**God is NOT Hidden**

According to one story, Bertrand Russell was once challenged with the question, “If you died and went to Heaven to be judged by God, how would excuse your unbelief?” Russell replied, “Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence!” Many people feel justified in making the same defense. To their minds, there is not enough evidence, either from natural theology or Christian apologetics, to justify religious belief to a sufficiently high degree to make that belief credible. As such, it is not rational, and is indeed doxastically impermissible, to profess Christian religious belief. Of course, many believers contend that they *do* have evidence, and sufficient evidence, to rationally justify their religious beliefs, regardless of unbelievers’ claims to the contrary. However, not wishing to doubt that the sincerity or propriety of the unbeliever’s presumably rational judgment, many have supposed that there is such a thing as *reasonable* unbelief, according to which many unbelievers are rationally entitled to their skepticism about the existence of God and the claims of Christianity.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to proponents of the argument from divine hiddenness, however, the existence of reasonable unbelief gives rise to an argument for atheism in its own right. For, it is claimed, if reasonable unbelief is even so much as *possible*, then an argument for atheism similar to the problem of evil rears its head. According to this argument, if there is even a single case of reasonable unbelief, no one’s religious belief can be rational, even in principle.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The argument basically goes like this. If the theistic God exists, and genuinely loves His rational creatures, He will make His presence known to them in such a way as to leave no doubt as to His existence and intentions. In that case, rational unbelief will be impossible and unbelief itself a rare phenomenon, a truly crazy belief that only a few hard-bitten souls will embrace. This, of course, is not what we observe as a matter of fact. Nowadays, many apparently normal, fully rational human beings not only doubt, but positively reject, belief in God and the Christian gospel, and do not seem to need or miss such belief in any way. The existence of God not only is not obvious to such people; it does not even seem something that needs to be seriously considered. In particular, having been taught that everything that exists is merely the product of chance and necessity, they are not impressed with traditional formal arguments for God’s existence. As such, God’s existence does not seem to be as evident as we would expect it to be if such a being existed. Thus, from the mere fact that God’s existence can be reasonably doubted it follows that such a God probably does not exist.

More pointedly, this argument is often seen to be especially troublesome for Christianity. The Christian God would surely want to save as many souls as possible and so would want to make His existence as undeniable as possible. Yet many seem quite capable of doubting the truth of Christianity with very little difficulty, indeed, with even greater ease than they doubt the existence of a theistic God. For many, perhaps most people today, it seems *prima facie* much more likely than not that Christianity (or at any rate, traditional Christianity) is false. This is not just an embarrassment and a challenge for Christian apologists, but in itself evidence for the claim that Christianity is probably false. For if Christianity were true, God would have made sure that He left us with an undeniably powerful witness, one so well attested that no reasonable doubt could attach to its truth. Once again, is seems contrary to what we observe. God, it seems, is hidden from us, and withholds His presence from the rational creatures He is supposed to be so concerned to save. The question then becomes “What possible reason would justify such a God in withholding Himself from His rational creatures, and making it so easy for them to miss their salvation?” The answer seems to be “Nothing” – an infinitely powerful, knowledgeable, and loving God would have no excuse for withholding Himself from us in such a way. As such, we should conclude not that God is hidden, but rather that He does not exist, and that Christianity is at best a fable and at worst a lie.

In response to this challenge, there are a number of standard responses on offer.[[3]](#footnote-3) First, there is skeptical theism, which suggests that it is logically possible that God has a good reason for hiding Himself from us, one which we have no expectation of being able to understand. Second, there is the classical theodical approach, suggesting that God has a good reason for not making His existence too overwhelmingly obvious, such as the necessity of free will for the possibility of a genuine loving response to God’s offer of salvation. Third, there is the view promoted by certain Reformational Protestants, according to which the merit attaching to faith would be destroyed if God’s existence were obvious, or provable using the arguments of traditional natural theology. Whatever the merits of these approaches, the position taken in this paper is distinct from these.

In contrast to the foregoing, I deny that God is hidden, and thus that these is such a thing as *genuinely* reasonable unbelief. While I do not rule out the possibility that there may be cases on non-culpable non-belief (such as that captured by the traditional notion of “invincible ignorance”) and that there may even be some people who, through no fault of their own, believe that their unbelief is reasonable, I simply deny that this is ever *actually* the case, regardless of what anyone may think.[[4]](#footnote-4) While I make no attempt to identify any such cases, a clear implication of this paper will be that if Christianity is true, a great many, perhaps most, atheists are guilty of *culpable* non-belief, though we may not be any position to determine this from the outside.

