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## Divine Hiddenness and Middle Knowledge: A Molinist Answer to How an Anselmian God Can Coexist with Reasonable Nonbelief

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## **Divine Hiddenness and Middle Knowledge: A Molinist Answer to How an Anselmian God Can Coexist with Reasonable Nonbelief**

### **Abstract**

Within the spectrum of doubt, divine hiddenness becomes a problem regarding the love of God. Why would a loving God allow individuals whom he loves, if he loves everyone, to maintain ? According to philosopher John Schellenberg, the existence of rational nonbelief poses a problem for divine hiddenness which provides a reason to believe that God does not exist.

We argue that the problem of rational nonbelief does not pose a problem for divine hiddenness if one adopts the doctrine of middle knowledge, a belief first proposed by Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina. We first offers a defense for the doctrine of middle knowledge, including a brief biblical defense, before arguing that a loving Anselmian God can coexist with a world where he permits reasonable nonbelief given his knowledge of how much evidence is necessary to bring a person to faith, and those for whom no amount of evidence would suffice.

### **Keywords**

Middle knowledge, divine sovereignty, human freedom, John Schellenberg

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Brian Chilton is a PhD candidate in the Theology and Apologetics program at Liberty University. He hopes to complete the dissertation by the spring of 2023. He is the founder of an online apologetics ministry known as Bellator Christi and the author of "The Layman's Manual on Christian Apologetics."

## Introduction

Does the hiddenness of God preclude the notion of God's existence? By *hiddenness*, it is meant that since God is not visible and many of his intentions behind certain events remain unknown, then God and his will are hidden from the purview of humanity. Scripture acknowledges God's hidden nature. In Psalm 88, the psalmist cries, "LORD, why do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me?" (Psa. 88:14).<sup>1</sup> The writer of Hebrews states that "faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen" (Heb. 11:1). For those who have experienced God in some sense, divine hiddenness may not pose a problem for belief. However, for others, this may not prove to be the case.

Divine hiddenness can pose problems for faith, particularly when individuals encounter tragic experiences leaving them to question God's moral nature, if God exists at all. More to the point, individuals struggle with an age-old problem of why some people are not saved if God desires to save all people.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser note that "Many people are perplexed, even troubled, by the fact that God (if such there be) has not made His existence sufficiently clear."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, questions about those who do not believe can cause further issues concerning God's moral nature. If God loves everyone, then why does reasonable unbelief exist?

John Schellenberg questions the existence of God from divine hiddenness due to the problem of reasonable unbelief.<sup>4</sup> If God loves all, then, according to Schellenberg, God must provide necessary evidence of his existence to all people. In his book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Schellenberg offers the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quoted Scripture comes from the *Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Reformed notions of Christianity may not have the problem of indicating why God would desire to save all people, as Calvinists argue that God chooses to save some, and chooses to condemn others by predestination. However, Calvinism holds a much greater problem when arguing for the concept of an Anselmian God, particularly God being the absolute Good, as it were. Calvinist models are far more problematic for the divine hiddenness conundrum, as God is held responsible for human evil. While Calvinists would argue against such an accusation, one cannot escape the logical end of deterministic argumentation. Ultimately, God would be responsible for human evil as much as he would be responsible for a person's inability to respond to divine grace.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God," *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Reasonable unbelief" is used interchangeably with "reasonable nonbelief."

following argument:

- (i) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving. And,
- (ii) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur. But,
- (iii) Reasonable nonbelief occurs. So,
- (iv) No perfectly loving God exists. Therefore,
- (v) There is no God.<sup>5</sup>

These questions often fall within the category that Gary Habermas describes as “emotional doubt”—that is, doubt that flows from “psychological causes, medical causes, faulty [views] of God, childhood problems, old wounds, and judging by feelings.”<sup>6</sup> Two of Habermas’s assessments ring true in this issue: a faulty view of God and judgment by feelings.<sup>7</sup>

The faulty view of God addressed by Schellenberg is not due to God’s desire to see all people saved and the Anselmian view of God’s moral nature—that is, as Anselm of Canterbury notes, “And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”<sup>8</sup> Both are affirmed. Rather, the problem in Schellenberg’s argument is found in premise (ii). A good moral God can exist in a world of reasonable nonbelief if God permits a form of libertarian free will without withdrawing some notion of God’s omniscient nature. The doctrine of middle knowledge as found in Molinism can offer a solution to the problem of divine hiddenness—that is, the coexistence of an Anselmian God with unbelievers’ reasonable nonbelief. To contend this notion, a biblical case will be offered for the doctrine of middle knowledge and the solutions that middle knowledge affords. Once middle knowledge is established as a viable option, then a counterargument to Schellenberg’s second premise will be given. The argument

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<sup>5</sup> John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1990), [http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/dealing\\_with\\_doubt/dealing\\_with\\_doubt.htm#ch2](http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/dealing_with_doubt/dealing_with_doubt.htm#ch2).

