

Why Is God Hidden?

The Hiddenness Argument, and the God Who Comes Veiled

by Richard Whiting

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I. A Question Scripture Asked First

If God exists and wants to be known, why is He so easy to miss? The question is older than philosophy—“Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior” is Isaiah’s sentence, not an atheist’s—but in the last generation it has become the sharpest arrow in the skeptic’s quiver, stated with real rigor by the philosopher J. L. Schellenberg. Unlike the problem of evil, this argument needs no suffering at all: a painless world full of sincere unbelievers would still pose it. And unlike most arguments for atheism, its data are conceded on both sides. The Psalms ask where God is; Job shouts into the silence; the saints named whole seasons of prayer after it; and on a certain Friday afternoon the question was asked from a cross. Christianity did not discover divine hiddenness when Schellenberg published. It has prayed inside it for three thousand years.¹

II. The Argument Stated

State it at full strength. A perfectly loving God, the argument runs, would want a conscious, reciprocal relationship with every person capable of one—as any loving parent wants with a child—and would therefore ensure that everyone open to such a relationship could have it; at minimum, no one genuinely willing to believe would be left unable to. But the world plainly contains nonresistant nonbelievers: people who have sought, studied, prayed into the silence, and would gladly believe if they could—and cannot. Their existence is exactly what a perfectly loving God would not permit. Therefore no perfectly loving God exists; and a God who is not perfectly loving is not the God of Christianity.²

The argument is deliberately independent of suffering, so the machinery of theodicy does not reach it. Relationship with God is itself the greatest good the theist recognizes; what greater good could its absence purchase? The theist who answers hiddenness with his theodicy has answered a different question. The argument must be met on its own ground: at the premise about what perfect love would do.

III. What Would Un-Hiddenness Cost?

So imagine the demand granted: God's existence as undeniable as the sun's—His name in the sky, His voice in every doubt. What exactly would that produce? Belief, certainly; the demons have that, and it makes them shudder (James 2:19). But the relationship the argument says love must seek is not assent to an existence claim; it is trust, surrender, and love returned—and those cannot be extracted by overwhelming evidence, only invited. An omnipotence standing in full view is not a suitor but a fact, and no one freely gives his heart to a fact he cannot escape.

The premise assumes that more evidence always means more relationship. Every human analogy of love says otherwise: there is a self-disclosure that woos and a self-imposition that ends courtship. Pascal weighed both sides of the ledger three centuries before the argument was formalized: there is “enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition”—a world calibrated, he argued, for seeking rather than compulsion, by a God “willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him.” Seeking is not an arbitrary hoop. It is what changes the seeker.³

IV. The Parental Analogy, Run Whole

The argument's engine is its parental analogy, so run it honestly—all the way. A loving parent is not maximally present. A good father withdraws precisely so the child can grow into a self capable of loving him back: he walks behind the bicycle, lets go of the seat, and does not call out that he has let go. Constant, irresistible presence is what smothering

looks like, not love. If God's aim is not bare belief but persons capable of faith, hope, and love—freely grown, in conditions where those virtues are possible—then a world with genuine epistemic distance in it is not evidence against a loving God. It is what the workshop of such a God would be expected to look like.

Two honest cautions belong here. This does not make every instance of unbelief the unbeliever's fault; the Church herself teaches that those who seek God sincerely without finding Him are not outside His mercy, and the Christian who wields “nonresistant nonbelief is impossible” as a weapon has answered cheaply what deserves reverence. And the reply does not pretend to compute God's reasons case by case. It does something more modest and sufficient: it breaks the inference from “hidden” to “unloving,” by showing that love itself has reasons for reticence.⁴

V. The Publicity That Was Tried

The skeptic asks why the God of the Bible, who once showed up in fire and smoke, went quiet. But the biblical spectacles are the experiment already run, and Scripture reports the results with disarming candor. Israel saw Sinai smoke and heard the trumpet—and made the golden calf within the month. Elijah's fire fell on Carmel and a nation shouted that the LORD is God—and Elijah fled Jezebel the same week, and the sequel's point is precisely that God was not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a still small voice. Thomas was offered wounds to touch, and Christ's reply reached past him to everyone after: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). John's Gospel states the pattern as a finding: “Though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him” (John 12:37). Spectacle produces astonishment that decays. It does not produce the thing love wants.⁵

