The Time and Place of Faith:
Does the fact that some people have (had) comparatively-less access to Christian beliefs and practices tell against the existence of the Christian God?

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Abstract

It is often claimed that the Christian religion faced an epistemic crisis upon the first European encounter with the New World in 1492. Modern commentators recognise that the discovery of entirely unknown people groups and vast uncharted territories in the Americas—apparently completely unaccounted for in the text of the Bible—posed a threat to the church’s claims of universal truth. Subsequently, in what many would see partly as a result of this destabilising realisation, pluralism and tolerance have become the chief virtues of Western society. Now, as previously unfamiliar cultures and religions intermingle, it is seen as disrespectful and backward to make claims of religious exclusivity [1]. Unlike the medieval church, we are now aware that for much of the world Christian beliefs are either inaccessible or viewed as culturally irrelevant. This makes the doctrine of the eternal condemnation of adherents of other faiths, many of whom seem to lack the opportunity to make a free response to the gospel, appear to be incoherent with the Christian concept of a loving and just God. In light of vast cultural diversity, the atheological argument from divine hiddenness—that if God existed he would make himself sufficiently apparent so as to prevent all reasonable non-belief—is claimed to be further strengthened by the fact that not only does God hide himself, but he seems to be more hidden to some than others. This essay will analyse the claim that this lends weight to the atheist position, evaluating theistic objections and attempting to determine the internal coherence of the Christian worldview on this point.

Schellenberg’s Argument from Divine Hiddenness

It was J.L. Schellenberg’s influential book Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason (1993) which first attempted to lay out an argument against the existence of God based on the proposed inconsistency of an all-loving deity who allows himself to remain hidden to his creatures. This work has been the focus of much scholarly debate centring on whether these two aspects of God’s nature can be reconciled. In expounding his argument from divine hiddenness (ADH), Schellenberg argues that a personal, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would ensure that all creatures capable of meaningful relationship with him would be able to participate in such a relationship “just by trying to”; and that God would provide all the necessary conditions to sustain that capacity unless the creature chooses to reject them [2]. Since belief that God exists is one of the necessary conditions to sustain relationship, and assuming the “involuntariness of belief”, part of God’s obligation would be to provide “evidence causally sufficient for belief” [3]. Humanity’s experience of God’s presence would therefore be as a “light that—however much the degree of its brightness may fluctuate—remains on unless they close their eyes” [4]. If this were the reality then there could never be an instance of reasonable non-belief—which is to say, non-belief which one isrationally justifed in holding [5]. However, since there is an abundance of what Schellenberg holds to be reasonable non-belief in the world, his conclusion is it follows that such a God does not exist.

Maitzen’s Argument from the Demographics of Theism

Although Schellenberg’s argument has been widely discussed on both sides, Stephen Maitzen in 'Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism' (2006) proposes an addendum in support of ADH which at the time of writing has not yet received much scholarly attention (the only direct response written to date will be assessed below). In this article Maitzen presents the idea that the uneven demographical spread of theistic belief across the world lends further weight to ADH. The claim is that not only does God hide himself and fail to prevent non-belief in general, but his hiddenness seems to be unequally spread across nations and people groups with the majority of individuals inculpably predisposed to disbelief by nature of their location or background. Maitzen gives the example of Saudi Arabia, which is 95 percent Muslim and theistic, and Thailand, which is 95 percent Buddhist and therefore atheistic, and points out that even if God were to allow non-belief to occur, there seems to be no plausible reason as to why he would allow it so unevenly between cultures and people groups [6]. He argues that such demographic data are more readily accounted for by naturalistic explanations than on any plausible theistic model, thus lending weight to the atheist position. Apart from this, the idea that these individuals are offered less opportunity to make a free choice to believe makes the thought of their eternal condemnation appear incongruent with the notion of a just and loving God. Thus Maitzen aims to show that both on inference to the best explanation and on moral grounds the uneven demographical spread of theistic belief seems to count against the existence of the Christian God.

Both ADH and Maitzen’s argument from the demographics of theism (ADT) [7] therefore make the claim that in light of the apparently innocent disbelief of vast swathes of people across the world, Christianity is faced with an inconsistency between the doctrine of exclusivism on the one hand and God’s benevolent nature on the other. In this way the arguments seek to show the
unlikelihood of the existence of God by pointing out what they see as an internal contradiction in the Christian worldview.