I

It is sometimes asserted, even by Christian intellectuals, that a good God would not punish an honest atheist, i.e. one who sincerely embraces atheism as true, for failing to believe and accept the Gospel. Such persons, we are told, will be judged on the basis of their moral conduct, acting according to their own lights. If Christianity is true, however, this simply cannot be the case. Traditional Christianity maintains that salvation comes solely through the saving death of Christ for those who repent and believe the Gospel. Of course, there has to be some leeway in the notion of what belief consists in, and I do not exclude the possibility that some may be saved without making a formal profession of faith in Christ – Christians must never put *a priori* limits on the power of God’s grace to save. More than this, I genuinely believe that every human being, regardless of circumstances and occurrent knowledge, will have the opportunity to make his or her choice for Christ in this life, in whatever guise it comes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nevertheless, those who make an informed, willful choice to reject the Christian message must be prepared to forego the salvation they have rejected, simply as a matter of consistency, and not suppose that they will be able to get it on the cheap. Indeed, if this were not the case, then unbelief would be the royal road to Heaven. While Christians are called to prayer and worship, held to high standards of personal moral conduct and even called to be perfect as their Heavenly Father is, the honest atheist is absolved from all of these requirements due to his non-belief and will be saved simply by acting according to his own lights. Since contemporary atheists tend to have fairly permissive views about human conduct, these lights are pretty dim. As such, the atheist’s acting according to his own lights amounts to very little being required to on the part of the honest unbeliever to be saved. One even envisages here a version of Pascal’s Wager suggesting that one ought, if at all possible, to cultivate atheism as the easiest, least burdensome way to achieve salvation. Why take masses and holy water when one can simply tie God’s hands, placing oneself beyond the possibility of divine censure for anything one believes or does “by one’s own lights” simply by refusing to believe and living accordingly?

If Christianity is true, then, those who explicitly reject the Gospel and embrace atheism run the very serious risk of eternal damnation as a consequence, consistent with and indeed entailed by their own free choice. God does not have a sliding scale that allows the creature to decide according to which standard God ought to judge him. This entails, in turn, that God will hold many people responsible for their actions according to standards that they do not accept but which God has promulgated and revealed to us for our own sakes. Christian belief is not a trivial, or merely academic matter – if Christianity is true, our entire future happiness depends on our believing that this is so. Given the likely consequences of non-belief, to the extent that Christian belief is *prima facie* reasonable, then given what is at stake it ought to be seriously considered by anyone capable of recognizing that fact, even if one also recognizes that there is a case for the other side. More than this, to the extent that Christianity proves to be genuinely reasonable upon examination, it cannot be reasonable to embrace atheism in preference to Christianity. Thus, given what is at stake, even without apodictic proof of the Christian point of view it is both reasonable to embrace the Christian message and extremely urgent that we do so.

The same holds even if there is only argumentative parity between the Christian and the atheistic point of view. Indeed, even a preponderance of evidence in favor of atheism would not be sufficient to justify embracing atheism, just so long as it was sufficiently likely that Christianity is true to make it a live option for belief. It would be reasonable to embrace atheism in preference to Christianity only if one were convinced that Christian belief is so improbable or likely to be false that no credible case can be made for it. I can only report, in my case, that this does not strike me to be true and that people who think otherwise simply have not looked into the matter with anything like an open mind. (The reason for this we will consider in the sequel.) At the very least, from the Christian point of view, one ought to affirm that there can be no such thing as *genuinely* reasonable unbelief. We do our unbelieving friends and colleagues no good by withholding these consequences from them, or soft-pedaling it in order not to offend them.

II

The proponent of the argument from divine hiddenness takes it to be a fact, or an obvious implication of certain obvious facts, that if God exists He is hiding Himself from us. Indeed, initially it makes no sense to suppose that the fact of divine hiddenness could even be sensibly questioned. If God existed and were not hidden, then there could and would be no question about the matter; God’s existence would be undeniable and to suggest otherwise would be absurd. In that case, the Christian who denies this must be supposing that the apparent hiddenness of God must be some sort of illusion, and this seems hardly credible. If it even so much as *appears* that God is hidden, then given the Principle of Credulity, the *prima facie* best explanation for its appearing to be the case that God is hidden is that either He is hidden or fails to exist at all. As such, the burden of proof is on the Christian believer to account for this fact, and his or her failure to do so strongly suggests that the Christian God does not exist after all.

