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Behind the Veil: Mysticism and the Reply to Hiddenness in the Work of Travis Dumsday

Catherine McCrary

Like the Problem of Evil, God's hiddenness is a difficult subject, not only from a philosophical standpoint, but from a personal, emotional standpoint as well. We pose these questions to a silent God like an abandoned child questions an absent father: With a mixture of both sadness and anger, and the confusion of a childlike mind that cannot hope to understand. "Why did you leave us?" "Why have you allowed so much evil to befall us?" "Why won't you help us?" "Why do you hide from us?" These questions weigh heavy on the human heart, and their answers carry enormous import; it is critical that we answer accordingly. I have opted to approach the subject of God's hiddenness from the perspective of religious experience and the mystic tradition. I will argue parallel to Travis Dumsday that (1) God's hiddenness is actually necessary when we consider the nature of religious experience, (2) instantaneous, indubitable knowledge of God (brought about via religious experience) may do more damage than good, and (3) the monastic tradition adequately testifies to God's "visibility." In this paper, I will expand upon the groundwork that Dumsday has laid. I will argue that the mystic tradition in

particular exemplifies both Dumsday's points about religious experience and monasticism, while also binding the spokes of his argument together more securely.

It is important first that we lay out the parameters of the hiddenness argument and Travis Dumsday's responses to it. The hiddenness argument has steadily grown in popularity and is now just behind the Problem of Evil in popularity with atheists. One reason (perhaps *the* reason) for its popularity is that, like the Problem of Evil, it is notoriously difficult to answer. Its basic structure has not changed much over the years, but much of the recent literature deals with J. L. Schellenberg's formulation of the argument:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of meaningful conscious relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such relationship (able to do so just by trying).
- (2) Necessarily, one is, at a time, in a position to participate in a meaningful conscious relationship with God only if at that time one believes that God exists.
- (3) Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of meaningful conscious relationship with God also (iii) believes that God exists.

- (4) There are (and often have been) people who are (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of meaningful conscious relationship with God *without* also (iii) believing that God exists.

And from the conjunction of (3) and (4) it clearly follows that

- (5) God does not exist.¹

A loving God who wants the best for us and desires a relationship with us, Schellenberg argues, would assure that anyone who is not actively resisting Him will at least have *access* to knowledge of Him and be able to commune with Him “just by willing it.”² After all, trust is the foundation of all relationships, and how could we possibly form a relationship with God if we cannot be certain He exists, nor commune with Him without significant effort (especially when this effort does not even ensure success)? This creates the problem of “nonresistant nonbelievers”—people who are not actively resisting belief in God, yet do not believe in Him. How could God allow such people to exist if He wants the best for all of us, and our best is a personal relationship with Him? Much like the Problem of Evil, the hiddenness argument seems nigh impenetrable, but there is one

¹ Travis Dumsday, “Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (Oct. 2014): 194.

² Ibid. Many theologians would affirm that relationship with God *is* what is best for us. God’s love for us—if genuine and, therefore, desiring of our well-being—requires relationship with us.

opportunity for rebuttal. Just as in a theodicy, the theist who seeks to respond to the hiddenness argument can escape Schellenberg's conclusion by providing a *reason* for God's hiddenness, Plantinga's fabled proposition *r* that reconciles seemingly inconsistent propositions *p* ("God exists") and *q* ("Evil exists").³ Many such reasons have been put forward by theists seeking to resolve the problem of hiddenness, but in this paper, I will be focusing on the answers offered by Travis Dumsday.