**A Question of Justice:**
**Salvation as Supererogatory Grace**

But one response which could be made from the Christian viewpoint is that it is not unjust for God to condemn to hell, as his sovereignty means he is not obligated to save anyone at all. In Christian teaching, anyone who is saved is saved by the free gift of grace and through no merit or special distinction of their own [8]. Humanity has fallen short of the glory of God and therefore stands condemned in the presence of his holiness [9]. It is only by God's mercy that he provides a way of salvation through Jesus Christ and therefore those who reject this offer of peace condemn themselves to eternity excluded from God's presence. William Lane Craig, a leading theist of contemporary philosophy of religion, defends this position stating that "those who make a well-informed and free decision to reject Christ...shut out God's mercy and seal their own destiny. They, therefore, and not God, are responsible for their condemnation, and God deeply mourns their loss" [10]. It is God's unmerited grace which allows for any to be saved and this benevolent act of God is wholly supererogatory. In this way it can be argued that there is no injustice in the notion of God condemning to hell those who reject his free offer.

However, Maitzen's argument from the demographics of theism in particular makes the case that the freedom of many to make what Craig calls a "well-informed and free decision to reject Christ" is hampered by circumstances beyond their control. Whether by virtue of their upbringing, education, time in history or location on the planet, they are placed at a disadvantage when it comes to hearing the message of salvation. It would appear therefore that many never consciously reject God's love as they are deprived of the opportunity to do so--yet God still condemns them. Although humble gratitude at God's generosity is indeed to be the posture of any believer, as he is saved by grace and not by merit, where does this leave the one who disbelieves through no apparent fault of his own and is condemned? How could these individuals be judged culpable--if they are in fact to be judged equally--alongside those who have indeed made a free decision? One might indeed claim that God is not technically obligated to save everyone, but as Schellenberg argues, we would naturally expect a perfectly good being to do so [11].

**Salvation Through General Revelation**

In response to this question, Craig argues that God does in fact desire the salvation of all humanity [12], and that God has provided general revelation of his existence through nature and conscience [13]. This seems to be the thrust of Romans 1:19-20:

> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse [14].

Although humanity is left without excuse, given this general revelation there is scriptural precedent to suggest that although not possessing explicit faith in Christ, some will potentially be saved according to their response to the light they have been given in nature and their inner conscience:

> For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness. (Romans 2:14-15)

It might therefore be argued that ADT does not present a defeater to the coherence of the Christian worldview, and by implication its God, in this respect as scripture seems to allow for the possibility of salvation for those disadvantaged in their lack of opportunity to hear the gospel. This would suggest that each will be judged according to the measure of their obedience to the light that they had. Although Craig rightly points out scripture's indication that the "mass of humanity does not even respond to the light that they do have" [15] in general revelation, the very fact that God would judge those who have not heard to a lower standard refutes ADT's charge of injustice. Schellenberg claims that he only intends to show that the demographics of theism are better explained by naturalistic causes than by theistic ones. Yet the contention that this tells against the existence of God rests upon the assumption that God's condemnation of the epistemically disadvantaged would be unjust. However, in the above way, it has been shown that according to wider Christian teachings, this is not the case.

**A Question of Benevolence**

But even though God, in hiding himself more from some than others, may perhaps be cleared of the charge of injustice, his unequal hiddenness still seems to be contrary to his loving nature. Even if he judges those who've never heard of him to a lower standard, isn't it still unloving to allow them to remain ignorant of his special offer of salvation? Maitzen's argument would suggest that God's love is meted out unfairly along demographical lines. Schellenberg would concur that for God to allow this proves that if he exists he is not loving [16]. Yet, as ADH points out, since it is a necessary truth of God's maximal greatness that he must be unsurpassably loving, this proves that there cannot be a God. Craig also recognizes that God's love is at the heart of the issue, stating, "God is supposed to be omnibenevolent, and it seems difficult to deny that He would be more benevolent if He were to save all persons rather than just some" [17]. It is this emotional aspect of God which must be defended by the theist, especially if he is to be convincing of anything more than logical possibilities.

**Marsh's Proposed Molinist Solution**

One scholar that has attempted to mount a defense against Maitzen's argument is Jason Marsh, who presents a theistic response to ADT in "Do the Demographics of Theistic Belief Disprove Theism? A Response to Maitzen"--the only direct response published to date. [18] Marsh argues that the demographics of belief, far from exhibiting a lack of divine love or justice, by adopting a certain philosophical perspective on the omniscience of God, can in fact be argued to prove the opposite. His contention is that by adopting a Molinist perspective on the nature of omniscience it can be argued God prevents certain individuals from hearing the gospel as an act of loving mercy in order to maintain their innocence for the chance of conversion at a later time--either pre or post-mortem. Molinism, also known as middle-knowledge, seeks to reconcile the problem of human free will and divine omniscience by proposing that both may be maintained if God acts in knowledge not only of what
a human will do, but of what he would do freely in any given situation [19]. Marsh assumes that God’s promise to finally defeat evil means that all will eventually be saved, and that one of the means of achieving this end is through the so-called “grouping strategy” in which souls resistant to the gospel are gathered into geographical regions where inculpable non-belief can be more easily maintained [20]. He claims to thus offer a way to reconcile the problem posed by ADT, stating that Maitzen’s failure to view the issue through a Molinist lens prevents him from seeing that “a certain degree of lopsidedness, far from an oversight on God’s part, may be the providential mechanism through which things get smoothed out in the end” [21].