Some opponents of the argument from hiddenness, like Alvin Plantinga, sometimes suggest that divine hiddenness is simply one of the cognitive effects of original sin.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to Plantinga, the primary means by which we acquire knowledge of God’s existence and nature is the *sensus divinitatis*, a special sort of perceptual faculty that produces a spontaneous, basic belief in God in much the same way that ordinary sense perception produces a spontaneous basic belief in an external world of independently existing material things. As we came from the hand of our Creator, this faculty worked perfectly well and left no doubt concerning God’s existence and benevolence for those possessing it. However, as a result of original sin, this faculty is weakened or damaged in such a way that it no longer functions as its Maker intended. As a result, its witness and testimony to God’s existence and nature is somewhat muted. In Reformational Protestantism, this sort of view is sometimes associated with a general conviction that the consequences of original sin affect discursive reason itself. In that case, to oppose one’s corrupt, incompetent reason to the witness of the Biblical revelation upon which Christian faith is properly based is as foolish as it is wicked. In this context, there really can be no contest between Biblical faith and reason.

Plantinga stops well short of this, but we need to note in passing that any view of this kind skirts the risk of self-refutation or special pleading. If our cognitive faculties are corrupt and depraved in such a way that affects their capacity to discover substantive truth, we can hardly regard them as trustworthy to establish that fact. Nor can we appeal directly to revelation on this point, since our understanding of revelation must inevitably be mediated through our cognitive faculties, including our reason. Even the claim that there are individuals who have been granted direct, intuitive awareness of divine truth transcending the operation of those faculties will not escape this problem, since there will have to be criteria for distinguishing real from spurious claims to this sort of inspiration, and reason will have to be used to arrive at and apply them.

More seriously, however, one may question whether this really makes any response to the divine hiddenness problem. If the primary cognitive faculty from which the grounds for properly basic belief in God and knowledge of his nature is to be derived is supposed to be malfunctioning, can I be blamed for the fact that I do not believe? Although I have inherited original sin and its effects in my nature, I am hardly morally responsible for that fact and so can hardly be blamed for my unbelief in that case. Of course, some Reformational Protestants refuse to concede this, insisting that all persons are culpable for their fallenness as such (“in Adam all sinned”), and thus for their failure to believe as well. However, for most of us, that God holds people culpable for their non-belief in circumstances in which our cognitive faculties fail to function as they should seems to call the divine justice into question unless that unbelief is due to something for which we are individually, and not merely corporately, responsible. Thus, to account for the illusion of divine hiddenness in this way seems either not to fully appreciate the problem to which it is addressed or to ground Christianity on counterintuitive claims.

III

Although I believe that the view I just sketched is on the right track, it needs some tweaking to present a credible defense of the claim that the hiddenness of God is not only an illusion, but an illusion that is the product of sin in such a way that many people who claim that God is hidden from them are morally culpable for this fact, and thus justly excluded from eternal life with God on that account. To begin with, I will consider briefly how we should understand the *sensus divinitatis*. Next, I will discuss the nature of the effects of original sin as they exist in our motivational structure. Following this, I will suggest that, given our disordered motivational structure, we are subject to powerful incentives tempting us to ignore, evade, or distort the evidence produced by the *sensus divinitatis* even though it is working properly. The illusion of divine hiddenness, then, is not the direct artifact of original sin, but rather the psychologically complex product that results when we freely succumb to the promptings of our disordered motivational structure and deceive ourselves into believing that there is no God who will punish us for doing the sinful actions to which it prompts us, including the choice to reject Christian belief. In that case, there is no problem of divine hiddenness for Christianity and many, perhaps most of those who think this do so culpably. In that case, if Christianity is in fact true they will be justly subject to divine punishment as a consequence of their refusal to believe.

