson, who argued against the existence of God, reflected on the possibility of a dramatic theophany in which a “radiant Zeus-like figure, towering above us like a hundred Everests” exclaims for every man, woman, and child to hear: “I have had quite enough of your too-clever logic-chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured, N. R. Hanson, that I most certainly exist.” Hanson continued,

Please do not dismiss this example as a playful, irreverent Disney-oid contrivance. The conceptual point here is that if such a remarkable event were to transpire, I for one should certainly be convinced that God does exist.

So, if God does exist and does seek a personal relationship with all people, then why has God not provided the kind of evidence that would remove all people’s doubts about these facts? For surely there are many people like Hanson who are not resistant to the truth about God to the extent that they would fail to hold theistic beliefs if there were evidence of the sort Hanson describes. Is there some reason why God remains (at least to some degree) hidden?

**II. HISTORICAL RESPONSES TO DIVINE HIDDENNESS**

**Butler**

Joseph Butler, in a sermon aptly titled *Upon the Ignorance of Man*, remarked that humans should not expect to understand the ways of God—including God’s reasons for remaining partially hidden.

And as the works of God, and his scheme of government, are above our capacities thoroughly to comprehend; so there possibly may be reasons which originally make
it fit that many things should be concealed from us.... The Almighty may cast "clouds and darkness round about him," for reasons and purposes of which we have not the least glimpse or conception.\(^\text{13}\)

Butler held that some facts about God are clearly evidenced, remarking that "it is as certain that God made the world, as it is certain that effects must have a cause."\(^\text{14}\) But as for the specifics of God's governance of the world, he maintained that the "wisest and most knowing cannot comprehend the works of God, the methods and designs of his providence in the creation and government of the world."\(^\text{15}\) Drawing from Butler's line of argument, the Christian theist might be inclined to argue that God may well have good reasons for not providing us with greater evidence that he exists and seeks to relate to us through the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, given our relative ignorance of the way God governs the world, so this line of argument would go, we should not be surprised that God's good reasons remain inscrutable to us.

Implicit in Butler's remarks seems to be the acknowledgment that, from the human perspective, divine hiddenness may not appear to be characteristic of a perfect world. After all, if God does exist, and if the holding of true beliefs about God is a good thing, then it may seem a natural enough judgment that a world with clear evidence in support of these beliefs would be better than a world with religious ambiguity. Butler's response is that we are not in a position to make such a judgment.

It is thought necessary to be thoroughly acquainted with the whole of a scheme...in order to judge of the goodness or badness of it.... From our ignorance of the constitution of things, and the scheme of Providence in the government of the world; from the reference the several parts have to each other, and to the whole; and from our not being able to see the end and the whole; it follows, that however perfect things are, they must even necessarily appear to us otherwise, less perfect than they are.

So, whatever bad effects might be associated with divine hiddenness, it may yet contribute toward some greater good. At the same time, given our very limited understanding of the ways in which the world is connected and managed by God, we should not expect to understand what these further good things are and why divine hiddenness makes them possible. In short, Butler's main assertion is that we are in a poor epistemic position to ascertain what good reasons God might have for remaining (to some extent) hidden from us.\(^\text{16}\)

In response to the contention that God's good reasons for remaining hidden are inscrutable, Schellenberg comments as follows.

> It is to be expected, perhaps, that a God would know of kinds of goodness that are impossible for us to understand. But why should this lead us to suppose that evils like that of the reasonableness of nonbelief...in fact serve such goods if God exists?\(^\text{17}\)

These comments are telling against the adequacy of any appeal to inscrutability as a line of argument. Schellenberg's original argument gives us reason to think that divine hiddenness precludes certain good things—
specifically the good things associated with a reciprocal relationship with God. If the Christian theist’s response is merely that we cannot grasp the ways of God, then the Christian theist will have to concede that, as far as we know, it is just as likely that divine hiddenness does not serve some further good as it is that divine hiddenness does serve some further good. (Additionally, one might press the point that, if we look for some further good and do not find one, then we have *prima facie* reason for thinking that it does not exist.) So, on the one hand we have a specific reason—apropos Schellenberg’s line of argument—to think that God’s perfect goodness is undermined by divine hiddenness. On the other hand we have the contention—stemming from Butler’s comments—that at best it is as likely as not that divine hiddenness is linked with some further good. This position hardly seems a comfortable one for the Christian theist.