Dumsday has written extensively on the topic of hiddenness, offering several reasons why God might have chosen to hide Himself. However, none of these reasons offered by Dumsday (or any of those offered by his peers for that matter) have proved convincing. I believe that those attempting to answer the problem of hiddenness are plagued by the same problem that haunted the great apologists of yore who sought to prove God's existence using the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for God's existence: Namely, no one argument was sufficient to make a conclusive case. However, when considered all together, the classical arguments for God's existence make a much stronger case cumulatively than each does on its own. Similarly, I believe that many of the answers to the hiddenness argument offered by theists naturally fit together and can be combined into a far more formidable reply to the problem of hiddenness. I will focus on three

³ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 69.

such solutions offered by Dumsday in “Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People,” “Divine Hiddenness and the One Sheep,” and “Monasticism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness.” But before I attempt to synthesize these arguments, I will sketch Dumsday’s reasoning in each of these essays.

In “The Opiate,” Dumsday argues that God’s hiddenness is a necessary precaution against “the experience of God” being abused as one would abuse a powerful narcotic.⁴ After all, the experience of the Anselmian God has historically been a life-altering experience “either of utter sublimity, ineffable wonder, and unspeakable delight, or terror, desolation, and unutterable despair,” at least for some.⁵ For Moses, meeting with God for 40 days and nights caused his face to glow so brightly he had to conceal it behind a veil; for Theresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi and other mystics, communion with God resulted in powerful ecstasies, which have been immortalized in art by Caravaggio and Bernini. Should everyone have “constant awareness of [God] (or at least a constant availability of such awareness) from the moment [she] achieved the age of reason,” there’s no guarantee that people would seek communion with God out of love for Him.⁶ Instead some may come to commune with God simply for the pleasure of the experience, thwarting the

⁴ Dumsday, “Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People,” 193.

⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁶ Ex. 34:28-35; Dumsday, “Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People,” 193.

possibility of genuine and meaningful relationship with the divine. This creates at least two very serious problems right off the bat: (1) Loving and pursuing God for such selfish reasons rather than because He is “the concretization of Goodness itself, Beauty itself, Love itself” constitutes “a devaluation of God” and a grave sin; and (2) using God merely as a means to an end (our own pleasure) makes sincere, positive relationship with Him difficult if not impossible, and if one affirms that a personal relationship with God is man’s greatest good, then we effectively handicap ourselves.⁷ God would then have at least two good reasons to remain hidden.

In “The One Sheep,” Dumsday hones in on the second of the two problems presented in “The Opiate” and elaborates it into an argument. In this argument, however, he approaches the issue from the perspective of *resistant* nonbelievers, those who actively oppose belief in God. Dumsday argues that Schellenberg’s solution to the problem of hiddenness—that a loving God should *prevent all* or at least *most* nonresistant nonbelief by providing “multiple, powerful religious experiences to every person on the planet, beginning from as early an age as possible” may do real harm to resistant nonbelievers.⁸ He gives the example of a world in which the vast majority of the world population, say 90%, are not only nonresistant to belief in God but are humble, virtuous people and morally mature

⁷ Dumsday, “Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People,” 197-98.

⁸ Travis Dumsday, “Divine Hiddenness and the One Sheep,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79, no. 1 (Feb. 2016): 76.

enough for relationship with the Divine.⁹ In Schellenberg's perfect world, this 90% would have rationally indubitable knowledge of God from a young age and, being properly disposed to do so, would respond properly to this knowledge and enter into relationship with God. The remaining 10% of resistant nonbelievers would be free to carry on in their unbelief until they reach a state of nonresistance and sufficient moral maturity. However, this would result in a minority of unbelievers somewhat akin to the Flat Earth Society. In such a world, Dumsday argues, "the 10% would not be able to ignore or deny theism, any more than the small percentage of the population that is born blind could deny the existence of sunlight given the overwhelming testimony of those who experience it (even if the blind do not fully understand the nature of that to which they are assenting)."¹⁰ It would seem that in such a world people would be forced into theism before they are ready, potentially resulting in harms to the individual's long-term wellbeing or, perhaps even worse, an outright rejection of God even when faced with the undeniable certainty of His existence. Thus, God would seem to have another plausible reason for remaining hidden: to protect the long-term wellbeing of the resistant.

