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Beings-in-Becoming: A Formative Critique of Schellenberg's Problem of Divine Hiddenness

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Thesis Defense

by

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Dedication and Thanks

In memory of my brother, Malachi Parker.

One who sought the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

With thanks to the many mentors, friends, and family who encouraged and helped me through the process. To my mentors Dr. Joshua Waltman, Dr. Ronnie Campbell, and Dr. Mark Allen for the ideas, research, and companionship. To my friends Matthew Hamilton, Tim Martin, and David Ochabski for the deep conversations and provided resources. To my family who pushed me forward and supported me through my academic career. Finally, to my dear wife Lydia, who steadfastly stood by my side and single-handedly motivated me to finish well.

May you all be blessed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Imagine a boy, born into a modest middle-class home in America. His parents aren't explicitly religious, but his grandparents are nominally Catholic. Throughout his childhood, his grandparents occasionally took him to church on holidays or for certain special events. As he gets older, he maintains a generally positive view of his church experiences but does not consider himself religious. He is happy and content with his life and sees no reason to accept that a divine being exists. He is not resistant to the idea. There just seems to be no evidence of a divine being who loves him. The man is confident that if such a being existed, it would show itself to him in a recognizable way. As his life progresses, he gets married, has kids, enjoys his work, and even through the difficulties of life continues to lack belief in a loving God. In his last few years, he considers his own mortality and determines that if a loving God did exist, then God would have revealed himself by now. Upon his deathbed, he murmurs a prayer saying, "I wish you were real so that this wasn't the end. If you exist, show yourself that I might believe even though I don't think the evidence is in your favor." Shortly thereafter, he dies.

There are many scholars who say that if such a man has existed, then a personal, loving God does not exist. Preeminent among them is J. L. Schellenberg.[1] Schellenberg contends that an unsurpassably great, all-loving God would desire personal relationships with all creatures who are open to relationships. However, there are persons who are open to a relationship with God and yet remain unconvinced of his love and existence due to his perceived absence. Thus, Schellenberg concludes there is no such being that exists. The impact of this argument is

[1] J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

immediately clear to any person who has seriously considered their human condition and beliefs. It appears common in many people's experiences to have gone through a stage of belief where God was hidden. Worse, when they sincerely sought him, he could not be found. Christianity has a long tradition of wrestling with this problem and often concludes that God must have some kind of purpose within this apparent absence.[2] However, many people never come to this conclusion on the basis that they sought God out and they could find neither presence nor evidence of a divine being. Schellenberg argues that if even one such person exists, then God cannot.[3]

Many philosophers and theologians have attempted to respond to Schellenberg by providing reasons why God may be hidden or by refusing the existence of nonresistant unbelievers on theological grounds. However, there is an undeveloped response available to the theist in the realm of the nature of belief. Perhaps, Schellenberg overstates his case for nonresistant unbelief. Once the modern psychological data and recent reworked frameworks of belief are examined, it may prove fruitful to argue that the kind of nonresistant unbelief Schellenberg defines is not possible due to his understanding of belief lacking the necessary nuance.

Statement of Purpose

This thesis aims to show that Schellenberg's problem of divine hiddenness fails as an argument for atheism because his assumptions about, and understanding of, what constitutes belief does not account for the nuanced and complex understanding of belief formation presented

[2] Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green, "Hiddenness of God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, 2022.

in contemporary psychology and recently developed dynamic liminal-belief frameworks. This paper argues that Schellenberg has been immodest in his robust claims regarding the existence of a cognitive state of nonresistant unbelief. In other words, he has misdiagnosed the human condition of doubt by unnecessarily holding to a narrow definition of belief. The complexity of belief formation necessitates a holistic credence structure that accounts for the dynamic, active, diachronic, and ultimately teleological nature of human experience.

The importance of responding to Schellenberg's argument is three-fold. First, it has become a hot-button issue within the philosophy of religion. Christians ought to have a good answer that shows the plausibility of God's existence given the problem. Second, the PDH has gained traction at the popular level and is impacting the local church. Public thinkers like Alex O'Connor have put forth PDH as a primary reason for their unbelief and offer an open challenge for Christians to respond. The Western church has seen a rise in deconstruction and deconversion, with many stating that God has not shown himself when they needed him. Finally, as Christians and philosophers, we have a duty to pursue truth wherever it may lead. If Schellenberg is correct, then we may have gotten something wrong in our framework of God or the world. By seriously engaging the argument, it will sharpen our ability to understand the nature of reality. This is explored and expanded upon in five chapters.

The first chapter examines the history of the problem, then turns to Schellenberg's argument in detail, paying close attention to his definition of nonresistant unbelief and his structure for belief development, and finally opens the possibility of a new response. The second chapter presents psychological data relating to agnosticism, doubt, and seeking beliefs. This provides a fuller picture of how beliefs develop during periods of destabilizing cognitive states. Attention is given to cognitive science's inability to adequately account for phenomena arising

from outside purely rational means. It will further establish humans as liminal beings, that is, beings in transition who are always seeking and believing anew.

The third chapter redefines belief as a relational position that pushes one in a trajectory toward, or away from, God. Drawing from the work of Charles Taylor, James K. A. Smith, Joshua C. Waltman, and Michael Lamb, a case is made that human beings are always betwixt and in-between, being thrust by the imagination toward practice and understanding. This means that there is an affective orientation toward some ultimate fulfillment. Here, the fundamental teleological and eschatological dimensions of belief are discussed. These dimensions must be continually aimed because one's belief is in constant fluidity. Further, this is the kind of belief anticipated if there is a loving, personal God. The final chapter discusses the inability of Schellenberg's nonresistant nonbelief category to account for the complexity of belief formation. The necessity of a modified framework results in the failure of his argument and the need for a new definition of nonresistant nonbelief. To conclude, a response to the contention that this thesis goes beyond the primary aim of PDH is given.

Statement of Position

I'm convinced that there is a reasonable answer to Schellenberg's argument found in the concept of liminal being. This is where my research yielded the most promising responses. Liminal being is the fluid space in which human beings always exist in the present.[4] It is an unstable space of cognitive ambiguity and epistemic uncertainty where one is no longer in a past moment of belief but not yet fully grasping one's teleological aim. Schellenberg believes that

[4] Liminal literally means "threshold" and denotes ambiguity, uncertainty, and transition. This is the kind of language that is common in psychological literature. Concepts of liminal space in theology can be found in the writings of Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. See St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, (Charlotte: TAN Books, 2010), and St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, (Charlotte: TAN Classics, 2011).

belief is born out of a synchronic state that one can enter or exit through rational means.[5] However, I contend that cognitive realization is born from a transitory 'now' where one's belief is in a continuous state of flux.[6] Driven by one's imagination, the *telos* constantly carries momentum in a certain eschatological direction.[7] This is prime ground for authentic belief formation—a place of disintegration and reintegration.[8] It is in this diachronic liminal space where a person becomes oriented to or away from divine relationship.

This model of complex belief-forming processes is what we might expect to find if there is a loving God. Finite, conscious, morally responsible creatures created by an infinite personal being are likely to have complicated faculties that allow for a genuine relationship with God. Positions that do not allow for a multifaceted system of belief formation do injustice to the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Simplistic systems may not lead to correct conclusions due to a lack of understanding or unknowingly ignoring relevant information that points toward truth.

Further, the dynamic liminal model is consistent with a Christian worldview. Jesus says, "For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds." He indicates that belief is an active process whereby seeking and asking are required for genuine relational belief. The Psalmists

[5] Synchronic states are like a picture, a moment frozen in time, of one's cognitive and doxastic state of being. Regarding Schellenberg, his epistemologies use of rational means to create intellectual assent seems in line with analyzing an individual's belief structure at a specific time and then claiming it fulfills the requirements for nonresistant nonbelief.

[6] The "transitory now" highlights the difficulty in evaluating a persons, or even one's own, cognitive state of being or belief. As drawn out in the later psychological data, beliefs often emerge from the subconscious. They are dynamic and unstable, in constant subjectivity to revision and adaptation.

[7] After discussing *how* beliefs emerge, the question inevitably becomes, "from *where* do beliefs originate?" In short, narrative and imagination lead to reflection. This is not to say that belief has no rational constituent. It is to say that the *telos* and vision of the end goal of existence provides the wellspring from which all reflective belief flows.