<sup>7</sup> Os Guinness notes that “doubt is a matter of truth, trust, and trustworthiness. Can we trust God?” Os Guinness, *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium* 2, in Sidney Norton Deane with Saint Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix, In Behalf of the Fool, by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo*, Sidney Norton Deane, trans (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1939), 7. See also David Baggett and Jerry L Walls, *God & Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

will show how a loving God can coexist in a world with reasonable unbelief. But first, the Molinist position of middle knowledge needs some explanation.

### The Core Tenets of Molinism

Luis de Molina was a Spanish Jesuit priest who lived from September 29, 1535 to October 12, 1600. He became a Jesuit priest when he was only eighteen years of age.<sup>9</sup> Molina was an expert in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Thus, to understand Molina's argumentation, one needs to first explore one of the biggest struggles of Aquinas. Aquinas struggled to resolve the age-old problem of how divine sovereignty interconnected with human freedom. Aquinas settled on a resolution with which he was not completely comfortable, but one that seemed to flow from the biblical material. Aquinas held that God predestined and gave his effectual grace to those whom he foreknew would merit his grace.<sup>10</sup> Aquinas said,

Since predestination includes will, as was said above,<sup>11</sup> the reason of predestination must be sought for in the same way as was the reason of the will of God ... Now there is no distinction between what flows from free will, and what is of predestination; as there is no distinction between what flows from a secondary cause and from a first cause ... Thus we might say that God preordained to give glory on account of merit, and that He preordained to give grace to merit glory.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Aquinas's use of "preordained" refers to God's foreknowledge of a person's merit, which includes the person's responsiveness to God's grace.<sup>13</sup> But the process brought questions to Molina's mind. First, how does one resolve the issue of human freedom within God's action as a primary cause? Second, does God desire to save everyone? Finally, are human beings responsible for what they

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy A. Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism: A Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Philosophical Analysis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 208.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.q19.a5, in *Summa Theologica*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans (London, UK: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), Logos Bible Software.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I.q23.a5.

<sup>13</sup> Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism*, 212, fn 25.

do with God's given grace?

### Three Logical Moments: Natural, Middle, and Free

As previously noted, Aquinas accepted divine sovereignty, human freedom, and a form of predestination. Aquinas held that God desired to reach everyone but provided effectual grace to those whom God foreknew merited grace. In some ways, Aquinas mirrored Jacob Arminius's interpretation of predestination.<sup>14</sup> But Aquinas's argument was not finished, for Aquinas continued by noting that predestination was directed to a final end<sup>15</sup> "from which it proceeds, as from its first moving principle."<sup>16</sup> That is to say, God is the first mover and offers grace to human beings, who in turn respond as secondary movers.

The question in Molina's mind was how one could show that God's foreknowledge and foreordination worked together with human freedom to bring about the final end. To this end, Molina designated three logical moments: natural knowledge, middle knowledge, and free knowledge. *Natural knowledge* is the first logical moment. Molina holds that natural knowledge is God's knowledge of all things that would be or not be, factual and counterfactual.<sup>17</sup> God has a

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<sup>14</sup> "God decided to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means necessary for repentance and faith—this being accomplished according to divine wisdom, by which God knows what is proper and becoming both to his mercy and his severity ... This decree has its foundation in divine foreknowledge, through which God has known from all eternity those individuals who through the established means of his prevenient grace would come to faith and believe, and through his subsequent sustaining grace would persevere in the faith. Likewise, in divine foreknowledge, God knew those who would not believe and persevere." Jacob Arminius, *Declaration of Sentiments*, in *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary*, W. Stephen Gunter, ed (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 135.