⁹ Thomas V. Morris and Daniel Howard-Snyder have both argued elsewhere (*Making Sense of it All* and "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," respectively) that it is insufficient that one be merely nonresistant to belief in God. Relationship with God—perhaps even simple knowledge of Him—requires humility and the moral maturity to recognize God *as God*. In many cases then, our own moral deficiencies preempt any attempt by God to reveal Himself to us, at least via rationally indubitable religious experience.

¹⁰ Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness and the One Sheep," 79.

Dumsday's final argument takes an entirely different approach to the problem of hiddenness than "The Opiate" or "The One Sheep." Whereas in the preceding articles he argued for a particular *answer* to the problem, in "Monasticism" Dumsday simply denies that Schellenberg's conclusion, proposition 5, follows from propositions 3 and 4. Even without a comprehensive answer to the problem of hiddenness, Dumsday argues, the existence of nonresistant nonbelievers still does not constitute "definitive evidence for atheism" under certain circumstances.¹¹ He goes on to describe these circumstances by drawing an analogy between the problem of hiddenness and its troublesome sister, the problem of evil. He asks us to imagine a world identical to our own in every way except one: Throughout human history on this world, there have existed communities from every corner of the earth whose members have been freed from sin and pain. The members of these communities believe they serve as a beacon on a hill, a "witness to [God's] grace in the midst of the wider world of pain and suffering," but they do not purport to have a decisive answer to the problem of evil.¹² They have no incontrovertible theodicy that proves God has a good reason for allowing so much and so many varieties of evil, but then again, they do not particularly need one. The point of the illustration is that if such communities did exist, they would not need a conclusive

¹¹ Travis Dumsday, "Monasticism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 59 (Jan 2014): 130.

¹² *Ibid.*, 131.

solution to the problem of evil; they are in themselves a sort of answer to the problem. They suggest that although we do not have a solution to the problem of evil, an answer may still exist and one day be found. Their existence allows the theist to continue to affirm belief in an all-good God and to do so on rational grounds. Such idyllic communities do not actually exist, but the circumstances described *do* obtain in the context of the problem of hiddenness, Dumsday argues. Monastic communities, particularly Eastern Orthodox ones, are just such examples. To the monks in these communities, God is not hidden or absent. “Rather,” Dumsday writes, “they live in an ever-growing communion with the divine that not infrequently manifests itself in powerful religious experiences, in senses of the divine presence, or even (so they claim) miraculous occurrences.”¹³ While they do not purport to have the answer to why God hides Himself from the vast majority of the world population or why He allows so much nonresistant nonbelief, they illustrate the possibility of a real answer to these questions.

Each of these articles on its own is not especially persuasive. They each suffer from their own serious criticisms, which Dumsday readily recognizes. For example, the so-called “opiate reply” seems to assume that an omnipotent and omniscient God could not foresee His creatures’ abuse of the experience of Him and the effect that would have on our relationship with Him. Surely He could have found a way

¹³ Dumsday, “Monasticism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness,” 132.

to affect the same results but without hobbling the development of relationship with us. For example, Dumsday describes some experiences of God as terrifying; if our experience of the divine were more Isaian than Mosaic, the temptation to abuse the privilege of constant communion with God would certainly be reduced if not eliminated completely. The One Sheep reply, while it might rescue general theism from the hiddenness argument (and that's a big "might"), seems unable to defend specifically *Christian* theism. After all, Christianity is fundamentally exclusivist. Christian soteriology demands belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and without faith in Him, even the most virtuous among us could not escape damnation. Simple knowledge of God's existence would not be enough to save Dumsday's mythical 90%; though they all may believe in God—the *same* God even—it would seem naïve to imagine that all or even most of that 90% would agree that Jesus was God. As for the monasticism argument, Dumsday seems to sink his own ship immediately out of port. He explicitly acknowledges that "a hardline atheist might dismiss the significance of these communities," and even if the atheist were to accept monastic communities as evidence of the rationality of theistic belief, he must then square with the patently nontheistic content of religious experiences in, say, Zen Buddhist monasticism.¹⁴ These and several other consequential criticisms (which in the interest of space I must omit here) render these arguments thoroughly

