

Usukindluse Päevad 2026

***Miks ei ole Jumala olemasolu ilmsem?
Küsimus Jumala varjatusest*** (inglise keeles)

Dr. Paul Copan

Kristlusevastaste argumentide kummutamine

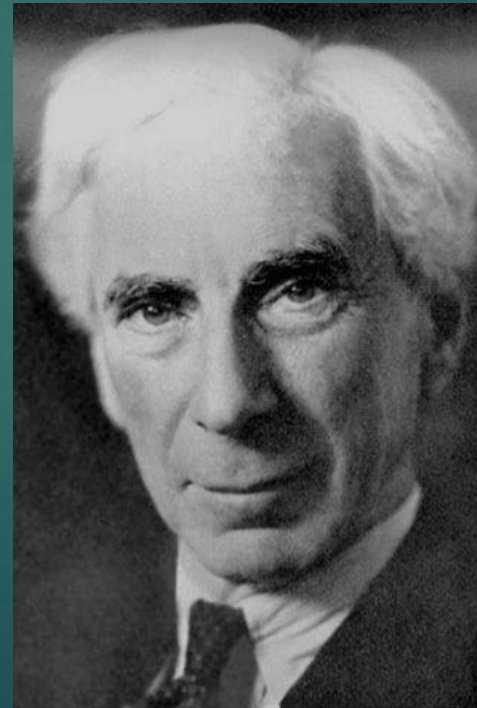
EMK Teoloogilise Seminari

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5. juuni 2026

Why Isn't God More Obvious? The Question of Divine Hiddenness

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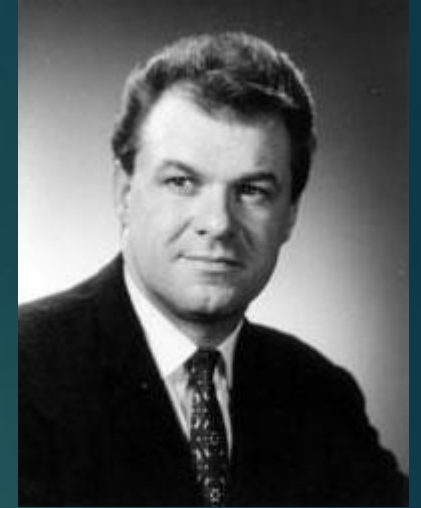


'Not enough
evidence, God. Not
enough evidence.'
Bertrand Russell

N.R. Hanson (d. 1967) would believe in God if....

Suppose that one morning just after breakfast everyone in the world is knocked to his knees with an ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls; leaves drop from trees; and the earth heaves and buckles, toppling buildings. Then the skies open and a huge, radiant Zeus-like figure appears. Then this figure points to Hanson and says, “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 do exist.”

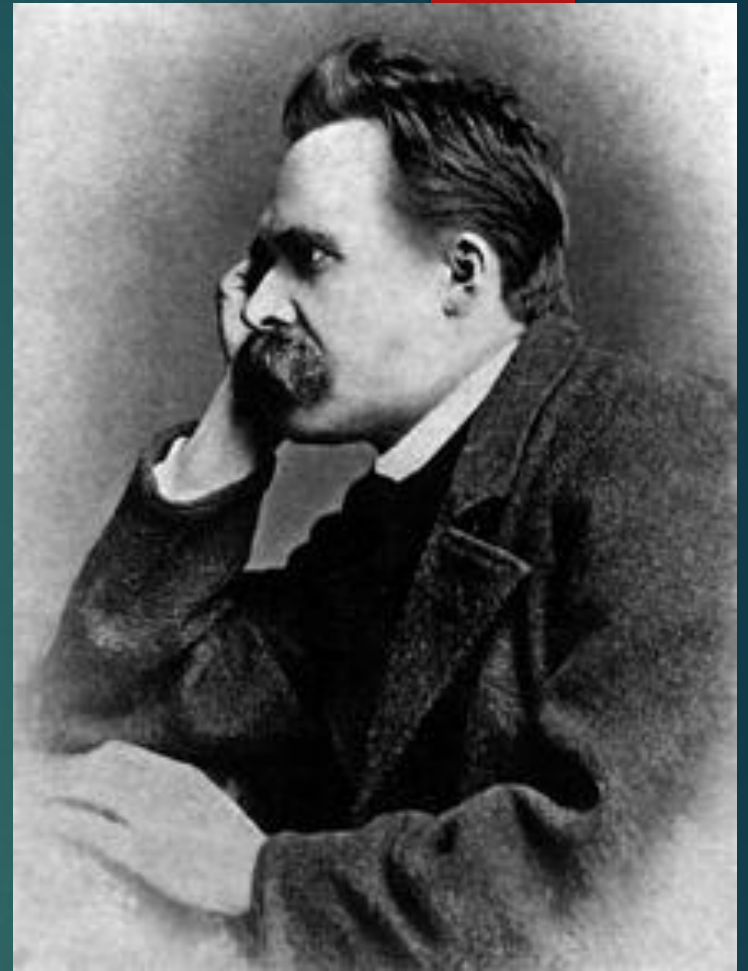
N.R. Hanson, *What I Do Not Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 313-14.