**Pascal**

Other Christian writers have been more optimistic about the possibility of identifying what God’s good reasons might be for remaining hidden. Blaise Pascal in his *Penseés* makes repeated references to human pride in addressing the question of why God does not do more to remove the religious ambiguity in the world. Pride, of course, plays a central role in the Christian tradition’s explanation of what keeps humans from the kind of personal relationship with God for which they were created. Martin Luther remarked that justification before God is only possible when humility overcomes pride. And Peter Lombard commented that “pride is the root of evil, and the beginning of all sin.” The aspect of human pride at issue here might be described in general terms as assuming a role that belongs only to God. John Wesley defined pride as “idolatry; it is ascribing to ourselves what is due to God alone.” In the case of Adam’s fall, which serves in the Christian tradition as a prototype for all human sins, pride is displayed as Adam comes to regard his own opinion more highly than God’s opinion with respect to where his own best interests lie. Accordingly, Butler remarked that “Religion consists in submission and resignation to the Divine will.” And Augustine pronounced that

> Isinfull things are done whenever Thou art forsaken, O Fountain of Life, who art the only and true Creator and Ruler of the universe, and by a self-willed pride any one false thing is selected therefrom and loved.

Stated roughly, pride is the beginning of all sin because it is pride that leads us to dismiss what God has commended in deference to our own planned course of action. Pascal identified pride as a fundamental impediment to our relationship with God; and he noted that God has taken steps to hold human pride in check.

> God wishes to move the will rather than the mind and harm the will will humble their pride.

At first glance, this passage may appear somewhat enigmatic. However, whatever else “perfect clarity” works against certain God’s aim of keeping human pride in
check is somehow hindered by perfect clarity. Pascal goes on to explain this connection between pride and perfect clarity as follows.

If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God.25

As evidence that knowledge about God is harmful to the person who does not have an accompanying recognition of her absolute need for God, Pascal points to the “arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not known their own wretchedness.”26 Pascal’s point here seems to be: ‘If the evidence for Christian beliefs were overwhelming, then people with prideful tendencies would come to form these beliefs. An acquisition of said beliefs in such people would actually lead them away from God, for it would bolster their confidence in their own mental abilities and thus serve to enhance their prideful commitment to self-sufficiency.’

Of course, Pascal did not suggest that God should provide no evidence in support of Christian beliefs. He noted the “equal danger” of one coming “to know his wretchedness without knowing God,” and as evidence pointed to “the despair of the atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing their Redeemer.”27 Pascal’s contention is that our religiously ambiguous world leads (or at least, tends to lead)28 to the formation of Christian beliefs only in those who would benefit from having these beliefs.

Thus wishing to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart and hidden from those who shun him with all their heart, he has qualified our knowledge of him by giving signs which can be seen by those who seek him and not by those who do not. There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.29

So, God has provided some evidence for Christian beliefs so that those who humbly seek him will come to see the truth about him. But God has not provided more evidence than he has because greater evidence would tend to lead to theistic beliefs among those in whom such beliefs would foster pride.

In response to Pascal’s defense of divine hiddenness, Schellenberg offers several criticisms. First, he wonders whether evidence in the form of religious experiences really is likely to foster pride. Religious experience has its own distinctive psychological effects, and arrogance is not very naturally construed as one of them. Feelings of gratitude, joy, reassurance, astonishment, grief, or dismay seem more likely.30

In response, though, the Christian theist may suggest that there is in fact some reason to think that religious experiences may often lend themselves to pride. Children and adults
alike often queue for hours just to glimpse someone famous. An autograph of a sports star will often constitute a child’s most prized possession and will trump most any other child’s claim to playground bragging rights. It is rare to find an adult who will not ‘drop a name’ if he has an appropriate name to drop. Indeed, many people’s self-described claim to fame is simply to have accidentally crossed paths with someone famous. So, it does not seem implausible to suggest that one who experiences a direct encounter with the divine might well be tempted to take unwarranted pride in her experience.