<sup>15</sup> Or teleological end.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Molina writes, "Through this type of knowledge, [God] knew all the things to which the divine power extended either immediately or by the mediation of secondary causes, including not only the natures of individuals and the necessary states of affairs composed of them but also the contingent state of affairs—through this knowledge He knew, to be sure, not that the latter were or were not going to obtain determinately, but rather that they were indifferently able to obtain and able not to obtain, a feature that belongs to them necessarily and thus also falls under God's natural knowledge." Luis de Molina, *Concordia* 52.2.9, in *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, Alfred J. Freddoso, trans (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 168.

knowledge of all possibilities and all conditions, including the laws of logic and natural laws that God would create.<sup>18</sup>

Second, God also holds *free knowledge*. Free knowledge speaks to the final end of things as Aquinas previously noted. In the case of human beings responding to his grace, God knew fully and freely all people who would be saved. Likewise, God knew, as Molina writes, “all contingent states of affairs [that] were in fact going to happen.”<sup>19</sup> In essence, free knowledge is comparable to the Arminian understanding of foreknowledge. God foreknows all things that will happen.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, coupled between natural knowledge and free knowledge, Molina argues that one finds *middle knowledge*. Middle knowledge argues that God knows what free creatures would choose given certain circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Thus, God knows which choices each person will or will not make from eternity past. While middle and free knowledge are not essential to God’s necessary nature—or his being an Anselmian God—they naturally flow from God’s necessary natural knowledge of all things and his foreknowledge.<sup>22</sup> William Lane Craig and Ken Keathley use three words to explain natural, middle, and free knowledge: *could*—God knows all possibilities that could happen; *would*—God knows which possibilities would occur when free individuals are placed in certain circumstances; and *will*—God extensively knows what will occur in the end.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> William Lane Craig explains that natural knowledge includes God’s knowledge of “all possibilities. He knows all the possible individuals he could create, all the possible circumstances he could place them in, all their possible actions and reactions, and all the possible worlds or orders which he could create. God could not lack this knowledge and still be God; the content of God’s natural knowledge is essential to him.” William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 129.

<sup>19</sup> Molina, *Concordia* 52.2.9, 168.

<sup>20</sup> See also Craig, *Only Wise God*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Molina explains, “*Middle knowledge*, by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice, He saw in His own essence what each such faculty would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or in that, or indeed, in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite, as is clear from what was said in Disputations 49 and 50.” Molina, *Concordia* 52.2.9, 168.

<sup>22</sup> To claim that God does not know future contingent events, which both Aquinas and Molina would differ, would be to hold that God is somehow limited by time.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 17; Craig, *Only Wise God*, 131.

While Thomism is often counterposed to Molinism, it is questionable as to whether Aquinas would have disagreed with Molina's assessment of middle knowledge. Aquinas himself provides an intriguing parallel to middle knowledge, saying, "God knows all things; not only things actual but also things possible to Him and the creature; and since some of these are future contingent to us, it follows that God knows future contingent things."<sup>24</sup> If God knows all future contingent things, then God would certainly possess the ability to know the free, contingent decisions of free agents.

### Divine Sovereignty and Middle Knowledge

Molinism strongly emphasizes God's sovereignty. God oversees all things and in is complete control. However, his sovereignty does not work in a scheme that overrides human freedom. Rather, God works concurrently with and through human freedom. Molina holds that God moves, applies, and even works alongside the human faculty of choice.<sup>25</sup> Using the example of Peter's willingness to preach Christ, Molina argues that God had to create an order that eventually led up to Peter's time, even working with the secondary causes; create Peter's soul and body; provide Peter with freedom of the will; the events leading up to Peter's speaking for Christ; the divine choice not to withhold Peter's concurrence with speaking within God's will; and the ability of God to foreknow Peter's willingness to speak for Christ.<sup>26</sup> Rather than detracting from God's sovereignty, Molinism actually fleshes out the exquisite nature of God's knowledge and sovereignty, as God's primary actions lead to conditions that evoke secondary free choices. While God may persuade and woo souls to himself, he does not remove human responsiveness in the process. Millard Erickson, who accepts the core tenets of Molinism,<sup>27</sup> contends that this sovereign working comes by God's choice to confirm what he foresees free individuals doing as they respond and react to God's grace.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the concurrent mode of sovereignty as found in

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<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.q.14.a.13, Logos Bible Software.