Friedrich Nietzsche


“How could an all-knowing and all-powerful God be good if he doesn’t make clear his intentions to his creatures but leaves them tormented by doubts and questions?”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingsdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 89-90.





Atheist John Schellenberg: “You are a child playing hide and seek with your mother in the woods at the back of your house. You have been crouching for some time now behind a large oak tree, quite a fine holding place but not undiscoverable – certainly not for someone as clever as your mother. However, she does not appear. The sun is setting, and it will soon be bedtime, but still no mother.




Not only is she not finding you, but, more disconcerting, you cannot hear her anywhere: she is not beating the nearby bushes, making those exaggerated ‘looking for you’ noises and talking to you meanwhile as mothers who play this game usually do. Now imagine you start calling for your mother. Coming out from behind your tree you yell out her name, over and over again.

“Mooooommmmm!” But no answer.

You look everywhere: through the woods, in the house, down the road. An hour passes and you are growing hoarse from calling. Is she anywhere around? Would she fail to answer if she were around?”

J.L. Schellenberg, “Does Divine Hiddenness Justify Atheism?” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2020), 166.



The late atheist philosopher William Rowe: “I knew that it was wrong and arrogant to ask for some special sign from God. But I longed for a sense of God’s presence in my life. And although I spent hours in prayer and thirsted after some dim assurance that God was present, I never had any such experience. I tried to be a better person and to follow whatever I could glean from the Bible as a life of service to God. But in the end I had no more sense of the presence of God than I had before my conversion experience. So, it was the absence of religious experiences of the appropriate kind that, as I would now put it, left me free to seriously explore the grounds for disbelief. Only recently, by the way, have I learned that St Anselm of Canterbury, a wonderful man and a brilliant thinker, longed for but, apparently, never experienced God’s presence. In an age of faith, disbelief may not be a rational option. Fortunately or unfortunately, we no longer live in an age of faith.”


Nick Trakakis, “Interview: William Rowe,” *Philosophy Now* 47.

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- I. SCRIPTURE AND HIDDENNESS
 - II. PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

I. Scripture and Hiddenness

A. The Scriptures make plain that “divine hiding” is not an oxymoron:

- ▶ “Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1).
- ▶ “How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 89:46).

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- ▶ **“Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel” (Isaiah 45:15).**
 - ▶ **“Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near” (Isaiah 55:6).**
 - ▶ **“I PRAISE YOU, FATHER, LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, THAT YOU HAVE HIDDEN THESE THINGS FROM THE WISE AND INTELLIGENT AND HAVE REVEALED THEM TO INFANTS” (Mt. 11:25).**

Psalm 88 A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to mahalath leannoah. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

¹ O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.

² May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.

³ For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.

⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength.

⁵ I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Selah

⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape;

⁹ my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Selah

¹¹ Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?

¹² Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

13 But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

14 Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

15 From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.

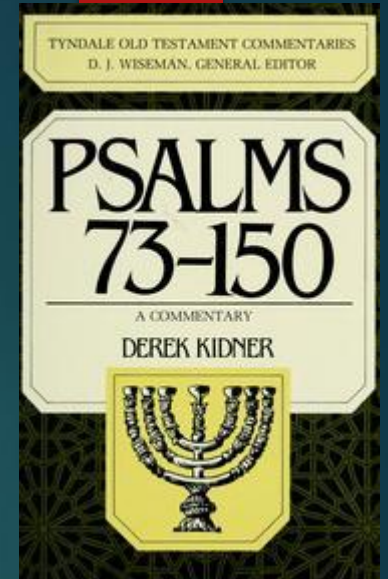
16 Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.