Schellenberg offers a further criticism of Pascal that serves as a possible rejoinder to the Christian theist’s line of response here.

Part of what God might communicate to us through religious experience is the very message of wretchedness and corruption that Pascal suggests a Divine disclosure would inhibit. Religious experiences, it can be argued, are not all likely to provoke an arrogant response, inasmuch as they would awaken in us a sense of our wretchedness and corruption (a state incompatible with arrogance).31

But is it really the case that a recognition through religious experience of one’s own corruption is incompatible with an arrogant response to that recognition? In C. S. Lewis’s collection of fictional letters from Screwtape—a ‘senior devil’ who offers written counsel to his apprentice nephew in the art of temptation—we find the following instructions.

All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, “By jove! I’m being humble,” and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt—and so on, through as many stages as you please.32

When we consider the varied and subtle forms pride might take, it does not seem at all clear to what extent (if any) a divine message of one’s own corruption would mitigate any tendency for that encounter with the divine to become a source of pride in one already tending toward prideful attitudes.

Schellenberg does offer, however, one objection to Pascal’s line of argument that seems quite forceful. In reference to Pascal’s construal of divine hiddenness as a divinely-given impetus to seek God with humility, Schellenberg remarks,

All these arguments suggest is that God has a reason for withholding good evidence from those humans whose present actions and motives are such as to prevent them from responding to it appropriately. No reason is suggested for withholding evidence from those who do not fall into this category—those who have felt their corruption and the emptiness of life without God and who have begun to search for God with proper motives.33

Are there people who search for God with humility and do not find him? Perhaps the proponent of Schellenberg’s line of argument will point to the testimonies of believers here. The Old Testament records the psalmist David crying out at one point,
"O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent." In a similar vein, we find the prophet Isaiah avowing, "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel." St. Augustine is among many professing Christians who have wished that God would reveal himself more clearly.

So speak that I may hear. Behold, Lord, the ears of my heart are before Thee; open Thou them, and "say unto my soul, I am thy salvation." When I hear, may I run and lay hold on Thee. Hide not Thy face from me. Let me die, lest I die, if only I may see Thy face.

And St. Anselm offers this poignant lament:

Never have I seen You, Lord my God, I do not know Your face. What shall he do, most high Lord, what shall this exile do, far away from You as he is? What shall Your servant do, tormented by love of You and yet cast off 'far from Your face'?... Lord, You are my God and my Lord, and never have I seen You. You have created me and re-create me, and you have given me all the good things I possess, and still I do not know You. In fine, I was made in order to see You, and I have not yet accomplished what I was made for.

Granted, these cries are from believers; and our main concern is with the lack of evidence available to earnestly-seeking nonbelievers. Still, these testimonies do seem to illustrate the lack of any strict correlation between the extent to which one searches for truths about God and the extent to which one finds clear evidence in support of these truths.

Interestingly, although we have noted Pascal's contention that "there is enough light" for those who seek God with proper humility, he seemed at one point in his Pensées to acknowledge that some earnestly-seeking people may yet find God hidden to such an extent that they fail to hold theistic beliefs.

Amongst those who are not convinced, I make an absolute distinction between those who strive with all their might to learn and those who live without troubling themselves or thinking about it. I can feel nothing but compassion for those who sincerely lament their doubt, who regard it as the ultimate misfortune, and who, sparing no effort to escape from it, make their search their principal and most serious business.

Even if we accept Pascal's earlier contention that God remains hidden so as not to encourage undue human pride, is there a reason why a perfectly loving God would remain (to some extent) hidden from nonbelievers who do earnestly seek him with humility?