[8] Disintegration and reintegration are the expanding and contracting existence of all human belief structures. There is no constant, steady monolith of belief that is secure on will or rationality alone. Beliefs are fluctuating, breaking down and then reemerging anew through the changing inner disposition of a person.

describe this tension of despair to realization in Psalms 10 and 34. The liminal being model shows that a loving God would incorporate the role of communities, desire, liturgy, and individual relationships in pointing one in the direction of the Good Life and spiritual relationship with himself. Schellenberg, then, at the very least, should be more modest in his proclamation of God's nonexistence, and redefine nonresistant unbelief, or at least belief, to account for the vast complexity of belief formation.

Literature Review

History of the Problem

The problem of divine hiddenness is hardly a new concept. Throughout the millennia, philosophers and theologians in the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions have wondered at the phenomenon of God's apparent absence. In the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of people seeking God and finding nothing (Job 23:8-9, 30:20; Ps. 10:1, 22:1-2, 42:9-10, 88:13-14, Is. 45:15).[9] Often, OT authors accuse God of purposely standing far off even when they earnestly seek him (Lam. 3:44). In ancient Rome, the Stoics wrestled with the suffering in the world and took the apparent lack of divine action to indicate that God is an impersonal, rational force directing the universe.[10] In the New Testament, Jesus praises the Father for hiding his divine plans from the wise of the world (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21). Then, there is the climatic paradoxical moment during the crucifixion story where Christ experiences the Father forsaking him (Matt. 27:46).

[9] All Bible references, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the English Standard Version, 2016.

[10] Marion Durand, Simon Shogry, and Dirk Baltzly, "Stoicism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/stoicism/>.

In Confessions, St. Augustine of Hippo wrestles in his lifelong pursuit of finding meaning in the face of evil. Ultimately, he believes it was his sin and brokenness that prevented him from seeing the clear reality of God's presence that can only be properly perceived with the aid of divine grace. For Augustine, God has always been there even in when he seemed absent.[11] Over a thousand years later, the Christian mystics pressed further into the problem of hiddenness. Thinkers like John of the Cross viewed the dark absence of God as a formative experience. The lack of presence is the transformative place where God causes one to abandon all false pretenses before he draws one into true knowledge and a deep relationship with himself.[12] Blaise Pascal had no qualms about this problem, saying, "God being thus hidden, every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden, is not true; and every religion which does not give the reason of it, is not instructive."[13] For Pascal, God is hidden for the purpose of encouraging proper motivation leading to genuine belief.[14] Søren Kierkegaard takes a different approach, still maintaining that the problem is primarily experiential, he recognizes the gulf between finite man and a transcendent God. For Kierkegaard, it may be in the paradoxical language of transcendence where one realizes the impossibility of God unambiguously revealing himself to human beings.[15] Much of the review to this point focuses on the historical discussion and response to the

[11] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, translated by William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[12] Sarah Coakley, "Divine hiddenness or dark intimacy? How John of the Cross dissolves a contemporary philosophical dilemma," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, eds. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 229-231; 239-245.

[13] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Project Gutenberg, 2006) 584. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18269

[14] Paul K. Moser, "The God Relationship and Evidence," in *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116–92.

[15] M. Jamie Ferreira, "A Kierkegaardian View of Divine Hiddenness," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 177.

existential problem of God's absence. However, the discussion surrounding the problem of divine hiddenness changed radically at the end of the twentieth century, it is now time to unpack the more formalized modern development of the argument.

J. L. Schellenberg's Modern Development

J. L. Schellenberg radically shifted the discussion in 1993 with his book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.[16] While not the first to raise the problem, Schellenberg was the one to create a formalized and deductively valid argument that had a significant impact within the philosophy of religion. Because of its widespread popularity and acceptance in academia, his PDH is the version that will be addressed in this thesis. The deductive form of this problem is as follows:

> (1) If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.
> (2) If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
> (3) If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 1 and 2).
> (4) Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
> (5) No perfectly loving God exists (from 3 and 4).
> (6) If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.
> (7) God does not exist (from 5 and 6).[17]

The thrust of this argument is seen in this explicit formulation where Schellenberg challenges theistic views that hold to the existence of a loving divine being. He claims that an unsurpassably great being must be omnibenevolent and desire personal relationships with finite persons. For Schellenberg, if such a being existed, then all finite persons who were genuinely

[16] Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[17] J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford Academic, 2015), 103.

open to a relationship would in fact receive evidence leading to knowledge of God's existence. This evidence could be received in various ways including religious experiences, empirical data, and miracles. The moral intuition is clear, of course, an all-loving God would show himself to those who are open to him. Yet, that does not appear to be the case. If even one person is not resistant and reasonably open to God, and God does not reveal himself in such a way that a personal relationship is possible, then there is no God. Schellenberg finds the strength of his argument grounded in the simplicity of the premises surrounding personhood and the nature of love. His "top-down" approach envisions the kind of world that would have an unsurpassably loving person God and then shows that this world does not fulfill those requirements.[18] He writes extensively, defending his view on benevolence, openness, moral culpability, nonresistance, reasonable nonbelief, and other lesser subpoints.[19] Now that the general outline of Schellenberg's argument has been established, it is necessary to take a closer look at how he defines *nonresistant nonbelief* and what *belief* entails.

For Schellenberg, *nonresistant nonbelief* is a sort of neutral relational and intellectual position where a person is open to a proposition (i.e., God exists) yet does not hold the evidence to be sufficient for such a belief.[20] The existence of such a position is an empirical fact.[21] Schellenberg argues for this epistemic state using three categories: evolutionary history (pre-

[18] J. L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," in Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives, edited by Adam Green, and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 23.

[19] These can be seen throughout Schellenberg's works referenced in this thesis. In particular, his books *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, *The Hiddenness Argument*, and *The Wisdom to Doubt*.

[20] Joshua C. Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden? A Trinitarian Theological Response to J. L. Schellenberg's Problem of Divine Hiddenness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 12.

[21] Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," 25

doubt), doubt, and secularism.[22] He argues that evolutionary history shows long stretches of time where belief in a personal loving God could have existed yet did not.[23] Reflective doubters are used to show that there are individuals who have begun to doubt not out of hardheaded moral resistance against God, this is taken to be evidence of real nonresistant nonbelievers.[24] Secularism further supports his contention of actual nonresistant nonbelief by pointing out how new information and a reduction of social pressure appear to lead to a more natural neutral state of nonbelief.[25] These three categories extend from Schellenberg's underlying evidentialist assumptions that belief comes about due to a rational examination of the available evidence.[26] Nonresistant nonbelief then occurs when one reflectively investigates the evidence and determines it to be insufficient for a reasonable belief.

Schellenberg's definition of *belief* appears to be something like intellectual assent regarding a certain proposition based on an accepted degree of rational evidence. The particulars of his view are difficult to establish because most of his discussion on belief is implicit in the definition of nonresistant nonbelief. In his seminal work, he begins to discuss belief and epistemic rationality using Richard Swinburn's five categories of rationality.[27] Here there is much discussion regarding the culpability or inculpability and rationality or irrationality of beliefs. However, little space is given to the nature of belief itself. A bit more detail is given in a

[22] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 74-88.

[23] Ibid., 78-79.

[24] Ibid., 82-83.

[25] Ibid., 86.

[26] Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 60-68, 82, 212.

[27] Ibid., 60.

recent contribution where Schellenberg grounds belief as an outworking of rationally accepting a proposition as true given the evidence that is presented, "When do you accept a proposition [thereby believing] and when do you say we should wait for more evidence? Many today would say that we are getting ahead of ourselves if we accept that theism is false. *I would suggest that we know enough to do so*" (emphases mine).[28] It is when one has enough evidence that a belief attains. When one investigates the evidence for the existence of God, they are either confronted with his absence, which is evidence against his existence, or confusion due to the abundance of arguments on both sides, which also counts as evidence against.[29] Schellenberg continues by agreeing with contemporary philosophers that belief is not simply a choice that can be forced to occur by will alone. There must be some kind of involuntary element.[30] One cannot say they believe in God without God making himself consciously known, due to his genuine openness, to that person so that they have the proper degree of evidence to warrant true belief.[31]

Interestingly, in one of his more recent articles, Schellenberg makes a surprising statement "Indeed, there is a sense in which belief – what all of us should believe about God – has very little to do with my proposal."[32] He goes on to argue that acceptance is a better framework because "acceptance is voluntary and belief is not."[33] This fits much better with his evidentialist epistemology where one should be open to changing one's position as new

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[28] Ibid., 32.

[29] Ibid., 69.