So what, then, is this mysterious “sensus divinitatis”? Although Plantinga, under the influence of Scottish philosophy, thinks of each of our cognitive faculties as a separate, discrete perceptual or quasi-perceptual sense, we need not follow him in this.[[7]](#footnote-7) Instead, we may think of the sensus divinitatis simply as our common, human intellect taken in relation to the standard experiential grounds for theistic belief and functioning in such a way as to produce a spontaneous judgment that there exists a providential theistic God. As even Hume admits, we naturally and ineluctably judge that there is a God when we contemplate the order, complexity, and beauty of nature just as we believe in selves, causes, the validity of induction and the existence of an external world.[[8]](#footnote-8) I would claim that we similarly make this judgment (unless we have either chosen or been trained to steel ourselves against it) when we recognize the contingency of the universe, hear the voice of conscience, or consider the notion of perfect being/ultimate reality. Whatever its ground, this spontaneous judgment, when freely acquiesced in, becomes a positive belief in the existence of such a being. On the basis of the principle of credulity, according to which it is reasonable to suppose that most of our spontaneous judgments are true, we are warranted in this acquiescence, at least *prima facie*. Of course, this *prima facie* warrant can be defeated or overridden by other considerations and evidence. However, this will only be the case if the sources from which that evidence is derived are trustworthy. I shall now argue that Christians ought to distrust this apparently contrary evidence due to the fact that it very likely reflects a systematically defective perspective on reality.

Nearly all traditional, Augustinian Christians accept the doctrine of original sin and maintain that all human beings inherit, and are born with, original sinfulness as a result. Because of this, all human beings are born in a state of rebellion against God and are in need of salvation. The primary effect of original sin is a disordered motivational structure, which I call our “natural bent,” which endows us with exaggerated appetites, unruly passions, and the inordinate desires we acquire under their aegis. Given our natural bent, which is opposed to the authentic human nature that we originally received from our Creator, we most strongly want the things of which reason and morality disapprove. Even though we know at one level that these things are not truly good for us, we nevertheless desire them to such a degree that we do our best to ignore that fact, acting instead under the false belief (informed by a false perspective on those things that we ourselves have constituted to cast them in their best light) that these things are good for us and necessary for our happiness. In so doing, we succumb to temptation, make the choice to pursue those false goods, and take the pleasure that results from acquiring them to be the good. This results in freely chosen actual sin, consequent loss of innocence, and thus the need for salvation from our hopeless plight.

Since our natural bent is fundamentally irrational and makes us enemies of God from birth, there is a part of each of us, even each Christian insofar as the New Man has not yet replaced the Old, which desires that the Christian God not exist. This is because the full and clear apprehension of the existence of the Christian God and His will for us proves to be incompatible with acting in accordance with our natural bent, which in our sinfulness forms the fondest wishes of our hearts. This, in turn, is a major source of cognitive dissonance, self-accusation, and feelings of guilt resulting from a divided self that recognizes at one level that we are bent wrongly but continues to act as our disordered motivational structure prompts us. At the same time, since we know that the Christian God hates sin and will punish us as we deserve for our derelictions, we have at the same a well-grounded basis for fearing that punishment. We could, of course, seek God’s forgiveness and make amendment of life. However if, in order to avoid this unpleasant state of “divided mind” we would rather follow our natural bent instead, the best strategy will be to contrive to ignore the evidence in favor of God’s existence or, given that this proves impossible, to try to evade evade its force. If the evidence for God’s existence were intrinsically so weak that it conferred little or no plausibility on that belief, there would be no need or reason for us to engage in this sort of self-deceptive subterfuge. However, for those intent on following our natural bent where it leads, and thus to adopting the point of view on reality and human life consistent with the way of life it dictates, even reason itself must be prostituted in the attempt to build a bulwark against the inbreaking of the awareness of God, along with anything else that might undermine our conviction that our natural bent is normal, healthy, and necessary for happiness in this life.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Symptomatic of this is the oft-heard claim that, as opposed to the wrathful God of the Old Testament, the New Testament God is a God of love, who eschews the petty, moralizing judgmentalism that we find in so many of His myopic Christian followers. Rather, it is claimed, God sees, understands and forgives all of our petty human faults without our even asking, simply out of indulgent love for us. God, we are told, loves us just the way we are and requires nothing of us beyond perhaps the avoidance of overt violence and the occasional act of kindness towards others. Indeed, even some Christians indulge this idea, conceiving of salvation as a free gift with no strings or conditions attached to it. On this sort of view, there is nothing really wrong with us, so we do not really need salvation to begin with, so no God is needed to supply this need. In that case, of course, the very idea of God is superfluous and belief in such a being incredible – witness the “problem of evil.”