17 All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.

18 You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

Derek Kidner's comments:

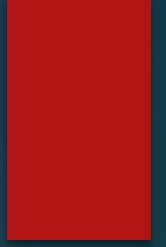
- ▶ The psalmist Heman is a Korahite; this family/guild produced a rich set of psalms: 42-49, 84-85, 87-88. Heman appears to be the head of this guild (1Chron. 6:33, 37).
- ▶ He experiences ill health and ill fortune (15); feels terrors from the Lord (15-17); finds no comfort at all (18).
- ▶ Darkness is the final word of the psalm. (Simon and Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence" begins, "Hello, darkness my old friend.").



What is the role of this psalm in Scripture?

- ▶ The possibility that unrelieved suffering may be a believer's earthly lot (happiness is not a due but a bonus).
- ▶ God's withholding suffering is not a proof of either God's displeasure or his defeat (e.g., Mother Teresa).
- ▶ The groaning in travail prevents the psalmist from accepting this state as final (Rom. 8:22: groaning/waiting for our redemption).
- ▶ Like Job, the psalmist does not give up, but he completes the prayer still in darkness.
- ▶ Heman's experience recounted in this psalm is an implicit reminder that God did not forget or abandon him.
- ▶ His experience is included in the Psalter for the benefit of generations of believers.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS




Some Philosophical Challenges: What Is Required of God, If He Exists?



John Schellenberg's Argument

1. If a loving God exists, then there are no nonresistant nonbelievers.
2. There are nonresistant nonbelievers.
3. No loving God exists.

In other words, people either believe in God OR they are resistant to belief in God.

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- ▶ The argument claims that a good God who desires loving relationship with his creatures would provide sufficient evidence for his existence.
 - ▶ Parents wouldn't intentionally stay hidden from their children. There would be something wrong with this.

See J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.


Schellenberg's argument:

(A1) If a loving God exists, then there are no nonresistant nonbelievers.

(A2) There are nonresistant nonbelievers.

(A3) No loving God exists.


If Schellenberg's LOGICAL ARGUMENT is false, then he has no case. All we need to do is argue: "GOD HAS MORALLY SUFFICIENT REASONS FOR NOT MAKING HIMSELF OVERWHELMINGLY OBVIOUS TO ALL."


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- ▶ This argument is not directed against deism but against Christianity specifically.
 - ▶ There is no room for agnosticism on Schellenberg's account.
 - ▶ Also, there is no room for doubt in the minds of religious believers.
 - ▶ The parenting analogies break down: should we be talking about adults rather than tender-minded children? Is this really an either-or matter?
 - ▶ What about reasons for God's existence evident in creation? I may not have a personal loving encounter with God, but I still may have glimmers of God's existence.


In response, we could EITHER deny the claim that there are nonresistant nonbelievers OR deny the claim that God's being perfectly loving is incompatible with there being nonresistant nonbelievers.

#1: NONRESISTANT NONBELIEVERS?


- ▶ Much depends on whether a person's questions/skepticism is truth-aimed.
- ▶ Many people may seem open, but it is hard to know the inner workings of the human heart.
- ▶ Some may be open to evidence for God's existence, but not open to what the entailments of God's existence are (repentance, etc.).
- ▶ Evidence for God may be widely available, but a person may acknowledge one subset of evidence but deny another subset of evidence (e.g., the problem of evil overrides the love of God manifested in the Incarnation and Atonement of Christ).

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- ▶ It's a false (cultural) assumption that God must make his presence known AT ALL TIMES. Our children may be harmed if we are always accessible to them. We often learn valuable lessons when our parents are not present to help us.* (Living in an age of cell phones exacerbates this—to be readily accessible at all times.) *
 - ▶ What if God has particular reasons for hiding himself? (NOTE: This is the same point that undermines the logical/deductive argument from evil. Since Schellenberg's argument is a deductive argument, it falls prey to the argument Mackie makes in his argument against evil. All we need to do is add the premise: "God has reasons for remaining hidden.")