[30] Ibid., 23. Schellenberg agrees with this and points out that God could reveal himself through experience. He then moves on without considering the complexity inherent within involuntary belief systems. It would be helpful if he gave a fuller account of what kind of involuntary systems produce belief.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," 30.

[33] Ibid.

information and evidence is presented. Schellenberg's general assumption is that human reason can sufficiently determine ultimate reality to the degree that acceptance of a proposition about it can occur.[34] His methodological framework, based in a high view of the philosophical enterprise, is optimistic about the human capacity to achieve belief in something through a rationally neutral doxastic process.[35] However, his position does seem to lack nuanced factors that contribute to one's convictions. This foundation has not been ignored by opponents of his argument. The implication of these assumptions for how beliefs are formed, specifically how they are explicitly cognitively realized for a nonresistant nonbeliever, have opened the door for responses pointing out the difficulty of evaluating one's genuineness and disposition.

Recent Attempts to Resolve the Problem

Recent attempts have been made to address premise (4) of Schellenberg's argument. However, few have challenged the foundation of Schellenberg's assumptions and understanding of belief formation. Two are relevant to mention in this discussion before the approach taken in this thesis can be explicated. While not specifically responding to premise (4), in Joshua C. Waltman's recent trinitarian response to the problem of divine hiddenness, he denies the existence of nonresistant nonbelief on the grounds that the genuine openness of a person cannot be established.[36] He claims that the kind of objective evaluation of a person's inner state Schellenberg espouses is probably impossible due to the complexity of evaluating one's disposition without self-deception creeping in.[37] Walman's contention is targeting Schellenberg's

[34] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 17.

[35] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 13.

[36] Ibid., 84.

[37] Ibid., 86.

assumptions about openness, and his point regarding the difficulty in evaluating the position of one's own belief, not to mention another person's beliefs, is well taken.

Additionally, Daniel Howard-Snyder responds to PDH by questioning Schellenberg's position that an unsurpassably great and loving God would always be open to a reciprocal conscious relationship at a certain time.[38] In his discussion, he voices a concern that there are no "well-disposed" nonbelievers of the sort that Schellenberg presents.[39] Using the example of children, Howard-Snyder says, "Character formation is not under the voluntary control of a child. Thus, by the time a nonbeliever becomes capable of a relationship with God, she won't be responsible for being well-disposed toward God, assuming she is well-disposed."[40] He further draws out the easily established point that people sometimes enter into relationships without the best motivations, or even without being aware of their intentions at all.[41] There are many factors that compel an individual to take various relational actions such as fear, pride, desire, willingness to please one's family, cultural expectations, etc. There may be more value in this line of thinking than is immediately obvious.

A New Approach

While these approaches offer interesting responses to Schellenberg's idea of nonresistant nonbelief and how beliefs are attained, there are additional avenues to address premise 4 that are waiting to be explored. It is one such path that is the focus of this critique of PDH. One of the

[38] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Divine Openness and Creaturely Nonresistant Nonbelief," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, edited by Adam Green, and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

[39] Ibid., 133.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 134.

best ways to succeed in the apologetic enterprise is to ask a good question of your interlocutor. This thesis aims to do just that. By contending that Schellenberg's definition of belief lacks clarity and asking, "What do you mean by belief?" I hope to uncover the shallowness of his position and point the way to a more holistic understanding of how beliefs attain.

The category of nonresistant nonbelief becomes unhelpful, indeed nonexistent, once belief is understood as the cumulation of various factors that go beyond the discussion of doxastic decisions, culpability, and rationality.[42] While Schellenberg writes extensively on these elements of belief, he does not establish how or where beliefs are rooted in the first place. He assumes one arrives at a belief through a rational or irrational process where a person becomes morally responsible for their conclusion. This seems simplistic and is not enough to explain how cognitive development happens or the myriad of subconscious factors at play before one becomes conscious of a new internal belief structure. There are affective, psychological, socio-cultural, and communal elements that influence one toward certain desires before a discussion on culpability can be broached. Discussion of types of evidence and culpability aside, it seems unhelpful to create a category of nonresistant nonbelief at all.

It is possible that a counterargument could be made by saying that the way beliefs come into being does not matter. Indeed, it could be said that primary importance is how beliefs end up being expressed in cognitive assent where they can be examined, consider new evidence, and then use reason to determine their truthfulness. However, this does not defeat the endeavor undertaken here. Belief is not merely the reflection of some intellectual assent, rational or irrational, it is a conglomerate of many complex interwoven factors that thrust one towards some

[42] While this is targeting premise (4), it has significant ramifications for the prior premises. By denying that nonresistant nonbelief occurs in the way described, the previous premises become redefined and are rendered largely useless.

telos, a destination guided by the accepted image of *eudemonia*. There is an eschatologically facing and affective dimension to belief. It is belief 'aimed' continually, not merely a single state. There is a constant, but ever moving, level of commitment toward some object leaving no space for nonresistant nonbelief. This suggests a certain level of dynamicism, contrary to syncretic states, anchored in both the past and the future. It is belief with momentum - being pushed from behind, aimed toward a purpose, and existing in a present point of time.

All of this is to say, that Schellenberg has misdiagnosed the human condition of doubt. It is not nonresistant unbelief, which is far too narrow to capture the holistic nature of belief formation. Rather, we should be looking at belief formation as primarily teleological; a complex process of aiming the whole person at something, and that something may be doubt, or God, or any number of other things.

This paper suggests that Schellenberg should incorporate several additional factors for an expansive and multifaceted definition of belief. Utilizing modern psychology and the works of Charles Taylor, James K. A. Smith, Joshua C. Waltman, and Michael Lamb, a dynamic definition of belief that takes into account the subconscious factors and understands humans as liminal beings is created. Modern psychology provides some empirical data regarding the complexity of the doxastic process leading to committed belief.[43] This is the bedrock demonstrating the necessity of a fuller definition. Taylor's idea of the modern social imaginary provides insights into how culture informs belief and how society influences one's view of the world.[44] Smith critiques the idea that human beings are firstly rational creatures. Instead, he

[43] Much of this discussion examines dynamic neuroscience and the research outlined in M. H. Connors and P. W. Halligan, "Revealing the Cognitive Neuroscience of Belief," *Front. Behav. Neurosci. Vol.* 16 (2022). doi: 10.3389/fnbeh.2022.926742. See also Seitz, Rüdiger J., et al. "From Believing to Belief: A General Theoretical Model." Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience., vol. 30, no. 9, (2018), 1254–64.

[44] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23-30.

demonstrates the role of liturgies and desires in the development of cognitive convictions.[45] In other words, humans are liminal beings incapable of neutrality – always in flux. Joshua C. Waltman builds out the contentions that one's spiritual disposition matters and that a loving God desires spiritual relationships above intellectual assent.[46] This has ramifications for how beliefs are expected to be formed if a loving God does exist. Finally, Michael Lamb draws on St. Augustine's understanding of faith, perseverance, and commitment. Here, some of the diachronic factors of belief are laid out.[47] Once these elements of belief are properly developed, it becomes obvious that Schellenberg's thin belief needs to be thickened. Let the inspissation begin with the psychological data.

[45] James K. A. Smith and Glen Stassen, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 51-176.

[46] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 90.

[47] Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2022), 82-84.

Chapter 2

Belief and Liminal Being

What is Belief?

Modern psychological data demonstrates that Schellenberg's understanding of belief, and thereby his contention that nonresistant nonbelief exists, is inadequate. The psychological data regarding the transient nature of belief, and the unavoidable complexity of determining what factors contribute to a particular belief, build an empirical bedrock that supports the following claim that humans are liminal beings. This points out that Schellenberg has not fully considered the inadequacy of his synchronic and evidentialist assumptions to account for a full-bore definition of belief formation. Rather, as will be shown here, belief is fundamentally diachronic and flexible. It takes into account the fixed picture of belief one has access to, yet also understands the dynamic interplay between past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations, with each moment building upon and influencing the next.[48]

Philosophers have long discussed what constitutes belief, especially regarding epistemology and how one knows something to be true. Due to the complexity and wide integration of the development of belief formation, a brief definitional overview is warranted. Beginning broadly, beliefs are those convictions that persons hold to be true about reality in some sense.[49] The outcome, or final affirmation, of a belief, is the central concern of epistemology.[50] Though psychology is often more interested in the processes that fundamentally

[48] This three-fold language of "past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations" was created with the help of an LLM.

[49] Connors and Halligan, "Revealing the Cognitive Neuroscience of Belief," 1.