The traditional Christian message, however, is incompatible with this pleasant fantasy. The mystery of salvation is that, even though and even while we were sinners, God acted to save us from our sins through a supererogatory act, the suffering and death of the Incarnate God in the person of Jesus Christ. God loves us, not as we are insofar as we are sinners living in accordance with the promptings of our natural bent, which after all is bent wrong by original sin. Rather, He loves us for the sake of His image and likeness in us and for what we could become through the working of His grace in us, leading us to fulfillment and happiness through the perfection of our *true* nature, the shape and direction of which is contrary to our sinful natural bent. The Christian message, then, is not one of reassurance concerning the *status quo* but of transformation through the grace of Christ as the means of salvation, one that by degrees *reorganizes* our motivational structure in accordance with the dictates of reason and genuine virtue. The problem is that, insofar as we are in sin and deeply committed to a life in accordance with our sinful natural bent, we are not prepared to believe this message, or even to give it a hearing. We do not *want* salvation at such a steep price and therefore prefer to believe that there is no God. It lies within the power of our wills, given God’s prevenient grace, to so believe and allow sanctifying grace to lead us to conversion. At the same time, the fact that we do not *want* to believe due to the influence of our sinful natural bent provides a strong (though with God’s help resistible) incentive to deny and reject that grace. However, if we freely choose to do reject that grace, thereby rejecting God’s offer of salvation, we become hardened in sin and resolutely turned away from God and His will for us. When this happens, we are lost. Those who die in final impenitence lost without hope of recovery.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This, in turn, requires for our own peace of mind that we do everything in our power to constitute the world as one in which the Christian God is *absent*. Although there are undoubtedly many strategies for accomplishing this, let me describe one possible and very likely typical means by which this can be accomplished. The first step is simple *evasion* of the Christian message and the evidence for it, including the evidence provided by the *sensus divinitatis*. The second step is *skepticism*, where we call into question, not merely the evidence for Christianity, but the values and ideals promoted by that religion, so opposed to the things that we *really* want in accordance with the bent of our fallen nature. The third stage in the development of this sort of process is open contempt and disdain for Christianity and for Christians; one finds the very fact that Christians continue to exist and profess their faith a matter of offense. Finally, this results in a spirit of *intolerance* and *persecution*, at first directed against the public expression of Christian worship, symbols, and values and then finally directed against the claims of conscience, as Christians are legally forced to conform to the dominant values and practices of a society that valorizes our natural bent as the true expression of human nature and its ideal. The logical terminus of this development will be the legal suppression of Christianity altogether.

A person of this sort raised, in a society of this sort, will very likely see God as hidden, because God is in fact hidden, not through His withholding Himself from our vision, but rather through our having hidden Him, both individually and collectively, from ourselves as part of a strategy of avoidance. It is perhaps at least partly for this reason that the “argument from Hiddenness” has emerged in recent years as a major argument for atheism and against Christianity. Many people are now the products of families that have been irreligious for two, and in some cases, three generations and who have firmly embraced their fallenness as something natural, good, enlightened and liberal; in their case, the voice of conscience has been stilled. They have been taught that science and technology are the place to look for the answers to all questions worth asking and all problems that need solving. Most likely, they have also been taught that religious people are ignorant, hypocritical, intolerant, and wicked. The claims and evidences for theism and Christianity are dismissed by their parents and teachers as no more credible than a fairy tale and they follow suit. Opportunities to encounter and examine that message are limited and curiosity concerning it discouraged. In short, many people today live in a world in which the dominant ideology is not only indifferent to religion, but positively hostile to it, especially in its Christian form. Having been acculturated into such a milieu, one as though designed to anticipate and block any possible path to the apprehension of God *via* the *Sensus Divinitatis*, it is not surprising that God appears to be hidden from them. Then, responding in a knee-jerk fashion from their fallen perspective, such persons accuse God of withholding Himself from them, of deliberately hiding Himself, and then unjustly punishing them for their unbelief. The truth of the matter, however, is that God has been hidden from them by a society that has done everything in its power to hide God from them.

Given human fallenness and our consequent rebellion against God, Christianity predicts that many, perhaps most people will choose to affirm and live their fallenness rather than make the choice for Christ, in whatever form that comes. The spectre of unbelief, then, should not be a matter of intellectual concern or worry for committed Christians. Nor does it represent even the ghost of an argument against the reality, goodness, or presence of God in the world. The existence of unbelievers not only is not contrary to what Christianity predicts about the world, but rather a confirmation of it. Instead of being a cause for doubt, “divine hiddenness” should be a motive for Christian witness and evangelization out of concern for those whose are going to Hell in a hand basket, so that (as St. Paul puts it) at least some of them may be saved.