It might be thought that, even though with humility, nonbelievers still maintain religious ambiguity in the world if he is to keep in check the pride of certain other nonbelievers who are not humble. Taking up Pascal's line of reasoning, Thomas V. Morris writes,
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Were God to reveal himself to people improperly prepared to come to know and love him, such revelation would be more of a curse than a blessing. In order to allow us to develop to the point at which a knowledge of him would be the extraordinarily positive thing it can potentially be, God must govern his public manifestation in accordance with the needs of the least developed of his human creatures.\(^{39}\)

Morris's point may well hold if we think of public manifestations of the divine as the only kind of evidence for Christian beliefs. However, when we consider the possibility of private religious experiences, we are still left with the question of why God does not ensure that all people who earnestly search for the truth about him come to see their evidence as clearly supporting Christian beliefs.

**Swinburne**

Richard Swinburne has taken up this question and has argued that God does have good reasons for withholding overwhelming evidence of his existence from people—even from people who seek him with humility. Swinburne begins with the assumptions that (1) people desire to be liked by others—and would especially desire to be liked by God, if he exists; and (2) people have a desire for their own future well-being, which is in God’s hands if there is indeed a God who allocates a fate to people in an afterlife. It is natural for one to believe, Swinburne continues, that, if God does exist, these desires will be realized if one acts well. Given a deep and certain awareness of God’s presence, Swinburne points out that one would have to have remarkably strong desires to do wrong in order for serious moral decisions to be possible. For, a moral decision arises when one’s desires tempt one to act contrary to what one believes to be morally right. And if the balance of one’s desires does not seriously tempt one to act contrary to one’s moral beliefs—as Swinburne imagines that they typically would not, given (a) one’s desires to be liked by God and to secure future well-being, and (b) one’s unwavering belief that by acting well God will ensure that these desires are realized—then one would not face moral decisions.

In order to provide people with moral choices, Swinburne acknowledges that God could have provided overwhelming evidence for theism and also given us a much more malicious nature, so that we lacked natural affection for our fellows. Because people would then have such a strong desire not to act in accordance with what they believed to be morally right, they would still—even with firm and certain theistic beliefs—have the opportunity to make moral choices. Alternatively (and preferably), God could have—and in fact has—made the evidence of his existence less than compelling. By doing so, he makes it possible for us to be "naturally good people who still have a free choice between right and wrong."\(^{40}\) For, where there is uncertainty about the existence of God, there is uncertainty that one’s desires to be liked by God and to secure a favorable afterlife will be met by doing what is morally right. Thus, these desires will not incline one so strongly to do wrong in order to be tempted to do so.

There are various responses to Swinburne’s argument that show that abundant theistic evidence would not in fact preclude moral choices. First, while it is true that people will desire a favorable afterlife if they believe one exists, one might
point out that people can be very imprudent, putting off greater future goods for more immediate, short-term pleasures. And if short-term pleasures are not enough to tempt an unwavering believer to forsake his desire for a favorable afterlife, then he might still be tempted to put off performing the right acts he believes will help secure this favorable afterlife. Thus, he may decide upon a plan of sowing his wild oats for the time being, with the idea of asking for forgiveness and changing his lifestyle sometime later in life before he dies. Another source of temptation one might point to for the unwavering believer involves self-deceptive techniques to mitigate the badness of his acts. A person may convince himself that his acts are not that bad or that everybody performs bad acts such as these. In this way, he may self-deceptively come to believe that the bad acts he desires to perform will not significantly undermine God's approval or his chances of a favorable afterlife. Finally, one might note that certain desires can have considerably more strength in a passionate moment than when a person is dispassionately reflecting—in what Butler termed 'a cool hour'—on his reasons for acting. A person may unwaveringly believe that God exists and may in a cool hour consistently have as his strongest desires the desires for divine approval and a favorable afterlife—both of which he believes will be afforded to him if he acts rightly. The same person may nonetheless succumb to a desire to impress his peers during a spirited boy's night out or to sexual urges during a meeting with a woman he knows to be romantically off limits. Surely unwavering believers, one might argue, can still succumb in the heat of the moment to temptations that they reflectively consider to be of much less value than the good goals their heated actions compromise.