However, when it comes to explaining the demographics of theism, many might find it hard not to agree with Maitzen that the Molinist perspective argued by Marsh, although logically possible, seems at least more complicated at face value than naturalistic explanations such as politics or culture. Apart from the controversial assumption of universalism that Marsh’s Molinist argument requires, it also entails the serious implication that God would create individuals destined irreconcilably for perdition—an question potentially shared with any position that holds to both restrictivism and God’s foreknowledge. But although Marsh admits that his approach is “more than a little bit messy” [22], he nonetheless succeeds in showing that a theistic answer can be conceived of, contrary to Maitzen’s assertion that ADT “confounds any [theistic] explanation” [23]. The Molinist strategy thus demonstrates the possibility of a coherent theistic explanation; but as Marsh admits, not all will be convinced of the plausibility and—it must be added—Biblical orthodoxy of the one offered thus far.

**The Demographical Limitations of the Incarnation**

From a different perspective, another possible answer to ADT might stem from the Christian teaching that God’s ultimate revelation was in human form and thus necessarily restricted to a certain historical moment and geographical location. By the incarnation of Jesus, God chooses to limit his omnipresence and constrains himself to time and history. By choosing the particular time and culture in which he was to be incarnated, it follows that Jesus necessarily excluded others. With regards to the reasons for doing this, it can be claimed that in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, God partnered with humanity in the project of salvation, charging them with the mission to extend his message of salvation to every culture and people group. Just as God had extended divine creative authority to humankind in the command to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28), he now extended the mission of redemption to his children as well. In light of this, it could be claimed that we should not be surprised at the demographic unevenness of theistic belief because the project of spreading the message of the gospel is still underway. Indeed, the imbalance provides Jesus’ disciples with greater impetus to reach the uttermost parts of the globe with his message. To pursue this course, it would need to be explored why incarnation would represent the ultimate method of revelation and also the reasons for which partnering with humanity in the project of salvation might be a special grace. Of course, the implications of the above answer to ADT deserve much fuller treatment, but suffice it to say that this constitutes another possible theistic approach which might answer Maitzen’s argument.

**Conclusion**

In sum, we have seen that both ADH and ADT present what appear to be formidable challenges to the Christian worldview, claiming that the concept of a just and loving God is incompatible with the phenomenon of non-belief and the uneven demographic spread of non-belief in particular. However, by showing that God’s offer of salvation is entirely supererogatory and that Christian scripture allows for the possibility of salvation via response to general revelation in nature, we have seen that the charge of injustice in the condemnation of unbelievers is successfully overcome. By contrast, the more serious implications of ADT have to do with the question of whether or not, in this light, God’s benevolent character still can be said to remain intact. Maitzen claims that ADT fits better with naturalistic explanations and that no theistic reason is forthcoming. Indeed, he adds that it is hard to see how any theistic response could account for the data. However, although Marsh’s Molinist response is perhaps more complicated than naturalistic answers, he nonetheless shows that a theistic explanation is possible and worth pursuing. Finally, it has been suggested that the implications of the incarnation might provide a further line of enquiry for the theist in response to this argument. It could be argued that the space-time limitations inherent in God becoming man may hold explanatory power for the demographic unevenness of theistic belief. All in all, it has been shown that although the argument from the demographics of theism does present a challenge to belief in the Christian God, contrary to Maitzen’s claims, there is nothing to suggest that a strong theistic answer cannot be formulated, and neither can it be claimed to present a defeater to theism in light of the wider arguments in its favour.

**Endnotes**

1. Craig, 1995
2. Schellenberg, 2005a: 202
3. Ibid: 203
4. Ibid: 203
5. Ibid: 206
7. Acronym mine. Maitzen himself does not name his particular argument.
8. Ephesians 2:8-9
9. Romans 3:11-18, 23
10. Craig, 1989
11. Schellenberg, 2005a
12. 1 Timothy 2:4
13. Craig, 1989
15. Craig, 1989
16. Schellenberg, 2005a: 204
17. Craig, 1995
19. Laing, John, ‘Middle Knowledge’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* <http://www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn> accessed 05/05/12
20. Marsh, 2008: 468
21. Ibid, 468
22. Ibid, 468
23. Maitzen, 2006: 177
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15. Piper J. Jesus: The Only Way to God; Must You Hear the Gospel to be Saved? Grand Rapids: 2010.

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