New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12705

COMMENT: THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

1

Let's suppose that honest atheists, when criticized by Christians for not believing that God exists, were challenged to defend themselves before God (on a day of judgment, say). Let's also suppose that their reply is: 'God, please excuse us, but you did not give us enough evidence'.

Should we think of these atheists as missing something important about belief in God? Should we cheer them on? What should we think of them?

It would be insensitive not to sympathize with them. The atheists now in question are 'honest' in the sense of being open to believing that God exists. They are not claiming that God's existence is impossible. Some of them are well informed about the history of philosophical and theological discussions concerning the existence and nature of God.

They are not self-declared atheists because they think that being so will help them on their career path. They are not self-identifying themselves as atheists while trying to deny something about themselves — as alcoholics might profess themselves to be sober. They *just do not believe* that God exists — as anyone might not believe that witches exist or that there is any such thing as the Loch Ness Monster. To them, God is *hidden*.

You might think that they *just ought* to believe that God exists. But our honest atheists are likely to say that 'ought' implies 'can' and that they cannot bring about in themselves the belief that such and such is the case by turning on something like a light switch. They will say that they cannot just 'cause' themselves to believe that God exists anymore than they can just 'cause' themselves to believe in the existence of wizards, or goblins, or anything else one might care to mention.

They might add that belief is not subject to human will — that, like knowledge, it is a *state*, not an *act*, and, therefore, not subject to praise or blame. They might well concede that ignorance (involving a lack of belief) can be criticized since there are times when we ought to have informed ourselves of something or other. They might also accept that there are steps that we can willingly take so as to acquire certain beliefs — that one might, for example, consult a map so as to figure out how to drive from London to Penzance. Yet, they might add, when push

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12705 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comes to shove, one cannot *will* oneself into a state of belief anymore than one can *will* oneself into a state of knowledge.

Most likely, they will rightly say that 'Consult maps before driving' is an imperative that makes sense, while 'Believe that 2+2 = 4' is not. Having ploughed through literature on the foundations of mathematics you may well end up believing that 2+2 = 4. You probably believe it already and without recourse to such literature. The point, however, is that 'choosing to believe' does not enter into the equation here. You can choose to *act* on the belief (as presented to you as something worthy of belief). You can choose to try to convert people to agree with the belief. But it seems hard to see how you can intelligibly *choose to believe* that, say, 2+2 = 4, or that God exists. This, anyway, is what some honest atheists would say in defense of themselves. Once again, they find God to be *hidden*.

2

But so do some biblical authors. Isaiah 45:15 says 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself'. Psalm 10:1 asks 'Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?'. For the authors of these texts, who are not atheists at all, the hiddenness of God also seems to be a problem. Isaiah notes it as a brute fact. The psalmist asks for an explanation. But both draw attention to it. And many professed Christians have lamented what they take to be a sense of God's hiddenness. St Teresa of Calcutta is a notable recent example. She spoke of herself as experiencing 'emptiness and darkness' when it comes to God. She reports having felt no 'presence of God' for most of her life. And she is not alone among Christians who have said or thought what she expressed.

3

Some people, who are aware of honest atheists and of believers who find God to be hidden, have suggested that there is a problem of divine hiddenness which amounts to a proof against the existence of God. For a currently famous defense of this view see J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddeness and Human Reason* (1993). The argument here is: (1) All good human parents would do everything they could to ensure that their children should enjoy a personal relationship with them; (2) If God is good, then God would do the same when it comes to all human beings (God's children); (3) In order to enjoy a personal relationship with a good parent, a child must at least believe that the parent exists; (4) So, a good God would do everything possible to arrange for people to believe that God exists or to have no serious sense of God's hiddenness; (5) God could have arranged for all people to believe that God exists or to have no serious sense of God's hiddenness; (6) There are (and have been) many people who, for no fault of their own, find God to be

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hidden; (7) Therefore, there is no God, or it is unlikely that there is any such thing as God.

This is not a stupid argument. But it does depend heavily on a strong and dubious comparison between goodness in human parents and goodness in God. More specifically, it depends on thinking of God and people as individuals of the same kind. This comparison will work if we take God to be, or to be strongly like, something existing in space and time. It will seem less plausible if we do not think that God is something like that. It also will also seem less plausible if we do not think that 'God is good' *has* to mean that God is something that would inevitably arrange for everyone to believe that God exists or not to find God hidden in some serious way.

The Catholic Church holds that God can be known on the basis of human reasoning. So, it does not think that God is totally hidden from everyone. But the Church is equally clear that God is not an object in space and time and that we cannot comprehend (fully understand) what God is. If the Church is right on this point, however, then God's hiddenness (for the honest atheist or for someone like Mother Teresa), is, in a serious sense, only to be expected if human beings typically come to know that things exist by encountering them as objects in space and time.

You might say that knowledge of God should be there in us as soon as we have knowledge and the will to act on it, as is said to have been the case with the angels. But we are not angels, and if we typically come to know that things exist by encountering them in the world of space and time, then we are not creatures that know that God exists as soon as we have knowledge and the will to act on it. You might say that God would or should have only created angels. You might say that God would or should have only created totally incorporeal beings with intellect and will who have a direct and infallible perception of God from the moment of their creation. And then you might conclude that God's not doing that is evidence of God's non-existence. But why suppose that there are standards to which God must conform when creating? And why should we be worried that we are not angels with an angelic knowledge of God? If we were angels we would not be human. But do we not all appreciate existing as human beings? If you think that God should only have created angels, then you are wanting God not to have created *you*.

As I have noted, people who worry about divine hiddenness often say that if God is good, then God is good as a human parent is good. And they expand this thought by noting that human parents strive to maintain a relationship with their children by always being present or available to them. The idea here is that loving parents do not hide from their children in any way, and neither would a loving God. Yet God is not a *human* parent since God is not an item in the universe. Human parents can hug and kiss their children and be hugged and kissed in

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return. But God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is the source of the entire universe for as long as it exists and is, therefore, not something in it to be picked out as an object of knowledge as is a human parent. It is not surprising that God is not as evident to us as our parents are. It is only to be expected given what God is.

You may say that God is supposed to be loving and that it follows from this claim that God will be immediately, and maybe enojoyably, evident to everyone who is open to the idea that God might exist. But there are problems with that line of reasoning. First, how is God to be evident to everyone given the obvious difference between God and human beings? Might it be by 'personal experience' of God in which we 'see' that God is 'there' as we see other people to be 'there'? But if God is not part of the universe, then God cannot be something in the world to be perceived as a parent might be observed. Again, why suppose that God can only be thought of as loving if God is present to us as 'there' in the sense that parents might present themselves as 'there' to their children? Would it not suffice as a reason for saying that God loves us to note that God makes us to be and keeps us in being and provides us with many goods? And what about the thought that, for love of humanity, God became incarnate and died on a cross?

Clearly, respect is due to those who feel God to be hidden (not just because they are human but also because of their sense of God's hiddenness). But feelings do not determine truth. And the truth of the matter is that for beings such as we are it is not surprising that God is not present to us as is a loving human parent. God's hiddenness may pain those who find God to be hidden. But it is not an insurmountable challenge to the claim that God exists.

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