¹⁴ Dumsday, "Monasticism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," 131.

unconvincing in their current format. However, I do not believe this renders them *useless*. Dumsday's arguments touch upon several important moving parts within this problem, including subjective experience of the Divine and the rationality of theistic belief, and it is these insights of his that I believe will be instrumental in constructing a more robust answer to the problem of hiddenness.

If Dumsday's three arguments are spokes, I believe we can remake the wheel by placing mysticism at the hub. Carl McColman, noted author and lay member of a contemplative Christian community himself, offers several "snappy definitions" of mysticism while still emphasizing its basic ineffability: "Mysticism is the art of union with God. Mysticism is the experiential core of spirituality. . . . Mysticism is the heart of spirituality where all religious differences are resolved and we find unity in the sacred."¹⁵ Mysticism draws together and unifies Dumsday's most salient points about monasticism and the subjective, euphoric nature of religious experience, while importing a more instructive, more mystic notion of God otherwise absent from the discussion. The debate over hiddenness can be criticized on the grounds that it operates upon a highly anthropomorphic conception of the divine. This is latent in the language of "hiding" and "revealing" that dominates the

¹⁵ Carl McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2010), 28.

hiddenness debate.¹⁶ But this “peekaboo” notion of God is foreign to those in the mystical tradition. Dumsday himself references this fact himself in “Monasticism” when he writes of those in the Eastern Orthodox tradition:

Imagine the modern philosopher presenting the problem of divine hiddenness to a sixteenth-century Ukrainian peasant. What would the latter’s reaction be? Perhaps something along the following lines: “What do you mean God is ‘hidden’? He’s not hidden to the monks and holy elders. If you want to learn more, go to the monastery. Why does God not just reveal himself to everyone? I don’t know. Ask the monks. And if they don’t know, at least we have their witness to the fact that God is active in the world, not ‘hidden’ as you suggest.”¹⁷

Even those laypeople to whom God is effectively hidden (i.e. they do not possess indubitable belief in his existence nor have they had a religious experience) may not perceive Him as hidden. This is because mysticism emphasizes both God’s omnipresence and His mystery. God is a spirit and as such He is not “absent” from or “present” in spaces as we are; as King David wrote “Where can I go from your

¹⁶ In the interest of fairness, it is the *hiddenness* debate. It would seem at least difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully interact with the topic while avoiding using anthropomorphic language. This criticism is perhaps best understood then as a call to recognize this tendency within the debate rather than as a call to fundamentally alter the language of the debate.

¹⁷ Dumsday, “Monasticism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness,” 134.

Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”¹⁸ At the same time, noted philosopher and theologian Rudolf Otto calls this omnipresent being, or rather, the experience of it, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the fascinating mystery before which we tremble. God belongs to the realm of the numinous; He is entirely other, an unknowable mystery that captivates our imaginations, yet there is an “awefulness, overpoweringness, and energy” in the experience of Him that causes us to tremble in His presence.¹⁹ “The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread,” Otto writes, “but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm. . . . The ‘mystery’ is for [man] not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him.”²⁰

It is no wonder then that Dumsday’s Ukrainian peasant would be so easily satisfied by the testimony of priests. The mystic tradition affirms what Dumsday and Thomas Morris suggest: that there is a requisite level of moral capacity needed in addition to simple nonresistance in order for someone to experience God. If the experience of the majestic and terrifying mystery that is God was too great for Moses, Francis of Assisi, and Theresa of Avila, among others, what reason do we

¹⁸ Ps. 139:7 NIV.

¹⁹ Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser, Jr., eds., *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 78-79.