[50] Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, and Matthias Steup, "Belief," in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Epistemology*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 2010), Credo Reference.

conjure a belief. Unfortunately, there has been less recent interaction between philosophers of religion and psychologists than there ought to be on this point. Moser frames broad common conceptions of belief simply, "Regarding mental action, a belief typically generates a disposition to assent, at least under appropriate circumstances, to the proposition believed."[51] In other words, it is propositional knowledge that produces belief.[52] Alternately, in behavioral frameworks, belief is dispositional. That is, they explain why we do something.[53] This can run into complications once the underlying propositional content of belief surfaces. In the more widely accepted state-object systems of belief, there is a propositional attitude toward some object of belief.[54]

In order to have a better idea of what belief entails, it is helpful to examine a few broad conceptual frameworks here. Specifically, four mainline conceptions of belief: standard picture, probability theories, voluntarism, and 'as dispositions.' First, and widely held, is belief as the standard picture model which locates belief in two states of mind made up of "propositional contents paired with attitudes towards those contents."[55] This is a sort of propositional attitude where belief is an idea, accompanied by certain feelings, and leading to a behavioral outcome. Within the standard picture model, three subcategories agree belief is an attitude grounded in propositional affirmations but place varying emphases within the model: realism, antirealism, and eliminativism. Realism ascribes belief as an "internal state causally implicated in

[51] Paul K. Moser, "Belief," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Dancy, et. al., "Belief."

behavior."[56] For the realist, it is meaningless to discuss the nature of belief outside of a particular linguistic context, since belief rests on a correlation between one's words and how they act in the world. The antirealist claims that there are no definite internal states, rather instrumental systems we call belief are merely patterns of behavior. In this view, any notion of belief is quickly regarded with skepticism. Finally, eliminativism is a reaction against folk psychology positions that understand belief as "intelligent behavior deployed in interacting with reasoning agents."[57] They contend that modern advances in neuroscience lead to the nonexistence of belief language entirely. Interestingly, Dancy, Sosa, and Steup posit that psychology may very well change our understanding of belief into a spectrum. Rather than deconstruct notions of belief, they hold that it would allow a deeper understanding of the essential elements of belief.[58]

Second, probability theories view belief as numerically quantifiable desires and preferences, thus their behaviors and actions can be predicted.[59] It can provide space for rational inquiry but runs the risk of being normative rather than descriptive. Thirdly, voluntarism holds that persons make decisions regarding what they believe.[60] There is a Cartesian element here, although it is difficult to actually establish that will alone determines one's beliefs. Even if one were to argue that there is an additional category of 'accepting,' it only shows that there is a piece of belief that is voluntary.[61] Fourth, and finally, belief as dispositions is the view that "the

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

ontology of belief is dispositional." In other words, beliefs function like hidden forces forming us, sometimes, but not always, manifested in our consciousness and actions.[62]

Interestingly, within all these potential frameworks, beliefs are distinguished from attitudes and behaviors in that beliefs are often the bedrock on which those categories are built.[63] It is often argued that a belief is not genuine or actual unless a particular attitude or behavior results from it. Behaviors that may seem irrational or unexplainable on the surface are typically the result of a deeply rooted perseverant belief. Due to the nature of belief perseverance, authentically held beliefs can withstand enormous evidential and logical stress, as seen in the existence of fringe conspiracy, religious, and political views.[64] If one finds a belief attractive and coherent by some, often subjective, measure, then a significant shift in one's foundational belief-forming structure is needed to implement any meaningful change.[65]

However, while these broad philosophical definitions can help determine what constitutes belief, they are ambiguous regarding the process of belief formation. Each has a sort of idealized model for belief and action where a person has a set of beliefs that "guides all of their actions all of the time."[66] This is unhelpful in establishing the underpinnings of belief creation. The concern of this thesis requires the developmental process of belief to be accounted for in order to

[62] Formed with the help of an LLM.

[63] Regardless of which of these systems you hold, they all reflect a sense of dynamic, diachronic flow. The importance of this research is to demonstrate the trajectory of contemporary psychology toward complex and dynamic systems of belief formation.

[64] Natalie D. Smoak, "Beliefs," in *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, eds. Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs, 1st ed. (Sage Publications, 2007).

[65] Ibid.

[66] Andy Egan, "Seeing and believing: perception, belief formation and the divided mind," *Philosophical Studies* 140 (2008): 47-63.

determine whether Schellenberg's assumptions are correct and whether nonresistant nonbelief is an actual state of being.

The Psychology of Belief

Now that belief has been broadly evaluated and defined, it is time to go under the hood and explore the deeper machinations that inform and create assent. The psychological constructs of belief are far more complex than the neat and orderly philosophical discussion seemingly entails. Keep in mind the main contention of this paper. Schellenberg has a thin view of belief that does not account for the complex process of belief creation which is teleologically driven. Several factors are considered here, including, the fluent and subconscious nature of belief processes (this is contra static perspectives),[67] a cognitive model of belief formation,[68] the dynamic influence of internal coherency and social conformity,[69] how actual belief systems are often fragmented,[70] and that conceptual beliefs are rooted in narratives and ritual acts.[71]

The contemporary discussion of behavioral attitudes and belief formation has entered a new frontier in the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience.[72] In an effort to go beyond older

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[67] M. Sugiura, R. Seitz, and H. Angel, "Models and Neural Bases of the Believing Process," *Journal of Behavioral and Brain Science* 5, (2015): 21.

[68] Connors and Halligan, "Revealing the Cognitive Neuroscience of Belief," 1.

[69] N. Rodriguez, J. Bollen, Y-Y Ahn, "Collective Dynamics of Belief Evolution under Cognitive Coherence and Social Conformity," *PLoS ONE* 11, (2016): e0165910.

[70] Egan, "Seeing and believing: perception, belief formation and the divided mind," 47-63.

[71] Rüdiger J. Seitz and Angel Hans-Ferdinand, "Belief formation – A driving force for brain evolution," *Brain and Cognition* 140, (2020), n.p.

[72] There are some who argue that specifically religious belief formation is fundamentally different from other types of belief formation. This is used to argue against the rationality of religious belief and for a view of evidentialist belief structures. One could use this to account for the peculiarity of religious belief occurring. However, it does nothing to address the primary contention here that every belief that attains is the result of a vast complex process that does not allow for nonresistant nonbelief. See Neil Van Leeuwen, *Religion As Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023), 199-206; Neil.

models that posit an imaginary versus factual model of belief, researchers have attempted to incorporate the findings in neurobiology into a framework that accounts for both cognitive and emotional processes in belief formation.[73] In their excellent article on believing processes, Sugiura, Seitz, and Angel propose a three-fold hierarchy of belief representation: basic physical level, interpersonal level, and higher social level.[74] Using these, they establish the groundwork for interdisciplinary interaction on this topic. Their findings show that belief-forming mechanisms are closely linked to one's personal relevance, that belief has a hierarchical structure with layers of complexity at every level, and that the process of believing is the "self-organization of the multi-layered associations of cognitive, emotional, and behavior representations."[75] In a rather surprising conclusion, they contend, "In traditional perspectives, the factual contents of a belief have been assumed to be explicit and static. In contrast, the current perspective provides support for the position that believing processes are *fluent and typically subconscious* as they are inherent in the rapidly achieved probabilistic interpretations of the complex world in personal terms" (emphasis mine).[76] The dynamic nature of what they propose has serious implications for any previous system or assumptions that the occurrence of belief is grounded in affirmation and rationality. If this research holds, then beliefs come about in an environment where personal valuations and social biases create strong currents of preferred

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Neil Van Leeuwen, "Religious credence is not factual belief," in *Cognition* Vol. 133. no. 3: 698-714; and Ilkka Pyysia¨inen, "True Fiction: Philosophy and Psychology of Religious Belief," *Philosophical Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2003): 109–25.

[73] M. Sugiura, R. Seitz, and H. Angel, "Models and Neural Bases of the Believing Process," *Journal of Behavioral and Brain Science* 5, (2015): abstract.

[74] Ibid., 17-20.

[75] Ibid., 13.