Still, whether or not abundant theistic evidence would always necessitate very strong inclinations toward the bad in order for moral choices to present themselves, Swinburne has at the very least shown that divine hiddenness represents a way in which God might provide moral probation and choice for people in this world. Yet, Schellenberg has a general objection to the idea that God would use the intellectual probation associated with divine hiddenness as a means of making moral probation and choice possible. He argues that there are other ways in which God could make moral probation and choice possible—ways available within an ongoing relationship with God. As an example, Schellenberg points to the intellectual challenges afforded by a 'dark night of the soul', where God intends "the believer to be troubled by questions that shake her confidence and motivate her to examine more closely the content of her belief." Thus, even if some sort of intellectual probation were necessary for moral probation, this intellectual probation would not have to come in the form of God remaining hidden to such an extent that earnest seekers could still fail to believe that God even exists.

III. TO WHAT EXTENT IS A LACK OF EVIDENCE FOR THEISM A BAD THING?

Schellenberg moves from the superfluity of this kind of intellectual probation to the conclusion that a perfectly loving God would not use this kind of intellectual probation as a means of providing moral probation and choice. His reasons involve the negative effects associated with now, in the midst of earthly pain and conflict, is when we require Divine guidance, support, consolation, and forgiveness.... I suggest that there is indeed reason to suppose that a being who did not seek to relate himself to us explicitly in this life—who
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elected to remain exclusive, distant, hidden, even in the absence of any culpable activity on our part—would not be properly viewed as perfectly loving.42

But does a lack of theistic belief preclude one from receiving such things as divine guidance and consolation? The recognition that God exists and has issued certain directives is, of course, one obvious way in which one might receive guidance from God. But there are also less obvious ways in which God might provide guidance—consistent with God remaining hidden. It is quite conceivable that God could regulate a nonbeliever's desires so that she wants to do what God judges it best for her to do. God could also see to it that she simply comes to believe that a certain course of action is best or right or will most likely realize the desires she has.

As far as providing consolation and support, God could well regenerate a nonbeliever's emotions so that she came to experience such things as joy, peace, and relief from feelings of guilt. In support of the idea that God does this very thing, perhaps the Christian theist would see as evidence the positive feelings that even nonbelievers experience when giving to others or the way in which even nonbelievers experience an easing of conscience when they admit past wrongdoings. It is true that some forms of support and guidance are not available to a nonbeliever. For example, a nonbeliever cannot experience the comforting thought that a loving and powerful God is aware of her problems and is working to help overcome them in his perfect timing. Still, there seem to be a number of ways in which a nonbeliever might yet receive divine support and guidance in the midst of earthly pain and conflict.

Even so, Schellenberg points out that divine guidance and support are not the only things of value within a divine-human relationship.

"God seeks to be personally related to us." In claiming that this proposition is essential to any adequate explication of "God loves human beings," I am claiming that God, if loving, seeks explicit, reciprocal relationship with us, involving not only such things as Divine guidance, support, and forgiveness, but also human trust, obedience, and worship.43

The Christian theist will, I think, have to concede that a lack of theistic belief does preclude one from having with God the kind of explicit relationship of which things like worship are a part. Given that the Christian religion commends above all else a (explicit) personal relationship with God, one might put to the Christian theist the objection that the Christian God, if he really existed, would at all costs remove obstacles that stood in the way of such relationships with him.

In responding to this objection, the Christian theist might begin by stressing the point that true beliefs about God do not automatically lead a person into an explicit and positive relationship with God. Rather, true beliefs about God provide the opportunity for a person to respond positively to God and thereby enter into an explicit and positive personal relationship with him. Correspondingly, true beliefs about God also provide the opportunity for a person to respond negatively to God and thereby move further away from a positive relationship.
with him. The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus denouncing certain cities that remained unrepentant in the face of miracles he performed in them.