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- ▶ Think of biblical examples, where God's purposes seem mysterious and hidden—as in the story of Joseph, who was himself puzzled by why God permitted his being sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 50:20), but these purposes became clearer later on. Maybe those reasons will not appear until the afterlife. There is also Heman in Psalm 88, for whom God seems hidden throughout his life.

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- ▶ Some may have a skeptical philosophical attitudes toward evidence (empiricism/scientism) and will deny certain common sense beliefs (e.g., that other minds/selves exist).
 - ▶ We can acknowledge that there may be sincere unbelievers who really want to know whether God exists and to be connected to him. Even so, Schellenberg's approach is too flat and fails to acknowledge the complexity and raggedness of the human experience. Schellenberg misses the complexity of both ordinary believers and nonbelievers who struggle with their nonbelief (“I believe; help my unbelief”).

*Thanks to Dolores Morris for these points (Faithful Witness conference, 2024).

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- ▶ John Peckham gives an example of needing to quarantine himself for several days while he had the flu, and his five-year-old son was wondering why his father didn't come out of the room to play with him: "I greatly wanted to be with him in answer to his many requests. He did not quite understand why we could not be together in the way he wanted (and I also wanted), but it was for his best good that I be temporarily removed from him in order to protect him from something far worse. In a somewhat similar fashion, perhaps in *some* ways God is restricted (morally) from even making his presence known or acting in ways he would otherwise prefer."*

*Peckham, *Why We Pray* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 132-133.



Part of the answer to divine hiddenness is that we are in a cosmic spiritual battle with the forces of darkness. The answer to Daniel's prayer was delayed 21 days because of the Prince of Persia (Dan. 10:12-13).

Also, think of the golden bowls of incense, “which are the prayers of the saints,” that are eventually poured out in judgment on the world (Rev. 5:8)—a response to the prayer of the ages, “Your kingdom come.”* The prayers aren't answered immediately but at the end of all things.

*Richard Bauckham, “Prayer in the Book of Revelation,” in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 255, 257.

Schellenberg's error is NOT in taking seriously God's perfect love when thinking about the extent and nature of God's revelation. God IS perfectly loving and willing to provide what is necessary for a loving relationship with all who are willing to receive it (evidence of his existence and character and the offer of salvation).

Schellenberg's error is to assume the following:

- ▶ (1) If God is open to relationship and has provided evidence of his existence, then humans are in actual possession of that evidence.
- ▶ (2) If God has provided evidence, then all nonresistant people will assent to the proposition "God exists."

#2: HUMANS IN POSSESSION OF EVIDENCE OF LOVING GOD?

Yes, God has widely revealed himself (Romans 1), but there is not a ready connection between evidence-providing and evidence-accepting, which Schellenberg assumes.

There may be RESISTANT nonbelievers who discount, say, arguments from design or dismiss God on the basis of evil, and NONresistant nonbelievers are misled by these arguments.

The evidence for God may be misinterpreted, perhaps due to one's family background and upbringing or education.


(2) If God has provided evidence, then all nonresistant people will assent to the proposition God exists. (In other words, must the nonresistant person believe in God?)

What if Schellenberg concedes the earlier point. He would say that this complexity is overridden by another challenge: God could make it such that there wouldn't be any nonresistant nonbelievers in his requisite sense—that they would become aware of the evidence God provides, will properly interpret it, and will reject any misleading defeaters for the evidence, ultimately assenting to the proposition, “God exists.”

What if, further, God respects the agency of the person. Couldn't God erase doubts that pop up on a person's mind by causing a burning bush to pop out of the ground to inform the nonresistant of his existence, accompanied by a voice that tells him that God loves him? Does God's love entail that he must do so? This depends on what God's purposes for humanity actually are.


Schellenberg's mistake is that he treats God as an object rather than a subject. Schellenberg treats God-avoidance as he would avoiding evident objects in our experience; for example, the only way to avoid a full moon in a clear sky at night is to deliberately direct our attention away from it.

God is interested in more than justified true belief that he exists. James 2:19: even the demons believe—and tremble. Mere propositional belief that God exists is far less important to God than the fact that God wants unbelievers to repent, bow the knee, and enter into a loving relationship with him—an "I-Thou" relationship.