[76] Ibid., 21.

belief orientations.[77] In other words, previous definitions of belief are fundamentally misguided.[78]

Connors and Halligan's Five-Stage Model

With this new understanding in mind, an updated model is needed. The five-stage cognitive model of belief formation (CMBF) created by Connors and Halligan is helpful here.[79] Their model recognizes the multilayered and interconnected network of beliefs and affirms the difficulty that lower-level cognitive processes (attention, perception, memory, etc.) present to neuroscientists and psychologists.[80] However, they are optimistic that they have uncovered several core functions of belief that allow for the establishment of a larger five-stage account of belief creation.[81] To summarize the CMBF, (1) precursor – often involves sensory input, introspection, pre-existing belief, or trusted communication, (2) search for meaning – is one's subjective interpretation of (1) that shapes or contextualizes it in a way that maintains coherence and "avoids dissonance," (3) candidate belief evaluation – is the evaluative process that attempts to ensure explanatory power and "consistency with pre-existing beliefs," (4) belief acceptance – this is where the belief is adopted into one's network of beliefs and becomes stable, (5) effects of belief – the final stage where the accepted belief is lived out while it simultaneously feeds back into the subconscious system biasing one's cognitive processes toward pre-existing belief

[77] Ibid., 20-21.

[78] Ibid., 21.

[79] Connors and Halligan, "Revealing the Cognitive Neuroscience of Belief," 1-3.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 2.

affirmation.[82] Each stage of this model is intended to illustrate a part of the process. While confirming the subconscious movement and fluidity of belief, it also provides a language for the cognitive processes that develop belief.[83]

The CMBF points out three relevant factors to the discussion in this paper. First, precursor beliefs are based on a myriad of sources and are often directly influenced by things outside of one's control (memories, images, social ideologies, etc.).[84] These ground future belief formation processes that are explicitly perceived. Second, in both (2) and (3) there are interpretive actions that occur at the subconscious and conscious levels aimed at maintaining internal consistency. These are often governed by less-than-rational motivations, including, social pressures, personal belief preservation, and cognitive bias in the surrounding environment.[85] Finally, beliefs that occur externally in attitudes, behaviors, or conscious reflection project influence back into one's subconscious pre-existing belief structures.[86] With this model in mind, three additional factors need to be expanded on concerning (2) and (3) to better grasp the complex elements informing belief.[87]

[82] Ibid., 2-3

[83] I recognize that not everyone agrees on a particular model, but CMBF helps synthesize the current research relevant to this discussion. It provides a limiting framework for the discussion.

[84] Ibid., 2.

[85] Ibid., 2-3.

[86] Ibid., 3.

[87] For a significantly expanded theoretical model that discusses the relation between belief and believing, and stable fluid belief structures, see Rüdiger J. Seitz et al., "From Believing to Belief: A General Theoretical Model," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, vol. 30, no. 9, (2018): 1254–64.

Fragmentation

As much as some may wish, humans are not purely rational minds bound in flesh. Human belief systems are often irrational, inconsistent, and fragmented. In other words, belief development is not guided by a single monolith of belief.[88] Rather, beliefs are compartmentalized and different compartments overlap with other spheres of belief, some conscious and some subconscious.[89] This affects one's ability to act consistently according to one's desires as well. Each belief has a sort of sphere of influence that can guide behavior and impact other beliefs depending on one's context, but not to the degree that it creates a single system. This type of fragmentation actually becomes useful for guarding against unreliably formed or inconsistent beliefs.[90] It allows for the detection of improperly formed beliefs that can be consciously evaluated and then retained or cast out. Without fragmentation, the underlying influences propelling belief creation would be nearly impossible to root out of a singular belief picture.[91] This further expands the evaluative factors found in stages (2) and (3) of the CMBF.

Conceptual Beliefs

Adding to the complex nature of belief formation, particularly regarding metaphysical questions, are conceptual beliefs. These are abstract beliefs that are often communicated through narrative and rituals.[92] The narratives linguistically transmitted provide, from a very early age, a framework for viewing common social, economic, and religious ideas that capture the

[88] Egan, "Seeing and Believing," 48.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., 59-61.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Seitz et al., "Belief formation – A driving force for brain evolution," 3.

imagination.[93] Rituals then reinforce many of these narratives, capturing an embodied emotional experience and "facilitating belief acquisition and maintenance affecting goal states and social connection."[94] Repeated narratives and rituals can create broad social acceptance of certain ideas.[95] A sort of flow of societal belief models sweeps those nearby into its stream. In a similar way to (2), one's environment gives credence to avoiding certain types of dissonance and accepting common conceptual ideas.

Social Conformity

As seen in (2) and (3) of CMBF, belief mechanisms are often aimed at internal consistency and social conformity. Any discussion on social conformity must take into account the strong influence of rigid, cognitively coherent belief systems.[96] The coherency level of a belief system held by a group in society correlates with how quickly that system will propagate.[97] A strong enough system can even produce belief that can resist immense social pressure.[98] Through belief processes in individuals with high levels of coherency, a confirmation bias feedback loop is produced.[99] Those individuals can have a huge impact on a society that is experiencing a lack of coherency.[100] Once the desire for coherency meets the desire to conform to social pressure; changes to one's belief system become increasingly difficult. The strength of

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid., 5-6.

[96] Rodriguez et al., "Collective Dynamics of Belief Evolution under Cognitive Coherence and Social Conformity," abstract.

[97] Ibid., 9-11.

[98] Ibid.,10-11.

[99] Ibid., 2.

[100] Ibid., 12.

these factors working together further demonstrates the underlying influences that complicate the belief creation processes.

Critical Response

For the sake of argument, a critic could make a case that all of this psychological data is itself fragmented and incoherent as a singular system, thereby dismissing its importance in challenging Schellenberg's category of nonresistant nonbelief. This would be a mistake. Even in granting the critic his argument, the data remains, showing that belief and the processes that form and guide it are deeply complex. The integration of modern psychological understanding regarding belief deserves Schellenberg's attention. It ought to drive him, at the very least, to reevaluate his underlying assumptions that define nonresistant nonbelief. This will be further examined in the final chapter.

Infraliminal Belief

Before moving on, it is helpful to add an umbrella term to account for the data described above. The term *infraliminal belief* is introduced here to specifically incorporate both the subconscious nature of belief-forming influences and the ever-changing movement of those factors. Infraliminal belief is taken to mean all of those various factors and influences discussed in contemporary psychology that are below the consciousness and inform one's belief-making processes. "Infra," meaning below, and "liminal," meaning literally 'threshold,' denote a transitory or 'in transition' space.[101] This is to incorporate both the ideas that there are elements of belief formation even below the subconscious (at the neurological level), and that those influences are constantly shifting and moving (never in a static state). Thus, it is those beliefs

[101] "Liminal," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2016).

that lay deep below the cognitive surface in a condition of transitory flux. This is more useful for the intention of this work than the generic category of subconsciousness because it accounts for those elements that can never be brought into the explicit rational consciousness or that inform the subconscious. It includes the complex layer of neurobiology that neuroscience has yet to fully understand – which is the physiological brain reactions and precursor beliefs leading to subconscious beliefs that are sometimes expressed in conscious reflection or external behavior.[102]

Liminal Being

What does the psychological data entail for human beings? If human beings are neither purely rational nor merely emotionally or instinctually driven, then what sort of believing beings are they? I contend that human beings are best understood as *liminal beings*. The idea of liminality is a concept adopted from anthropology and originating from Arnold Van Gennep's seminal work on ritual functions in transitory stages of life.[103] It is a conceptual space of being betwixt or between, in an intermediate and ambiguous process.[104] A feeling of displacement with an inherent lack of direction.[105] In architecture, liminal spaces are functional as transient places. For instance, a hallway is the in-between space where one transitions between two larger spaces. Similarly, human life could be encompassed as the hallway between birth and death. While

[102] Shellenberg is simply not looking into the complexity of belief. We do not fully understand how beliefs are formed and influenced. Even if one does not agree with the argument presented here, there is no doubt that the complexity is far greater than it initially appears. Schellenberg cannot claim that nonresistant nonbelief is attained in the way he describes until he shows that his argument can account for the data presented in this chapter. He must demonstrate that his intellectualist presuppositions are reasonable in light of how beliefs are actually formed.

[103] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

[104] Lisa M. Ortiz, "Liminality," in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, eds. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2001).

[105] Anne Franks and John Meteyard, "Liminality: The Transforming Grace of in-between Places," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 3 (2007): 216.

liminality is often used to explain social conformity and processes of cultural change, it can also be implemented as a way to understand the locus of belief creation in persons.

Contemporary psychology seems to have difficulty in understanding the bridge between neurological mechanisms and the forming of belief. Perhaps, that is because their view of human nature is misguided. Rather than being complex machines that produce even more complex beliefs, humans are desiring beings that exist in a perpetual condition of liminality. This would certainly account for the fragmentation and biased structures of belief that have been previously established. It further explains the convergence of many internal and external factors, similar to small tributaries feeding into a river, into the flow of one's belief formation processes.[106] Liminal categories are not based on empirical structures per se. Instead, they allow for a new lens for understanding belief creation where change, contingency, and teleological orientation are taken seriously.