<sup>25</sup> Molina, *Concordia* 53.3.7, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> He compares this concept to sublapsarianism. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 333, fn 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



middle knowledge in no way disregards God's sovereignty. In some ways, it intensifies God's sovereign nature.<sup>29</sup>

God's sovereignty is also found in his complete knowledge of all people. This does not mean that God only knows what people will freely choose to do, but that God fully and completely knows each person before creating the universe. Molina contends, "God does not get His knowledge from things, but knows all things in Himself and from Himself; therefore the existence of things, whether in time or eternity, contributes nothing to God's knowing with certainty what is going to be or not going to be."<sup>30</sup> Molina holds that God's knowledge works in harmony with his omnipotence, as in "God there is providence and predestination with regard to future contingents."<sup>31</sup> That is, God has the ability to bring about the intended results he desires while using free agents.

One finds Scriptural support for this concept in Jeremiah chapter 1. God said to Jeremiah, "I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Interestingly, God appointed Jeremiah as a prophet, placing him in the appointed time and place, while knowing that Jeremiah would respond to God's call to the prophetic ministry. Thus, God places individuals in certain times, certain places, and within certain circumstances to bring about certain ends without removing a person's ability to respond to God's calling. Jeremiah could have rejected God's proposal, as he initially began to do. However, God knew Jeremiah's final response.

### Divine Loving Desire and Middle Knowledge

Even though Molinism shares the concept of God's sovereignty along with Calvinists, the Molinist system excels at affirming God's desire to save all people which is problematic for the Calvinist approach.<sup>32</sup> Molina argues for concomitant degrees in God's decrees. Molina holds that even though God possesses complete and precise knowledge of all future contingent events, his antecedent desires do not always necessarily match his permissions. Due to the problematic nature of human free choice—that is, that humans often choose wrongly—God permits evil

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<sup>29</sup> God's sovereignty is much stronger in this sense, because he is able to work with and through free agents as compared to determinist models, where God orders, dictates, and executes his plans without the ability to use free creatures.

<sup>30</sup> Molina, *Concordia* 49.12, 120.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.13, 121.

<sup>32</sup> Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 152.

events in time, but he does not directly bring them about.<sup>33</sup> If one is to accept genuine human freedom, then one must concur with Erickson that genuine freedom, if not even permitting the nature of genuine humanity itself, must be granted the ability to do things contrary to God's desired will.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while God may seem hidden in times of evil, God can still work things for an ultimate good.

Taking the distinction between God's desired will and permitted will through the lens of middle knowledge, one can see how it is possible for a loving God to desire to see individuals saved but permits individuals the capacity to choose otherwise. God's desire to see all souls saved is something that is evident in Scripture. Peter acknowledges that "The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). Additionally, the prophet Ezekiel writes, "Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked?" This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. 'Instead, don't I take pleasure when he turns from his ways and lives?' ... 'For I take no pleasure in anyone's death.' This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. 'So repent and live!'" (Eze. 18:23, 32).<sup>35</sup> Paul also writes, "This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time" (1 Tim. 2:3-6). As shown in both the Old Testament and New Testament, God is a benevolent Being who desires that all come to repentance—stemming from his antecedent desired will—but, because of his granting of human freedom, God allows individuals to freely rebel due to his contingent permission.

### **Biblical Defense for Middle Knowledge**

The Molinist conception of middle knowledge hangs on two distinct concepts: the sovereign omniscience of God and human libertarian free will. If the Christian theist is to even use the Molinist conception of middle knowledge to combat atheistic conclusions regarding divine hiddenness, middle knowledge must find warrant withing the biblical data. Thus, divine sovereign as evidenced through God's omniscience and human libertarian free will must be evidenced in Scripture if middle knowledge is to be a viable option. In this section, biblical

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<sup>33</sup> Alfred Freddoso explains that for Molina, "evil effects are *antecedently permitted* in that by His middle knowledge God allows for them in detail and knows that they will ensue given that same causal contribution." Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction," in Molina, *Concordia*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 395.

<sup>35</sup> See also Ezekiel 33:11.

data demonstrating middle knowledge in God's sovereign omniscience will show that God not only has knowledge of all future contingencies, but that God is also aware of counterfactuals. Additionally, biblical data will be shown to accept the concept of soft libertarian free will, otherwise known as concurrence.