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- ▶ Romans 1 isn't about merely acknowledging God's existence, but also the attributes of God—*his eternal power and divine nature*—resulting in awe, worship, gratitude, and glorifying God.

Stephen Evans: “When a human being is not spiritually attuned, God is not experienced as real, and in a sense God is not real for that person.”

*Evans, “Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time?” *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2006): 311




Schellenberg treats the evidence for God as an either-or notion. He uses a Mackie-style argument: if God is all-powerful and all-good, then evil cannot exist. Therefore God must not exist). But this style of argument has fallen on hard times.


Also, what if the majesty of mountains or the power of the ocean or the dignity of human beings is detected (and could serve as pointers to God), but that this is diminished by misleading counter-evidence against theism (e.g., Freudian wish-fulfillment psychologizing)?

What if God's revelation to us is different than what we expected?

Does evidence for a mere theism differ from a robust Christian theism and the richer resources the latter provides?



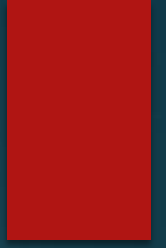
Beilby: “The salient question is not merely whether a nonbeliever is resistant or not, but to what they might be (or might not be) nonresistant. For instance, I might be wildly nonresistant to receiving a raise from my university, but that doesn’t mean that I would accept any conditions associated with such a raise. I would not accept a raise even if that meant I had to teach five times the number of classes I currently teach or if I had to replace my teaching duties with administrative duties. Similarly, a nonbeliever might be nonresistant to coming to know whether God exists, but not be at all open to relationship with the God that exists, and certainly not any relationship with God that places moral expectations or constraints on their behavior.”



To sum up: a loving God would desire to be in relationship with every human person, but it isn't clear is that a loving God would desire any sort of relationship with humans.

If humans see themselves as God's moral and intellectual equals, God doesn't want that kind of relationship—one based on falsehood, arrogance, and self-destructive attitudes. God is open to a *particular sort of relationship with humans*. So there are actions God can't perform in order to bring about there being no nonresistant nonbelievers.

III. Further responses



A. There are natural theological reasons for God's existence, and God has also revealed himself in Jesus Christ, supported by the historicity of his resurrection.

So God is not completely hidden. There are widespread indicators of his existence.



B. What would an absolutely-certain, irrefutable divine manifestation look like?

What if Hanson's Zeus-like figure appeared?
Couldn't we always second-guess or explain away such "manifestations"?

How do we become absolutely sure this remarkable figure isn't an extra-terrestrial *pretending* to be divine?

C. Evidence for God would be accessible but non-coercive and resistible.

Stephen Evans:

#1: the wide-accessibility principle

#2: the easy-resistibility principle


Blaise Pascal: “[God is] willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart ...There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.”

C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Pascal, *Pensées* , #430

D. Plenty of evidence won't inevitably lead to seeking God and or to repentance (intellectual vs. filial knowledge of God).

Evidence can be useful and miracles can lead to belief (John 20:30-31), but this isn't a guarantee that people will invariably believe (Luke 16:31).




Are we looking for the “right” God?
The kind of God we have in mind
will shape the kind of evidence we
have in mind.

Since God is personal, he desires that we have *personal, loving knowledge* of him.

This requires being more than *passively “open.”* We must be *morally serious* toward God who makes *momentous demands of us* (e.g., “take up your cross”).

Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”



Israel's witnessing miracles in the wilderness (Num. 14:14—pillar of cloud/fire; daily manna) though they die in unbelief.

After Korah and his band are swallowed up, the very next day “all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’s people’” (16:41).

Cigarette cartons plainly warn of smoking's negative effects, but this doesn't prevent people from chain-smoking.



Matthew 11:21-24 vs. Luke 16:31?

- ▶ Judgment on Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, where Jesus performed miracles yet the people remained unresponsive (Mt. 11:21-24)? Sodom would have “remained to this day” had he performed miracles there
- ▶ Luke 16:31: *But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’*
- ▶ *Jesus refused to give signs to those who insisted on them for entertainment or evaluative purposes.*

F. The question of God calls for a humble, grateful spirit, not a demanding one.

We should be grateful for whatever glimmers of light God gives rather than insisting on how God should satisfactorily reveal himself to me.