Liminal beings are always moving along a spectrum of belief. They are fundamentally believing lovers. Contra Schellenberg, it is impossible for a liminal being to have the sort of open nonbelief required for his category of nonresistant nonbelief to actualize. Infraliminal influences create an internal environment that is incapable of maintaining the cognitive state of nonresistant nonbelief. Liminal beings are not motivated by openness or assent toward propositions. Rather, they are motivated by a *telos*, an imaginative vision created from multilayered factors. In this way, Pascal is right to contend that it is first important for one to desire a thing to be true and then later find out that it is.[107] If one does not desire or orient themselves in some way toward a thing, then they will likely never find it to be believable. Does this mean that rationality plays no

[106] M. Trebilcock, *Towards a Theological Hermeneutic for Contexts of Change: Love in Liminality*, (Australia: Charles Sturt University, 2015), 44-45.

[107] Pascal, *Pensées*, 187.

role in the formation of belief? No. It means that rationality is only able to examine those beliefs that arise out of the infraliminal factors that are constantly thrusting the person toward some teleological end. Those infraliminal factors can be influenced and shifted by a holistic pattern of change in a person. It takes a combination of reflection, ritual/liturgy, behavioral action, and rational inquiry to reorient the flow of motivated belief. It is now time to turn to an examination of how changes occur and a holistic model that exposits humans as beings-in-becoming formed by infraliminal elements, narratives, and liturgies aimed toward something.

Chapter 3

Multifaceted Belief Formation

Humans as Beings-in-Becoming

Humans as liminal beings affected by infraliminal influences are well-accounted for in Christian concepts of human belief formation. The psychological data does not take the Christian by surprise. Indeed, on a theistic model, it is anticipated. This chapter will demonstrate that Schellenberg's concept of nonresistant unbelief is too narrow, failing to capture the fullness of the human experience of belief, which is active, dynamic, and directed towards an ultimate concern. This argument implies that the apparent absence of belief in God at any point is not necessarily indicative of a divine failure, but could be part of the complex, teleological process of beliefs formed by liminal beings. In other words, there is no such state of being that allows for nonresistant nonbelief because belief is always eschatologically aimed and teleologically informed. The sort of open middle belief Schellenberg proposes is impossible to attain. It also resonates with existential and phenomenological accounts of human existence that view individuals as beings-in-becoming, always in the process of shaping and reshaping their beliefs in light of new experiences, liturgies, and insights. Persons may have a concept of their past beliefs, but not their present becoming of belief. This is why one may become suddenly aware that they are or are not oriented toward a relationship with the divine.

The contention that a uniquely Christian conception can account for both the complexity of belief-forming mechanisms and the liminal nature of human beings is evaluated in four parts. First, Charles Taylor offers the initial terms and formulations that are used in the following discussion. Of particular importance are his ideas surrounding the formative power of socio-

cultural contexts for one's identity, especially the dynamic elements of human belief.[108] Further, his concept of social imaginaries provides a path leading away from the idea that belief is primarily cognitive assent.[109] Second, James K. A. Smith's influential book *Desiring the Kingdom* is used to flesh out a framework of liminal belief formation.[110] His contention that humans are first lovers shaped by desires and liturgies, rather than reasoners governed by rational inquiry, is shown to account for and align with contemporary belief psychology.[111] This sort of being is guided by a *telos* instead of by a contention.[112] Third, Joshua Waltman's work on the nature of God's love is examined to understand why God may allow for complex liminal belief structures in finite creatures.[113] The answer is found in the purpose of a loving, trinitarian God that is aimed at participatory and deeply spiritual relationships with persons.[114] Finally, Michael Lamb draws on St. Augustine's understanding of faith as a relational position of belief, which continues Waltman's contention.[115] Lamb builds a position of distinctly Christian faith as

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[108] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Harvard University Press, 1992).

[109] See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*; Karen Swallow Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*.

[110] James K. A. Smith and Glen Stassen, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

[111] Jeffery Porter, "Rituals of Ultimacy: A Neurotheological Account of James K.A. Smith's Post-Secular Liturgy," *Practical Theology* 14, no. 6 (2021): 518–28.

[112] R. J. Seitz, R. F. Paloutzian, and H. F. Angel, "Processes of believing: Where do they come from? What are they good for?" *F1000Research* 5, (2016): 2573; Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

[113] Joshua C. Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden? A Trinitarian Theological Response to J. L. Schellenberg's Problem of Divine Hiddenness*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023).

[114] Joseph Minich, *Bulwarks of Unbelief: Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age*, (United States: Lexham Academic, 2023); Joseph Minich, *Enduring Divine Absence: The Challenge of Modern Atheism*, (Russia: Davenant Institute, 2018).

[115] Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought*, (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2022), 64-69.

a multifaceted form of motivated and affective belief.[116] Importantly, the diachronic and eschatological dimension of belief is explored in the context of a faith informed by hope.[117]

Social Imaginary and Dynamic Belief

Charles Taylor's notion of a social imaginary is the "ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[118] It is where the governing assumptions of society are, often without reflection, held. These would be beliefs, practices, and expectations that exist at the subconscious or infraliminal level, guiding the implicit desires and normative behavior of a person. The imaginative forces at play are not make-believe or false fantasies about reality. Rather, they are the deep-seated framework that grounds normative notions about one's identity, role, and ritual practices in the community (usually a national community).[119] While often applied broadly to implicit motivations of nations and societies, there is much to be gleaned for the purpose of understanding the formative impact of one's social biases and the nature of belief creation in liminal beings.

Social imaginaries are akin to the internal machinations of a car engine, one cannot see exactly what is occurring but it is clear that the car is being propelled forward by whatever force is exploding within. The imaginative engine in human beings is largely precognitive and

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[116] Ibid., 68.

[117] Ibid., 83, 94.

[118] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

[119] Manfred B. Steger, "Social Imaginaries," in *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, ed. George Ritzer, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2012).

heedlessly accepted, it shapes the flow of belief like a riverbed before floodwaters fill it.[120] These are unavoidable elements in human belief creation processes. Complexity is ubiquitous here. There is a constant movement of belief as the infraliminal factors of society shift along a spectrum of hidden assumptions that encourage or discourage certain types of belief. The interrelational elements incorporated in this structure of social imagination point to the core of human belief formation as a transitory process, furthering the case for humans as liminal beings-in-becoming. Taylor seems to support this idea at a macro level by contending that there is an inevitable process of transforming social beliefs, sometimes occurring slowly over long periods, and other times happening at a rapid pace through revolutions and the like.[121] Regardless of the time or place, at certain points in history, a new social imaginary exerts a strong influence over individuals' belief inclinations. The imaginative engine is updated.

Indeed, one such imaginary is the sort of "radical individualism" seen in 21st-century America that contextualizes what one may expect of God's revelation.[122] One might say that God ought to live up to one's threshold in order to believe in his existence. If the narrative that a person's belief faculties are oriented by precludes certain types of evidence or specific visions of reality, then it is highly probable that they will not accept those beliefs except through a fundamental infraliminal belief shift. Thankfully, this is possible if humans are liminal beings with fragmented belief systems. One can use reason to evaluate those influences that rise to the surface of consciousness and begin to position themselves in a space that enables reorientation to a new *telos*, a new version of the Good Life. This one thing is clear, individuals do not possess a

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[120] Karen Swallow Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis,* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 23.

[121] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 30.

[122] Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 44-45.

disengaged rationality. Each one is a creature inexorably connected to, and with, a community that lays the bedrock of acceptable belief.[123] Each person starts from a certain disposition, a guiding orientation. This leads to other contributing factors in liminal beings' belief-forming processes: ritual, *telos*, and desire.

Liminal Being and Ritual Formation

Taking infraliminal belief and social imaginaries seriously requires a cohesive and comprehensive model that develops the idea of liminal being further. Here, James K. A. Smith's anthropology is immediately helpful in extrapolating the liminal nature of humanity and the redefinition of belief formation as a fundamentally desiring process. This is examined in three parts. First, his elucidation of human beings as liturgical creatures who form beliefs based on loves and desires aimed at a *telos* provides a fuller account of dispositional precognitive belief formation. Second, the role of imagination as a "meaning-making" function that enables the conscious reflection and affirmation of certain beliefs.[124] Third, the explanatory power of embodied liturgies and practices that impact precognitive functions is shown to anticipate and confirm the contemporary psychological data.[125] Importantly, this anthropological framework furthers the notion that one's *telos*, aiming at a particular ultimacy, is what motivates and propels a person's creation of beliefs.[126] This is in contrast to a kind of 'intellectualist' position where belief changes from state to state based on available evidence.[127]

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[123] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 25.