### Middle Knowledge and the Sovereign Omniscience of God

Sovereign omniscience is meant to acknowledge God's knowledge of all things, past, present, and future. This would include factuals and counterfactuals. If God could not know counterfactuals, then God could not be an Anselmian God (i.e., a maximally great Being). The Scripture provides ample evidence that God knows future contingent events. First, Scripture holds that God knows future free actions before they occur. David proclaims that "Before is word is on my tongue, you know all about it, LORD" (Psa. 139:4). Paul, alluding to Amos 9:11-12, writes, "After all these things I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by my name—declares the Lord who makes all things known from long ago" (Acts 15:16-18). Isaiah also acknowledges God's complete knowledge by saying, "Speak up and present your case—yes, let them consult each other. Who predicted this long ago? Who announced it from ancient times? Was it not I, the LORD?" (Isa. 45:21a). Thus, God knows future events in totality.

Second, Scripture notes how God's foreknowledge works in cooperation with election. Paul writes, "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And who he predestined, he also called; and those he called; he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29-30).<sup>36</sup> Peter also acknowledges how God's sovereign knowledge works within human freedom. Appealing to his countrymen, Peter preaches that the people killed the Source of life (Acts 3:15)—referencing Jesus—and God raised him from the death. He then contends that "And now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your leaders did. In this way God fulfilled what he had predicted through the prophets—that his Messiah would suffer" (Acts 3:17-18). Thus, Peter views the personal choices of the people of his day working within

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<sup>36</sup> This passage is highly controversial. Calvinists, such as Wayne Grudem, hold that foreknowledge does not look at anything of merit in the person. However, the Calvinist argument still holds that God foreknows each individual and chooses whom he will save. Thus, it appears that God has some reasoning to save some. If God has complete sovereign omniscience, then one could not eliminate the possibility that God would have been able to foresee each person in totality and what each person would freely choose to do. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 825.

God's sovereign knowledge. But God permitted things to go as they did to bring about his intended will.

While God's foreknowledge is accepted by the vast majority of Christians, God's counterfactual knowledge requires a bit more investigation. For God to hold middle knowledge, he would need to not only see what would happen in time (factuals), but also what could happen had someone chosen differently (counterfactuals). Molina offers two passages of Scripture to defend this position.<sup>37</sup> First, Jesus noted that "if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago" (Matt. 11:21). Jesus states that if he had performed miracles in Tyre and Sidon to the level and degree that the people had received in Israel, then the people of Tyre and Sidon would have repented.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, David's consultation with the Lord in 1 Kings 23:10-12 affords another exhibition of God's counterfactual knowledge. David asked God if Saul would descend on Keilah if David went there. God told David that Saul would descend, and that the men of Keilah would hand him over to Saul. David did not go to Keilah, thus the two events that God predicted could occur did not happen.<sup>39</sup> Thus, God's factual and counterfactual knowledge is in full view. One could also argue that God's prophetic words to nations about what would happen if they did not repent and what could happen if they did. Molinists, like Craig, have acknowledged the tremendous fruitfulness of middle knowledge. Craig writes that middle knowledge is "one of the most fruitful theological ideas ever conceived. For it would serve to explain not only God's knowledge of the future, but divine providence and predestination as well."<sup>40</sup> As shown, middle knowledge finds a home in the biblical narrative.

### Middle Knowledge and Human Libertarian Free Will

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<sup>37</sup> Molina, *Concordia* 49.9, 116-117.

<sup>38</sup> A question emerges as to whether Jesus is speaking metaphorically or literally. In either case, his counterfactual knowledge emerges. For the hyperbolic view of Matthew 11, see William Lane Craig, "The Middle Knowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 121-122. For the literal view, see Zachary Breitenbach, *Slipping Through the Cracks: Are Some Lost Who Would Have Been Saved in Different Circumstances?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 66. But one must ask, would repentance have led to salvation, or could it have been a temporary turning from their current actions? Most assuredly, this requires further investigation.

<sup>39</sup> Other biblical examples of middle knowledge can be found in Breitenbach, *Slipping Through the Cracks*, 65-79.

<sup>40</sup> Craig, *Only Wise God*, 127.