In fact, there is more than sufficient evidence for the existence of God to make belief in God plausible when viewed from an impartial point of view. Anyone familiar with the history of the philosophy of religion in the latter half of the twentieth century ought to be willing to admit that theistic philosophers have made great strides, both in answering the objections to theism and especially the seemingly formidable critiques of the traditional arguments for God’s existence, all of whom have proven their resilience in the face of the most concerted attempts to refute or otherwise undermine them. This is a fact that even some fair-minded atheists are willing to concede, at least in some cases.[[11]](#footnote-11) No one can plausibly claim that there is no case to be made for theism in contemporary philosophy or that belief in God is possible only for benighted fools who reject reason and science.[[12]](#footnote-12) If so, then, God is not hidden, however much we may have blinded ourselves to His presence, nor has God failed to adequately justify His existence to our reason.

For this reason, it remains important for Christian philosophers and Christian apologists to continue to present the rational case for theism and Christian belief, despite increasing hostility and persecution, and to continue to convict this sinful world of its irrationality and wickedness. The philosophical defense of natural theology and the defense of traditional morality are important aspects of this witness. The bulwarks that sin has raised against the inbreaking of the apprehension of God must be attacked and razed, for it is often those who are the most vehement critics of Christianity who are the least confident in their unbelief despite their intransigence and dogmatism. For others, these exercises can serve as *praeambula fidei*, a source through which prevenient grace can be conducted to the souls of students, colleagues, and to others who may be intellectually open to the Christian message. Such researches also help strengthen the faith of those who already believe, to relieve their doubts and allay their fears. With so much strident, dismissive, and poorly argued anti-Christian polemic in the air, Christian intellectuals have a greater burden and mandate then at any other time in recent history to take on the role of *defensor fide*. The case must be stated calmly but confidently, with as much rigor as is needed to meet the case for the other side. At the same time, we must not overestimate the importance of this work, assume burdens we cannot carry, or promise more than we can accomplish. Contrary to what many unbelievers think, making the case for theism is not make-or-break for Christian religious belief.[[13]](#footnote-13) Neither can the standard for success be set by those who are antecedently resolved (on pre-philosophical grounds) not to believe in God or in Christ and are willing to make any intellectual sacrifice in order to avoid this outcome.

More than this, we must remember that the Christian God has entered into history in a most dramatic way in the life, death and ministry of Christ, a witness that leaves no doubt concerning what He requires of us from the point of view of faith. This has been consistently taught through the ages by His Church and promulgated to the ends of the Earth. There is nothing obscure or ambiguous about this message as traditionally taught, believed, and practiced by Christians down through the ages. Indeed, if this were not so, there would not be so much opposition to that message or so many people engaged in the project of attempting to refute it. If the Christian revelation is true, no one can plausibly claim that the Christian God has failed to make His will and presence known to his rational creatures. Indeed, so much is this the case that, until very recently, the most persistent threat to the Christian message has come, not from without, but from within in the form of cognitive idolatry consisting in various attempts to water down the Christian message to make it palatable to those unwilling to repent and believe the Gospel.[[14]](#footnote-14) Only those who propagate such attempts, under whatever name, are fooled by them. Unbelievers know a sellout when they see it, and simply flatter themselves that, if this is what Christianity comes to in the end, they were right to reject it all along. Traditional Christians, of course, do believe that the Gospel is true; as such, they need no reason to entertain the notion that God is hidden.

Believing Christians, then, need not be troubled by the problem of divine hiddenness, however mysterious God’s providential actions may sometimes appear. God is hidden to sinners, but only as a consequence of their own, self-imposed intellectual blindness, which Bernard Lonergan has called a *scotoma*.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is quite otherwise for the Christian who has been freed by the grace of Christ from that blinkered perspective and for whom the presence God becomes the more palpable as one grows in living faith. Indeed, in the lives of the great saints, the presence of God is nearly as great as it was for our prelapsarian ancestors, whom we are told walked and talked with God in the Garden.