"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

One of the ideas here seems to be that, among those people who reject God, those who are presented with greater evidence for certain theistic beliefs accrue more moral guilt than those who are presented with less evidence. Yes, the opportunity that comes from clear theistic evidence and from having true beliefs about God can turn out to be a blessing in that it can move one toward a fulfilling personal relationship with God. But such opportunities also can turn out to have the opposite effect.

IV. Divine Hiddenness and Theodicy

Schellenberg might at this point press the same type of objection he makes against Pascal: Why would God not provide clear evidence for theism to those people for whom such evidence will serve to move them toward a fulfilling relationship with God? Implicit in this question is the suggestion that a perfectly loving God would always provide a person with clear theistic evidence if he knew that the person would respond positively to it. We have already noted that the Christian religion affirms that God's chief purpose for us is that we take part in a fulfilling and personal relationship with him. So why would God not provide a person with clear theistic evidence if he knew that that person would respond positively to it and thereby move toward the kind of (explicit) personal relationship with God for which the person was created?

In offering a theodicy on this point, there seem to be three types of responses that the Christian theist might plausibly offer. First, the Christian theist might suggest that God does not in fact know for certain just when people will and will not respond positively to clear theistic evidence. Granted, not all Christian theists would want to take such a line. However, there are at present a growing number of Christian writers who argue that human decisions cannot be free (on the libertarian definition of freedom) if God knows in advance what these decisions will be. Proponents of the so-called 'open view' of God suggest that the Christian religion's traditional understanding of God's omniscience has long been unduly influenced by Greek philosophical ideas. Specifically, they point to the Greek idea that change denotes imperfection. And they submit that, in order to resist the notion that change might occur within God as he observes what humans freely do, the Christian tradition has tended to embrace a much stronger picture of divine immutability than is warranted by the Christian scriptures.

If God does not know with certainty whether a person will respond positively to further theistic evidence at a given point in time, then he will not know with certainty
whether the introduction of further evidence at that time will move the person toward or away from a positive, personal relationship with himself. It is true that God could still know whether a person is inclined to respond in a positive way to further evidence. But we must also consider that, for one who already has good moral tendencies, a decision to break with these tendencies may change significantly the shape of one’s moral orientation. Conversely, a decision to follow the tendencies one already has does not have the potential to re-shape one’s character to as great an extent. So, the fact that God may know people’s tendencies to respond positively or negatively to a certain piece of theistic evidence does not mean that God knows whether the introduction of this evidence would, all things considered, tend to be a good thing. We conclude, then, that the appeal to the incompatibility of (libertarian) free decisions with God’s advance knowledge of those decisions provides one way for the Christian theist to defend God’s goodness in the face of God’s hiddenness.

A second type of response the Christian theist might offer draws upon the Christian understanding of the universal nature of human sin. Schellenberg’s line of argument stipulates that God would provide evidence for his existence sufficient for theistic belief to those who are “capable” of a relationship with him. By ‘capable’ Schellenberg means something like: ‘able to enter positively into.’ In response to Schellenberg, the Christian theist might grant that perhaps many nonbelievers are not so resistant at a time $t$ to the truth about God that they are incapable of entering into some kind of beneficial relationship with God were they to have more evidence for theism. At the same time, the Christian theist might insist that the introduction of further evidence at time $t$ may nonetheless in many cases make more difficult the kind of deep, long-term personal relationship with God commended by the Christian religion. In other words, the Christian theist need not assert that all nonbelievers, if they were to possess clear evidence for God’s existence, would fail to form any relationship with God by which they might receive certain benefits. Instead, the Christian theist might make the more modest suggestion that all nonbelievers would, upon considering clear evidence, fail to form the kind of deep and trusting relationship with God that is God’s ultimate purpose for each person. This suggestion is quite natural when we consider the Christian theist’s position that all humans on earth—believers and nonbelievers alike—have sinful tendencies and thus resist the kind of loving and completely self-giving relationship with God for which they were created and which the redeemed in heaven enjoy.