Human freedom finds an abundant home in the pages of Scripture. The covenants of Scripture along with the law itself seem to imply that human beings have the ability to choose x versus y. Aquinas argues that humans must have free will according to Scripture; otherwise, “counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain.”<sup>41</sup> In the New Testament, people are called to repent and believe in Jesus (Matt. 3:2, 4:17; John 3:16; Acts 3:19; Rom. 10:9; and 1 John 3:23). A refusal to turn to Christ also illuminates a person’s ability to reject God’s grace given to them (John 5:40). Furthermore, Paul holds that those who reject Christ are without excuse (Rom. 1:20-21), which particularly fits the aspect of divine hiddenness. That is, God grants people the opportunity to believe, but many refuse of their own volition.

While Scripture seems to acknowledge human freedom, it does not go so far as to claim that a person can do anything as they please. For instance, a person cannot choose the nation or the family into which one is born (Rom. 9). Furthermore, a person cannot choose one’s height or add days to one’s life (Matt. 6:27). This kind of freedom matches what Keathley calls soft libertarianism, or concurrence.<sup>42</sup> Thus, soft libertarianism does not dictate that a person can choose anything, but rather that a person can choose those things that are within their volitional power to choose.

### **A Middle Knowledge Resolution to Schellenberg’s Divine Hiddenness Problem**

Thus far, the paper has shown the basic tenets of Molinism, explained middle knowledge, and provided a biblical defense for sovereign omniscience and human free will. One may question what the aforementioned data has to do with divine hiddenness. It is in this section that the connection will be made. Middle knowledge can answer Schellenberg’s objection to God’s existence from his hidden nature. As previously noted, premise (ii) of Schellenberg’s argument is questionable, where he claims that “If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.”<sup>43</sup> If middle knowledge is true, as has been shown, then

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<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.q83.a1.

<sup>42</sup> “Soft libertarianism, or concurrence, is very similar to soft determinism in many ways but views human responsibility differently in several crucial aspects.” Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 71-72. The five tenets of soft libertarianism include ultimate responsibility, agent causation, the principle of alternate possibilities, the reality of will-setting moments, and the distinction between freedom of responsibility and freedom of integrity. *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 83.

it is perfectly acceptable to hold that a loving God can coexist within a world where reasonable nonbelief occurs, because God knows all individuals fully and completely, and God knows all future contingents. By his middle knowledge, God realizes how much evidence is required to bring a person to faith, and he also knows that, for some, no amount of evidence would suffice. If middle knowledge is true, as this paper has suggested, then the following argument could be given in response to Schellenberg's second premise.

- (i) If an Anselmian God exists,<sup>44</sup> then he would provide sufficient evidence of his existence to those whom he foreknew would respond to his grace.
- (ii) If middle knowledge is true, then God foreknew all who would respond to his grace.
- (iii) Middle knowledge is true.
- (iv) Therefore, an Anselmian God provides sufficient evidence of his existence to those whom he foreknows will respond to his grace.
- (v) Therefore, an Anselmian God exists.

The paper has spent a lot of time defending the concept of middle knowledge—the linchpin of this argument. However, a few other factors need to be considered, particularly how they help to answer the divine hiddenness problem. God's complete relational knowledge of future beings and how that impacts sufficient evidence and his permissive directly relate to the divine hiddenness issue.

#### Divine Hiddenness, Middle Knowledge, and Sufficient Evidence

Molina argues that God completely knows each person that he will create, as evidenced in Jeremiah 1 and other passages.<sup>45</sup> God completely knows each person's decision. Wayne Grudem, a Calvinist theologian, pushes back on this concept, arguing that foreknowledge impedes human freedom. Grudem writes,

For if God can look into the future and see that person A *will* come to faith in Christ and that person B *will not* come to faith in Christ, then those facts are already *fixed*, they are already *determined* long before these persons were even born. If we assume that God's knowledge of the future is *true*

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<sup>44</sup> Anselmian God, here, refers to a perfectly, loving God for whose existence is necessary, otherwise known as a maximally great Being.

<sup>45</sup> Molina, *Concordia* 49.11, 119.