[124] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 22-24.

[125] Porter, "Rituals of ultimacy," 518.

[126] Brad D. Strawn, "Desiring a Kingdom: The Clinical Implications of James K. A. Smith's Theological Anthropology," *Journal of psychology and theology* 50, no. 1 (2022): 73.

[127] Paul K. Moser, *The God* Relationship, 191.

(1a) Creatures of Desire

According to Smith's anthropology, humans are not primarily thinkers, believers, or creators. Rather, they are lovers guided by liturgical practice toward an object of desire.[128] He is reacting against a modernist, cognitivist anthropology that understands the primacy of reason in shaping persons.[129] Smith posits what he considers is a more holistic model of persons that considers the beings-in-becoming nature of embodied humanity as they experience the transient present. It is a grounded view attempting to shift the emphasis of formation away from the head and closer to the heart.[130] Fundamentally, this is "a more dynamic sense of human identity as both unfolding and developing over time (a process of formation), something characterized by a kind of dynamic flow."[131]

Within this dynamic flow, there are several characteristics that seem obvious upon reflection. There is an inherent intentionality behind human behavior and belief.[132] In other words, there is no position of being that is not pointed toward some end. There is no neutral ground where one is not navigating intentionally in the world. Smith holds that the rudder steering this intentionality is one's loves, that is, the objects of desire.[133] When someone acts in a way that appears outwardly irrational, often despite the advice of others, it is because they are

[128] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53-54.

[129] Ibid., 56.

[130] Ibid., 63.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 64.

[133] Ibid., 68.

driven by a particular intention to attain what they ultimately love. This often functions at the level of precursor beliefs and deep dispositional orientations.

(1b) Teleologically Propelled

The realm of dynamic desire is informed additionally by a teleological picture that is perceived as *eudemonia* (the Good Life). Again, as Smith is quick to point out, this is primarily a noncognitive, affective characteristic that one believes is the path to a fulfilling life.[134] While Smith largely avoids language of belief per se, his view can be applied in the infraliminal belief structures that have been established, the teleological end that a person is continually aimed at is made up of many social, narrative, and imaginative influences existing before rational determination takes place. One's vision of the Good Life is created by many expectations and internal mechanisms that propel one forward to attain that goal.

This is an affective understanding of belief formation where what a person judges as good is an important contributing factor to what they will consider to be true, and in turn, to what they will openly affirm belief in. As Smith contends, "It's not so much that we're intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a precognitive level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons."[135] The complicated narratives that inform teleological aims are varied and given the circular nature of confirmation bias in belief creation, a significant event or change of infraliminal influence is needed to divert the flow of belief toward a new object of desire. It may well be the impact of new liturgies that transforms belief processes in this way.

[134] Ibid., 70.

[135] Ibid., 71.

(2) Imagination Station

The imagination is a place where narratives, pictures, and ideas co-mingle and prime one's belief-forming mechanisms. It is the affective background from which desire emerges.[136] The individual imagination creates meaning in one's life, it establishes the air one breathes. As Kieran Egan puts it, "[the] function of imagination is such that it never merely copies the world or translates perceptions; it is a constantly active and creative faculty that shapes the world we perceive and that uses our hopes, fears, and other emotions in that shaping."[137] There is very little decision-making involved in this stage of priming belief. In a real way they are "birthed in us" coloring all future perceptions of the world.[138]

The imagination is the center of "meaning-making" faculty that contextualizes one's understanding of a belief before it reaches the threshold of cognition.[139] It is the locus of actualized personal belief beyond those infraliminal influences that are nearly impossible to access. This is why there might be two individuals who grow up in identical situations and yet nevertheless ascribe meaning to their beliefs in radically different ways. It is in this space that the eyeballs of belief reside, giving vision to what one is inclined toward believing is desirable. Often, regular embodied practices influence the orientation of imagination and desire. It is liturgies that bring beliefs from below into the behavioral and conscious world to be examined.

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[136] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 196.

[137] Kieran Egan, *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 924.

[138] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom,* 196.

[139] Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*, 21-22.

(3) Liturgy and Practice

Desire and imagination are precognitive aspects of belief formation shaped through embodied practices and rituals of ultimacy.[140] Habits and practices act as an engine propelling one's being toward the motivating *telos* of the heart.[141] For Smith, there is a kind of diachronic process of ritual where individuals participate in systems and institutions that create imaginings of the Good Life that form one's desires. The desires then feed back into the system of rituals that reinforce a person's end goal and perceived meaning. Embodied practice informs desire and the desire reinforces the practice. Liturgy is the rituals humans participate in that direct, or inform, one's ultimate love and desire.[142] These practices are dynamic and can be reimagined to enforce a different vision for one's *eudemonia*. There is always an eschatological kingdom structured in one's understanding through the liturgies they participate in.[143] The way one acts is indicative of their internal belief-making mechanisms, but more importantly, one's belief-forming process is influenced by the way one acts. Belief is no longer construed as cognitive assent, rather it is an adaptive orientation of a person's love.[144]

The precognitive and infraliminal structures of belief are primed by the "material practices" drawn to some ultimate.[145] Contemporary psychology has begun to recognize the multilayered, complex process that motivates human action and habit.[146] Many of the guiding

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[140] Porter, "Rituals of ultimacy," 518.

[141] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 95.

[142] Ibid., 97-98.

[143] Ibid., 99.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Strawn, "Desiring a Kingdom: The Clinical Implications," 76.

[146] Ibid., 77.

mechanisms operate at a deeply subconscious level that only emerges into the consciousness once outward behavior emerges. Often, the only way to stimulate change is through shifting the liturgies that one participates in to change their "hermeneutical horizon."[147] The imagination that pictures an ultimate *telos* is formed in the crucible of socio-cultural influences informing the way that one embodies the story, forming meaning, and participating in liturgies that create infraliminal belief. Importantly, these outward actions and inward influences cannot be encapsulated in what is often described as 'knowledge' or 'reason.' Rather, the practices are the preconscious dispositional elements by which one feels out the world they live in.[148] It is a space of being devoid of neutrality and imbued with an inherent sense of meaning.

Clinical psychotherapy is beginning to realize the implications of Smith's liturgical anthropology. The internal struggles of a person are informed by the kingdom they are attempting to be a part of – the story they are embodying.[149] Real change can only occur in a person if the infraliminal elements are uncovered in such a way to cause one to potentially shift the flow of their teleological trajectory toward a different imagination of the Good Life, thus reorienting their desire, and finally re-aiming their beliefs.[150] Only by becoming aware of the "liturgies of ultimacy" that one participates in can a person begin to examine the intentions and influences below their belief.[151]

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[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid., 79.

[150] Ibid.

[151] While one might say that this is irrelevant to PDH, it is a necessary step in furthering the dialogue between theology, philosophy, and psychology regarding the formative elements that influence belief. How one views human ontology colors their understanding of how beliefs are formed. Psychology can inform theology and philosophy on the function and process of belief. Philosophy can distinguish logical consistency and veridicality. Theology can create a system of meaning and purpose behind the beliefs.

There is a paradigm shift in how neuroscience understands belief formation. The data gained through contemporary scientific studies utilizing fMRIs, PETs, and SPECT are leading away from previously held intellectualist assumptions and toward a view of humans as liturgical creatures.[152] This further supports the contention posited earlier in this paper that human belief processes should be understood in the context of liminal being, always in a fluid condition of belief construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Jeffery Porter argues that a new method, that of *neurotheology*,[153] is needed in order to understand both the brain functions and spiritual phenomena that give rise to religious belief.[154] The bodily practices one engages in and what one believes about the world are integrally linked to each other. Various structures of the nervous system (sympathetic, parasympathetic, etc.) are immediately impacted by ritual practice.[155]

This is not to say that reason has no influence. Reason is the faculty that allows one to reflect on these formative practices. It enables a person, once the awareness threshold has been breached, to determine the types of narratives worth encouraging. Smith's anthropology is aligned with this contemporary research and is providing a language for the complex belief creation processes that neuroscientists are uncovering. Humans are liturgical creatures, liminal beings whose beliefs are being aimed through a network of infraliminal factors.[156]

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[152] Porter, "Rituals of ultimacy," 522.