If God’s ultimate goal in providing theistic evidence is to draw people into this kind of deep and self-giving relationship with him, then the Christian theist might suggest that, in many cases, clear theistic evidence best draws a person into this kind of deep personal relationship only after the person’s character becomes developed in certain ways. Thus, for the purpose of helping ready people for the kind of deep personal relationship he wishes to have with them, God may remove the painful resistance to him that has been mitigated by a pattern of good moral choices through which they become more capable of such a deep, personal relationship. Put another way, moral growth may be best achieved among many moral decisions at earlier stages of their moral development and then at later stages are

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*First Fruits*

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It is not uncommon in human examples for one person to delay making to another person an explicit invitation to become involved in a certain kind of loving relationship. Even though a positive—albeit more superficial—relationship through which the beloved can benefit might be possible early on, a person might still wait until the beloved is judged to be in various senses more ‘ready’ to take part in the deeper relationship the person wishes to have with the beloved. In the case of human readiness to commit every aspect of life unhesitatingly into the hands of God, obstacles to such readiness may take any number of forms. We have already discussed how pride can undermine the kind of relationship with God that God endeavors to have with people. Other obstacles include a fear of commitment, a lack of understanding of the ways in which one needs a savior, and the tendency to backslide from an existing relationship where one does not appreciate just how valuable that relationship is. Again, if the Christian theist is correct in affirming the universal nature of sin, then all people will face such obstacles to the kind of deep relationship with God for which the Christian religion affirms they were created.

Schellenberg might at this point want to expand on a previously noted rejoinder of his and insist that non-epistemic obstacles to a deep and fully self-giving relationship with God are best overcome within an existing, explicit relationship with God. He appeals at one point to the Christian theist’s understanding of God’s “infinite resourcefulness in addressing human need” and notes “the testimonials of those who claim that precisely through relationship with God all manner of ills of the sort that might be introduced here—such as initial resistance to God or fear of God—have been defeated and indeed turned into good.”47

But it seems far from clear that an explicit, but less-than-ideal, relationship with God would always lead one in the direction of the kind of deep, self-giving relationship with God for which Christians maintain we were created. Suppose that a nonbeliever received clear evidence that God does exist and has issued the commands contained throughout the New Testament. Responding to her new beliefs about what God commands of her, suppose the person responds positively to God’s commands on stealing, forgiving, making peace and caring for widows and orphans—yet resists God’s commands regarding lying, sexual behavior and finances. Thus, in some respects she becomes more like the kind of person who can enter into the deep and trusting relationship with God for which the Christian religion affirms she was created. On the other hand, she also resists in some ways this type of relationship and thereby solidifies her resistance to some aspects of the relationship God endeavors to have with her. So, has the original introduction of clear evidence led her, all things considered, toward or away from the kind of relationship with God commended by the Christian religion? This question seems difficult to answer. At the very least, it is not obviously correct that resistance to a deep and completely self-giving relationship with God is generally best overcome after epistemic obstacles are first removed. And so it remains possible for the Christian theist plausibly to argue that God, so that we can participate in the kind of ultimate fulfillment, will not see it as necessarily a good thing that we enter into an explicit, but less-than-ideal, relationship with him during the early stages of our development.

A third type of response open to the Christian theist is to emphasize that people’s relat-
tionships with God are enhanced by the fact that, in a world where God's existence and character are not obvious to all, people must help one another to learn about God. The Christian religion has always emphasized that God works through people to spread the gospel message. Jesus's reference to how he envisioned the spread of the gospel is recorded in the Gospel of John, where we find Jesus praying "for those [i.e., people throughout the world] who will believe in me through their [i.e., his disciples'] message." Accordingly, we find Timothy encouraged by the person who shared the gospel message with him to share in turn the gospel message with others.