In the *Gospel of John*, Dives the rich man languishes in Hell while Lazarus, after a lifetime of suffering and neglect at Dives’ hands, is comforted in the bosom of Abraham. Dives begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his six brothers, so that they may avoid his own fate. “They have the law and the prophets to guide them,” says Abraham, “Let them heed them.” “But they will not heed them,” says the rich man. “Then,” says Abraham, “they will not believe, even though one should come back from the dead.” One has come back from the dead, and has not been believed, not because there is not enough evidence but because, like Dives’ brothers, we have not wanted to believe it. This is not God’s fault, but ours, and there will be no appeal from His just judgment if we try to claim otherwise.

Whether the atheist’s unbelief is culpable or inculpable is a matter of his or her motives for unbelief, something that cannot be judged from outside. Even so, it seems clear enough that there are a lot of people who don’t *want* to believe in God and will resist this belief at almost any cost. If you are one of those people, the question you need to ask yourself is, “*Why* don’t I want to believe in God?” God, of course, can infallibly know the answer to this question in every case through His power of *cardiognosis*, but unlike God our powers of cardiognosis are limited, so that we are not in a position to judge these matters with certainty. For this reason, Christians should refrain from making such judgments, something that in any case is God’s prerogative, not theirs. Nevertheless, it behooves every atheist to raise and seriously consider this question for him- or herself from the internal point of view, facing it with full honesty while being psychologically prepared for an unflattering result. Having arrived at such a result, the question then arises, “What should I do about it?”

That is the question. That is the question indeed.

1. In what follows, I shall use “non-belief” generically to refer to any lack of belief in God, whether culpable or inculpable. I shall reserve “unbelief” to refer to the state of positive, willful disbelief in God’s existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Theodore Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil*, Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Press, 1998, and J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the essays in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness*: New Essays, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This would make my position something like the Christian distaff to William L. Rowe’s condescendingly “Friendly Atheism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Peter Geach, *The Virtues*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, 31-32 concerning the story of the Viking known as “Bairnsfriend.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, *Warranted Christian Belief*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, 206-218. Although Plantinga, following Calvin, says that our intellects have been blinded by sin, the account he gives in the text is certainly consistent with what I say here. All the examples he gives to illustrate this intellectual blindness are, in fact, consistent with the idea that the intellect is entirely intact and it is our disordered will that leads us to voluntarily blind ourselves to the evidence for God that is right there before us to be seen. If so, the difference between us on this point may be merely verbal. Even so, I prefer my way of putting this to Calvin’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Warranted Christian Belief*, op. cit., 170-177. Again, I am not sure how important this difference between my view and that of Plantinga turns out to be in the final analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hume repeatedly says this, both in the *Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*; see, e.g. Timothy Yoder, *Hume on God*, New York, Continuum, 2008, 81-120 for an examination of the evidence on this point. While Yoder successfully defends Hume against the charges of atheism and deism, he tends to soft-pedal Hume’s irreligion. For a good corrective to this, see Paul Russell, *The Mystery of Hume’s Treatise*, New York, Oxford, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One illuminating way of viewing Hume’s philosophy, for example, is to see it precisely as devoted to this sort of project and pursuing it in a ruthlessly single-minded way. If it is the case that reason leads us to God, to avoid this result requires that Hume arrive, as of course he does, at a thoroughgoing skepticism concerning the power of reason and the possibility for attaining theoretical knowledge. I hope to write on this in another place. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I reject universalism on the ground that it trivializes choice for Christ, by allowing us to infinitely defer that choice until we have either had enough fun, or suffered the consequences of our wrong choices to the point where we are finally ready, in our own time and at our own good pleasure, to submit to God. If I will have infinite opportunities to accept the gift of salvation, there can be no good reason to accept it in this life if I would rather do anything else. After all, the choice for Christ is always available and so can be deferred indefinitely without cost. Similar considerations apply (*mutatis mutandis*) to the idea of reincarnation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, among many excellent examples, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. This is only one of many excellent books and collections by Christian philosophers defending theism. By contrast, the number of comparable defenses of atheism reduces to a mere handful and even some of these concede that theism is an intellectually respectable position, even if a false one. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Despite the great noise made by the New Atheists, there is really nothing at all new in their arguments against theism or Christianity; all of their objections have been answered a hundred times before they were they ever made them. For a recent examination of, e.g., the relation between science and religious belief that examines the claims of the “New Atheists,” see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. There are many others, appropriately written mostly by popular Christian apologists. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See “A Brief Note on Christianity and Theism,” in preparation. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For the notion of Cognitive Idolatry, see Paul Moser, *The Elusive God*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, especially 101-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insigh*t, New York, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1957, 191-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)