(which it must be), then it is absolutely certain that person A will believe and person B will not. There is no way that their lives could turn out any differently than this.<sup>46</sup>

However, this is not necessarily true as knowledge does not strip one's ability to choose x versus y. It stems from a complete understanding of the person in question. For instance, a mother may know her son to the point that she can accurately predict what her son would do given certain circumstances. If the son loves to play his video games in the basement, she can accurately predict that her son is in the basement playing his video game when she returns home from work. If a parent holds a limited form of middle knowledge from a complete knowledge of her child, then consider the level and degree of middle knowledge that God must hold given God's ability to operate beyond the scope of time's restraints. God is on another level of knowledge that is higher than what anyone could begin to fathom.

But what about reasonable nonbelief? Schellenberg defines reasonable nonbelief as "exemplified by any instance of failure to believe in the existence of God that is not the result of culpable actions or omissions on the part of the subject."<sup>47</sup> This kind of nonbelief comes, according to Schellenberg, from no fault on the part of the skeptic.<sup>48</sup> But is this necessarily the case? How much evidence is sufficient? Jeffrey Jordan rightly points to a problem within Schellenberg's argument. According to Jordan's assessment, Schellenberg argues that "God's love must be directed toward every human as its object; and must be as deep as possible with every human an equal recipient."<sup>49</sup> But could it not rightly be said that some people will refuse to believe no matter how much evidence is given? Atheist Lawrence Krauss noted how science "does not make it impossible to believe in God, but rather makes it possible to not believe in God."<sup>50</sup> It could be argued that some atheists simply do not desire God to exist, and science affords them that option. Yet numerous other scientists and mathematicians—such as

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<sup>46</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 827.

<sup>47</sup> Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Jordan, "Divine Hiddenness and Perfect Love," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9.1 (2017): 191.

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012), Kindle ed.

Stephen Meyer, Isaac Newton, and John Lennox—strongly believe in God’s existence. The realm of Christian apologetics elucidates numerous reasons for believing in God’s existence, to the point that even former atheists such as Lee Strobel and J. Warner Wallace have come to accept the Christian faith even after ardently opposing it. Thus, can it really be said that God is hidden after all? Could it not be said that God has provided everything necessary for belief?

Reasonable nonbelief is to be expected in a world of free agents. In fact, Jesus acknowledged this level of unbelief. In his Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man cries out asking that his family would be persuaded not to come to the hellish place that he abides. In Jesus’s parable, Abraham said to the rich man, “They have Moses and the Prophets: let them listen to them” (Luke 16:29, NIV).<sup>51</sup> The rich man then expresses that if a person were to rise from the dead, then maybe they would listen to that person. But Abraham rightly answers, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31, NIV). According to middle knowledge, God knows what a person would do when given certain circumstances. As such, God knows how much evidence is sufficient for each person, and he also knows that some will not respond regardless of how much evidence is provided.<sup>52</sup> Again, this flows from the complete knowledge God has of each individual.

Schellenberg seems to argue that truth always wins the day. However, truth may not always be enough to win people over to a certain perspective. For instance, consider Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. In his story, a man is released from the confines of the cave that housed him since his youth. He experienced the grandeur of the world as it actually exists. Yet when he returned to tell his comrades, he was met with laughter and was eventually killed due to the inability of the men to consider the nature of his claims. Plato writes,

Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in ‘evaluating’ these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark—and this time required for habituation would not be very short—would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had

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<sup>51</sup> Scripture noted as NIV comes from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Biblica, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 has revealed the level of confirmation bias that the vast majority of people hold. As such, if people are committed to certain ideologies concerning a virus, then it stands to reason that more important issues like salvation and belief in God would be met with even stronger resistance if a person is hostile toward the idea in question, even if evidence is given to the contrary.



returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him<sup>1533?</sup> “They certainly would,” he said.<sup>53</sup>

Schellenberg’s expresses a bit of naivety as he thinks that any and all reasonable persons would accept evidential claims of God’s existence. But, as noted by Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and Jesus’s Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, some people would not be convinced even if God were to fully reveal himself—even raising someone from the dead. Some may account their experience with God as the result of indigestion from last night’s burrito or a mental hallucination stemming from the stressors of life. Sufficient evidence is a relative concept. What may be considered sufficient evidence for some, may be insufficient for others. Much of what is considered sufficient evidence depends on one’s biases, resistance, and rationality to accept truth claims. Furthermore, as Alvin Plantinga has shown, belief in God could be considered a warranted belief, which may not require any evidence for some.<sup>54</sup>