VI. The Map of Belief

What of the demographics—the child of Riyadh becoming a Muslim, of Tulsa a Baptist, of Kyoto neither? The geography of religion is the geography of every human good: literacy, medicine, mathematics, and the arguments for God themselves travel by the same roads, carried by human hands, because God has chosen—scandalously, from the beginning—to reach persons through persons. The map says nothing about God that it does not say about all truths humans transmit. And the Catholic Church, which the objection imagines consigning the unlucky map-squares to darkness, teaches the opposite: that God's grace is not confined to the visible Church, that those who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel yet seek God with a sincere heart may attain salvation, and that the sincere seeker is already being sought.⁶

VII. Hiddenness Is How He Comes Near

The deepest Christian answer is not that God stays away but that He comes veiled—because veiled is how the infinite can be met without being obliterating. He passes by Elijah not in the earthquake but in a whisper. He walks the Emmaus road as a stranger, and the disciples' eyes are kept from recognizing Him until the bread breaks—at which point He vanishes, having taught them where He would be found thereafter. He remains, the Catholic believes, most findable where He is most veiled: in bread, in words of absolution, in the least of His brethren.

And the Incarnation is the pattern's summit and the argument's decisive counter-instance. In Christ, God did what the hiddenness argument demands: came in person, in public, maximally available—touchable, audible, questionable, crucifiable. The result was not universal relationship. “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11). Un-hiddenness did not compel love; it got God crucified—and from that cross came the one cry that places God Himself inside the arguer's experience: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The Christian claim is not that the silence is illusory. It is that God has been inside it, from our side, and that the silence is not the last word: “you will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).⁷

VIII. To the Honest Seeker

A closing word to the reader this essay is really about: the one who has looked, and asked, and heard nothing. The argument from hiddenness treats you as a counterexample to God. The Gospel treats you as a character in its central stories—the Emmaus travelers, walking with a Christ they could not recognize, hearts burning without knowing why. Two things follow from everything above. Your experience is not evidence that no one is there; on the Christian account it is what meeting a non-coercive God mid-search feels like from the inside. And the search itself has a promised shape: not proof at a distance, but a seeking with all the heart that ends at a recognition. The Church cannot hand you the recognition. She can only tell you where the bread is broken, and that the Stranger on the road was never absent—only, for love's reasons, unannounced.

Endnotes

1. Isaiah 45:15; Psalm 44:24; 88:14; Job 23:3–9; Matthew 27:46. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1993), with restatements in his later work. The formulation here paraphrases his.
3. James 2:19; Pascal, *Pensées* (Brunschvicg 430; W. F. Trotter translation).

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§847–848; *Lumen Gentium* §16. The fullest philosophical development of hiddenness as consistent with—and expressive of—divine love is Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford, 2018).

5. Exodus 19–20 with Exodus 32; 1 Kings 18–19; John 20:24–29; John 12:37.

6. *Lumen Gentium* §16; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§847–848; the positive case that Someone is there to be found is made in the essays accompanying “Arguments Pro and Con” on this site.

7. 1 Kings 19:11–13; Luke 24:13–35; John 1:11; Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm 22:1; Jeremiah 29:13.

For Further Reading

The Hiddenness of God, by Michael C. Rea—the fullest Christian philosophical engagement with the hiddenness argument.

Pensées, by Blaise Pascal—light enough to see, obscurity enough to refuse. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm>.

Could God Permit Evil?—the neighboring problem: suffering, where hiddenness borders it. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/theodicy/theodicy.php>.

Arguments Pro and Con—the positive case that Someone is there to be found. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/arguments/arguments.php>.

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“Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior.” — Isaiah 45:15

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Christian response to the argument from divine hiddenness*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.