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.... And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

In relying on the testimony of others to learn about the character and promises of God—as well as in turn testifying to others about these things—one learns what it is to be in a relationship where one person depends on another for direction in religious matters. That is, one learns what it is to be in the kind of dependent relationship into which, according to the Christian religion, God invites us. And only if God remains to some extent hidden from us do we have the opportunity to rely on others—and have others rely on us—in obtaining spiritual direction in the form of true beliefs about God's existence, character, promises and directives.

Continuing this third line of response, the Christian theist can insist that the testimony of others does not merely provide a way for people to gain knowledge about God. Rather, the testimony of others provides an essential way if we are to enjoy fully the relationships for which we were created. The 'communion of saints' is an important notion in the Christian religion, which affirms that humans were created in such a way that their relationships with God are, in a sense, actualized through their relationships with others. While maintaining that humans were created to be in relationship with God, the Christian theist can also affirm that humans were created such that their proper development and well-being require things like physical contact with other people and a sense of belonging to a community. As we relate to one another within a community where human touch and supporting acceptance are present, we find a kind of fulfillment we would otherwise not find. In God-centered, loving relationships with one another, the Christian theist may emphasize, we experience the love of God as we relate to the 'image' of God within one another. On the understanding that the Holy Spirit infuses those in right relationship with God with God's presence and with God-like characteristics such as self-giving love, the saints in heaven relate positively to God as they relate positively to one another. Thus, it is open to the Christian theist to argue that people were created in such a way that they were created in such a way that they find ultimate fulfillment in their relationships with God and with one another.

The relationships within the community of saints in heaven are meant to reflect the loving, self-giving, interdependent relationships within the members of the Trinity. If the saints in heaven are not in some ways dependent upon one another, then their relationships with one another will not be characterized by interdepen-
dence. Clearly, they could not depend on one another for things only God can provide—such as atonement for sins and sanctifying grace. However, among those spiritually significant things the saints can provide for one another are instruction and insights into the nature of God and his interaction in human history. And clearly, if the saints are to be dependent upon, and responsible for, one another with respect to learning about God, then God will need to limit private revelations and other ways of helping people learn about him that do not involve the activity of others.

While each of the three lines of response we have discussed provides a plausible way for the theist to defend God's goodness in the face of Schellenberg's general argument from divine hiddenness, the third line of response may have the most explanatory potential. For it involves God's general reasons for creating a world that contains a certain amount of religious ambiguity. In defending this third line of response, the Christian theist can acknowledge that God may have reasons for granting special revelations to certain people at certain times. For example, the Christian theist may see St. Paul's Damascus Road encounter with Jesus Christ as part of God's plan to use Paul to preach to the Gentiles. But while such special, private revelations to certain people may be necessary for specific purposes God has, the Christian theist can still maintain that it is God's general intention for people to learn about him with the help of one another. In taking this third line of response, then, the Christian theist need not be bothered by the fact that some people receive clearer theistic evidence than others. The Christian theist need not point to any moral characteristic within unbelievers that accounts for the fact that God may have made less theistic evidence available for them than for others. Rather, the Christian theist can account for divine hiddenness by pointing to God's general intention that people should learn about him from others.

NOTES

3. Calvin, I, ii, 2.
6. See Mark R. Talbot, "Is it Natural to Believe in God?" Faith and Philosophy 6 (1989), especially 166-8. Talbot's reference to sin is to a person's own sin.
7. Talbot, 166.
8. Schellenberg, 66.
11. Hume, pt. II.
15. Butler, XV, 55.
17. Schellenberg, 90. See 88-91 for Schellenberg’s full response to the appeal to divine inscrutability.
25. Pascal, §446.
27. Pascal, §449.
28. Inasmuch as there exist “arrogant philosophers,” Pascal would have to concede that divine hiddenness does not always prevent the prideful from forming (at least some) Christian beliefs.
29. Pascal, §149.
33. Schellenberg, 140.
34. Psalm 22:2.
35. Isaiah 45:15.
38. Pascal, §427.
41. Schellenberg, 203.
42. Schellenberg, 28-9.
43. Schellenberg, 18.
45. For an introduction to this line of thought, see Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, The Openness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
49. 2 Timothy 1.15.