#### Divine Hiddenness, Middle Knowledge, and Permissive Will

As previously noted, middle knowledge draws the distinction between God’s permissive will and desired will. Schellenberg argues that if God loved everyone, then he would provide sufficient evidence for all people. It was already noted that sufficient evidence is relative to each individual. For some, no amount of evidence for God’s existence would be sufficient. Schellenberg argues that God must “maximally extended and equally intense.”<sup>55</sup> However, God may love each person intensely, but allow the possibility that some people would reject his loving advances. By its very nature, love is trifold, requiring a lover as a first mover, the beloved as a recipient of love, and the free spirit of love found

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<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Republic* 516e-517a, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 5, Paul Shorey, trans (Medford, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press; William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), Logos Bible Software.

<sup>54</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 259.

<sup>55</sup> J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God* (New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 103.

between the two parties.<sup>56</sup> If God were to force his love on a person, one could not claim that the relationship that ensued was a true loving relationship. The love that people have for one another is modeled on the loving relationship that God enacts with his creation. As such, God extends grace to each person, called common or universal grace.<sup>57</sup> However, salvific grace requires the responsiveness of the beloved. William Lane Craig rightly notes that a person seeking God does not only need to search God with the mind, but there must also be a sincere “search of the soul.”<sup>58</sup>

Middle knowledge allows for God to hold a love for every person while also permitting people to reject his grace. What Schellenberg fails to realize is that forced love on God’s part would not be love at all. In the scope of middle knowledge, God knows how to engage each person. As God engages people through his middle knowledge, his love moves the course of history to the point where his hiddenness will be fully revealed (Phil. 2:6-11).<sup>59</sup> Genuine expressions of love would precipitate the existence of reasonable nonbelief of some.

Before concluding, a further word should be said about the evidence given to the world through the incarnation of Christ. Karl Barth noted that God became accessible to all people, even visible to humanity, because “Jesus Christ can reveal God because He is visible to us as men.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, God has provided the world with more than sufficient evidence of his existence through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As Paul asserts, “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15, NIV). The incarnation of Christ was, in essence, the fullest manifestation of divine hiddenness come to light. In Jesus and through the Spirit of God, God is not so hidden after all.

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<sup>56</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2011), 551.

<sup>57</sup> “It is seen in all that God does to restrain the devastating influence and development of sin in the world, and to maintain and enrich and develop the natural life of mankind in general and of those individuals who constitute the human race. It should be emphasized that these natural blessings are manifestations of the *grace* of God to man in general.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 435.

<sup>58</sup> William Lane Craig and Joseph E Gorra, *A Reasonable Response: Answers to Tough Questions on God, Christianity, and the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2013), 132.

<sup>59</sup> “Perfection in love is precisely to have confidence in the work that God is working through the whole of history. Perfect love lives out of a deep affinity with faith. For perfect love is none other than to have confidence in God’s redemptive work. This perfect love we can have.” Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1992), 72.

<sup>60</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2010), 36.

### Conclusion

As this article has shown, Schellenberg's divine hiddenness argument does not hold as much weight when adopting the doctrine of middle knowledge. A perfectly loving God—or an Anselmian God, that Being from which nothing greater could be conceived—can logically coexist in a world where some individuals hold reasonable nonbelief in God's existence. The problem, as it has been shown, is not so much a matter of God's lack of revealing his identity, as Christ is the ultimate revelation of God's existence, as much as it is the rejection of individuals from searching out God both intellectually and with the soul.

Doubt is often a complicated process as it involves intellectual, volitional, and emotional reasons within the mind and heart of the doubter. But to claim that God's existence is impossible due to the existence of rational nonbelief is quite unfair as it does not consider that some may not respond even to the most rational of God's advances. Middle knowledge affords an excellent way to explain how an Anselmian God can desire for all people to be saved, offer sufficient evidence for those whom God knows will respond to his grace, and to permit human response, both pro and con, due to his granting of human libertarian free will. It is expected that, given middle knowledge, that God would permit individuals to respond in various manners as the nature of love itself requires the free expressions of compassion from the lover and the beloved without either party being forced.

Middle knowledge offers additional support to other aspects of divine sovereignty. Further explorations would prove fruitful if one were to research how middle knowledge may explain the hiddenness of God in times of tragedy. Such research would prove especially helpful with problems of theodicy and possibly provide potential reasons behind why God permits evil to occur.

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