We are not in a proper epistemic position when we insist on what God is obligated to do. Rather, what does God (the Cosmic Authority) demand of me?

“If anyone is willing to do His will,” Jesus affirmed, “he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself” (Jn. 7:17).

Paul Moser



God's purposes to transform us into the image of Christ—which can include divine hiding and obviously takes a good deal of time. Thus, we should not demand that God of “meet our hasty schedules.”

As noted later, what if God will ultimately give postmortem opportunity for any non-resistant seekers who were without unambiguous indicators of God's love during their earthly life?


“Does Divine Hiddenness Justify Atheism?: No” *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., eds. Michael Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 2020), 190.

G. The will is a critical factor in the knowledge of God.

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6).

God hides himself from those who smug in their self-sufficient smartness. “You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants” (Mt. 11:25).

When we use the analogy of parents staying hidden from their children, a more apt analogy would be adult children rather than those of tender age. And we must also recognize the fundamental matter of human pride and rebellion—more relevant for adult humans than children.



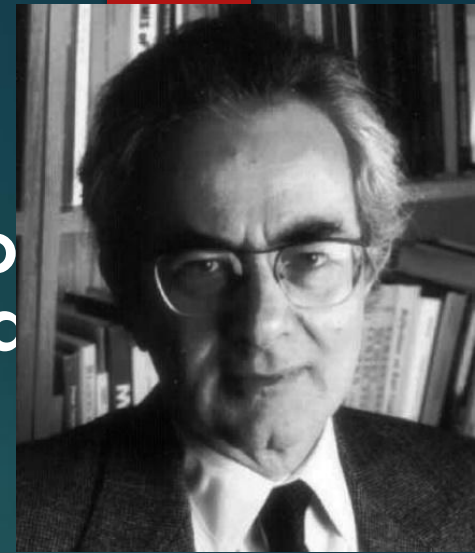
“The will, which prefers one aspect to another, turns away the mind from considering the qualities of all that it does not like to see; and thus the mind, moving in accord with the will, stops to consider the aspect which it likes, and so judges by what it sees.”

▶ Pascal, *Pensées*, 38 (#99).

Thomas Nagel, NYU

“In speaking of the fear of religion, I don’t mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence ... I am talking about something much deeper---namely the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true and I am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I am right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”

Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.




“Mastery”

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933)


*I would not have a god come in
To shield me suddenly from sin,
And set my house of life to rights;
Nor angels with bright burning wings
Ordering my earthly thoughts and things;
Rather my own frail guttering lights
Wind blown and nearly beaten out;
And long, sick groping after doubt;
Rather be lost than let my soul
Slip vaguely from my own control--
Of my own spirit let me be
In sole though feeble mastery.*



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- ▶ Romans 1:18 refers to the majority of humankind who fit precisely into the resistant non-believers camp, who—without divine initiating grace—“suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” For theological reasons, we can contest the claim that there are multitudes of nonresistant nonbelievers, in spite of the evidence about God that has been “clearly revealed, being understood through what has been made so that people are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). In our fallen condition, we don’t seek after God (Rom. 3:11).

H. God's absence may make his presence more clear. God may have reasons for hiding:

- ▶ to give us a deeper appreciation for God;
- ▶ to teach us to trust him when things look black,
- ▶ to foster a greater sense of dependency on God and a renewed determination to obey,
- ▶ to teach us to yearn for relationship with God,
- ▶ to encourage gratitude,
- ▶ to humble us in our pride;
- ▶ to help us realize sin's disastrously negative consequences (Rom. 1).



If, as Schellenberg assumes, “the greatest good any human being could experience” is a relationship with God, then why can’t divine hiddenness contribute to a deepening of this relationship? Hiddenness could be used as part of a “greater good” theodicy.*

We take a similar view on the problem of evil—namely, the knowledge of God is the greatest good, even though this may (and does) include the existence of evil in this world.

What if God’s timing is what matters rather than our own assumptions about what that timing should look like? Would it suffice that God will one day wipe away all tears from our eyes in the new heavens and new earth?

Schellenberg in *Contemporary Debates*, eds. VanArragon and Peterson, 171,

*Thanks to Parker Settecase on this point.