²⁰ Rudolf Otto, “On Numinous Experience as *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*,” in *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*, eds. Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser, Jr. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 85.

have to think that such an experience would be wonderful for a nonresistant nonbeliever in South Asia who has never heard the name of Christ? In fact, as far as Christianity goes, Schellenberg's prescription for what a truly good God would do to reveal Himself to His creation, does not seem especially helpful if these people still do not affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ. In this way Dumsday's one sheep reply, and his argument against hiddenness as a whole, would seem unable to escape the criticism that it cannot defend specifically Christian theism. However, this is a bullet I am willing to bite, and not an especially damaging one as far as I am concerned. In this way, I believe we can still affirm the importance of evangelism and missionary work while also maintaining that God is not hidden in the sense that Schellenberg seems to believe. God, like a mystery, is impenetrable, "hidden" by definition, and He *must* be so if He is indeed the sort of maximal being that St. Anselm imagined Him to be (else we should all burn away like mist in His presence). This does not mean that God is completely inaccessible. Even as we stand transfixed by the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, God races down to grasp our feebly outstretched hands.

This gives us some room to maneuver when it comes to the topic of non-theistic religious experiences as in Zen or (non-dualistic) Hindu monastic traditions. The issue at hand is not that there exist monastic communities where the members doubt the existence of God. That simply reinforces what we already know: God remains hidden to most people, even those who are in search of the divine. What is at issue

here is the idea that there might be non-theistic religious experiences. If this is the case, it casts doubt upon the value of theistic religious experiences, specifically their value as evidence for God's existence (or more modestly, the reasonability of belief in God). Orthodox Christianity has suggested that there may perhaps be more than one variety of religious experience, some being less theistic and, therefore, less veridical than others. But even if one were to reject this patently Christian explanation based largely on Orthodox tradition, I believe there is still an answer open to the theist. However, this requires us to turn to metaphysics. Without becoming too bogged down in a discussion of the metaphysics undergirding the phenomenology of religious experience, I believe the metaphysical implications of non-theistic religious experiences basically comport with theism, and mysticism as a whole seems to affirm this. Mystic experiences do not fundamentally differ although their content may change depending upon the specific tradition, whether that be Sufism, Vedanta Hinduism, or Kabbalah Judaism. McColman affirms this himself when he writes, "Mysticism is a manifestation of something, which is at the root of all religion, and all the higher religions have their mystical expressions."²¹ McColman's fellow mystic, Swami Abhayananda, echoes this sentiment:

²¹ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 30.

Scholars may imagine that a Buddhist experiences one thing, a Vedantist another, and so forth; but one who has experienced It, whether a Sufi, Christian or Hindu, knows that It is the final Truth, the only One. There are not different [Unities] one for each sect or denomination; there is only one One, and it is That which is experienced by Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis alike.²²

Although one may indeed be a Zen Buddhist monk and an atheist (or at least an agnostic), the Zen Buddhist's non-theistic experience of what Abhayananda calls "Unity" does not diminish the Christian mystic's theistic experience of that same Unity. She simply makes sense of the ineffable in a different way.

The mystic traditions of religions all around the world testify against the problem of hiddenness, and by tapping into their unique, mystical conception of God, the replies to the hiddenness problem offered by Travis Dumsday can be synthesized into a far more comprehensive reply. The both terrifying and fascinating, omnipresent and numinous God of mysticism is indeed "hidden" from us, but perhaps not in the way that the anthropomorphic language permeating the hiddenness debate might suggest. He is accessible to those willing to devote themselves to a life of careful cultivation of virtue and moral living, and even to

²² Swami Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament* (ATMA books, 2012), 242-43.

those, the experience of Him is overwhelming, both irresistible and existentially, unutterably terrifying. A truly loving relationship is one entered in through the free will of the beloved, and God does not force Himself, even indirectly, upon nonbelievers. Under this conception of the divine, God remains hidden because of the limitations *we* have imposed upon our relationship with Him.

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