[153] Porter is adopting a methodology created by Andrew Newberg who is primarily interested in the dialogue between neuroscience and theology to increase understanding in areas of complex human belief and experience. See Porter, "Rituals of ultimacy," 519.

[154] Ibid., 519.

[155] Ibid., 523.

[156] The difficulty inherent in this discussion is that most philosophical discussions surrounding belief are concerned with the epistemic grounding of belief, its logical consistency, coherency, culpability, etc. There is very little discussion, especially in Schellenberg, about how or where beliefs come from. It seems necessary to ask what belief is before examining its reasonableness. Schellenberg discusses Swinburne's five kinds of rationality but never

Divine Love Desire's Deep Personal Relationship

Now, a simple question rises to the surface, "Would a loving God create creatures with these sorts of belief-forming mechanisms?" or perhaps, "Is this the type of anthropology we could expect if a loving God existed?" In order to answer this, the nature of divine love and the intention of a loving God must be explored. Using Joshua Waltman's trinitarian framework of perichoresis and participatory divine love, three points are made here.[157] First, the love flowing from a trinitarian God is participatory. Second, the purpose and desired outworking of this love is a deep spiritual relationship between God and man. Finally, the liminal and liturgically formed nature of human belief allows for that type of relationship to occur.

(1) Participatory Love

The nature of perfect divine love is grounded in the core of God's being. Unsurpassably great love is perfectly self-giving, sacrificial, and completely shared within the divine nature as a perichoretic relationship. That is a "mutual interpenetration" of maximal reciprocated intimacy between the three persons of the Trinity.[158] This kind of infinite communion of unbounded spiritual unity within the godhead is impossible for human beings to fully experience due to their finitude.[159] However, a maximally loving being such as God is ontologically personal, thus perfectly aimed at participatory personal relationships. The goal of loving actions taken by God will necessarily attempt to reveal personal, relational, and communal characteristics of himself in

examines the complex, dynamic factors that produce belief in the first place. Here is where psychology and theology may be helpful. See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, (Clarendon Press, 2007).

[157] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 55.

[158] Ibid., 55-56.

[159] Ibid., 57.

order to draw persons into a spiritual relationship and experience divine love.[160] This type of love must go beyond intellectual assent to facts and evidence, as seen in James 2:19. That sort of evidential revelation would be unable to spark the desire necessary to elicit a participatory relationship.[161] God's revealing actions, born out of unsurpassable love, are an invitation into a deeper spirituality where belief is inexorably intertwined with spiritual relationships.[162]

(2) Divine Desire

The ultimate divine desire flowing out of a participatory and perichoretic love is perfect communal fellowship in a spiritual relationship.[163] This desire can only be born out of a love that "is not a static unmoved and unmoving Love, for God's Being is an eternal movement in Love . . ."[164] The "gratuitous overflow" of that ceaseless stream of love is what God desires to extend out to human beings so that they might experience the immeasurable goodness of his nature.[165] In Christian concepts of God, this sort of orientation toward relational unity with the ultimate love is a core theme. In John 17:20-23 Jesus declares his desire, which he equates to the very desire of God, is that those who enter into a relationship with God will be perfectly unified in and through divine love. It is not those who affirm God's love for the world that enter into this reciprocal relationship of divine communion. Rather, it is the people who are affectively oriented to God, who desire fellowship and participation, that enter into a genuine spiritual relationship

[160] Ibid., 57-58.

[161] Ibid., 58.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 163.

[165] Ibid.

where God is revealed. What kind of creature is capable of this? A liminal being who is formed by imagination and liturgy.

The Necessity of a Liminal and Liturgical Anthropology

If belief was formed primarily in a synchronic picture, a fixed intellectual affirmation influenced by bias and evidence, then human beings would be unable to experience, and indeed know, the fullness of God's love. There would be significant limitations preventing persons from grasping essential elements of who God is that can only be known through an affectively motivated and ever-changing flow of belief formation. This is especially true in relational forms of belief where the object of affection is itself constantly moving. Desire has an influential and moderating role in this. In order to genuinely believe in God one must be oriented in their whole being, not just in their mind. Otherwise, there would be portions of one's intellectual belief that would be unable to enter into an experience of the spiritual relationship that has communion with God as its teleological aim. There must be underlying influences that enable one to recognize their ultimate state before God as dependent, humble, and finite creatures. The human capacity for a relationship beyond reason must exist at every level of the belief creation process for God's love to be experienced. Given the perichoretic nature of divine love, we might expect to find that God would create creatures that form belief through communal narratives and imaginations that can capture more of his suprarational characteristics.

God's aim in this now becomes that the *telos* of a community is perfect reciprocal communion with God. The motivating narrative of belief formation becomes unity, or abiding, in the love of God.[166] This can only be accomplished through a spiritual relationship. In order for humans to build the communities required to fully experience and participate in divine love, they

[166] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 59.

must have faculties and processes that allow for significant paradigm shifts, ongoing belief change, expanding belief capacities, communally formed imaginations, subconscious and conscious reorienting mechanisms, and embodied practices that enable multifaceted understanding of complex beliefs. This is exactly what the psychological literature has found and what Smith's anthropology explains.

The Diachronic and Eschatological Aim of Belief

In his excellent recent work on Augustine's political thought, Michael Lamb discusses Augustine's understanding of faith as an "orientation toward objects absent and unseen."[167] The sort of faith that Lamb explores incorporates a dual understanding of faith as a type of relational trust, and belief as fidelity or commitment to another.[168] Important to this paper, both ideas go beyond rational or epistemic categories and involve the desiring characteristics of "tenacity" or "steadfastness."[169] Lamb furthers the case that has been built up to this point here, saying, "To have faith is not only to believe *that* God exists or believe *in* God but, on the basis of that belief, to *move* toward God as one would move toward a person whom one loves or trusts."[170] In other words, it is a belief that moves along with the purpose of relationally engaging the object of desire. There is no black-and-white belief here. Instead, we are left with a complex process of formation where persons are always committed to *something* that significantly impacts their ability to make rational decisions based on evidence alone.

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[167] Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 69.

[168] Ibid., 80.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Ibid., 81.

It may be best to understand this as a 'beings-in-becoming' framework, a liminal space continually occupied where all belief carries momentum. This is a "diachronic dimension" to belief creation where "practices" and "commitments" thrust one toward the ends they are aimed at.[171] As one gets closer to the eschatological outworking of their desire, their love for that object grows, "Informed by love, faith in God involves a relationship of trust with God . . . or movement toward God."[172] At all times, one is sliding down a spectrum of belief, gaining speed the more they are oriented by practices, desires, and imaginaries toward that love. This ultimate love is one's hope, the motivating factor that says the loved thing is desirable as the Good Life.[173] Those who do not have hope and love focused on a reciprocal relationship with God are disoriented and need a fundamental paradigm shift that reorients their desire.[174]

Conclusion

Consider the hallway example – is there ever a time when an individual has emerged from the transitory fluid movement of belief? It seems not. The complexities and dynamic nature of belief-forming mechanisms need an equally nuanced multifaceted framework informed by psychology, theology, and philosophy. As discussed in this chapter, the central contention and development of the idea that humans are liminal beings deeply influenced by infraliminal factors. They are beings-in-becoming who deconstruct and reconstruct their belief based on various internal and external guidance. In the context of PDH, the fundamental question for liturgically formed, spiritual relationship-desiring creatures changes from, "Are you genuinely open to assenting that God exists and shifting your behavior/attitudes?" to "Where are your desires

[171] Ibid., 83.

[172] Ibid., 94.

[173] Ibid., 68.

[174] Ibid.

oriented, and toward what form of the Good Life are you aimed?" Belief is then defined as the expression of an affective process flowing from deep in one's being.

The endeavor of this thesis began with an evaluation of Schellenberg's category of nonresistant nonbelief which argues for a largely intellectualist view where belief is the result of cognitive affirmation of certain propositions. It is a fixed point of assent sometimes affected by one's bias. The data presented in chapters 2 and 3 challenges this assumption by showing that belief is more like a constantly changing process shaped by desire, liturgy, and love. This was supported by Taylor and Smith's work which demonstrated the teleological aim of belief as social narratives and ritual practices shape one's desire for a certain Good. Waltman presented a participatory view of God's love that anticipates creatures with liminal belief faculties capable of experiencing a reciprocal spiritual relationship with God. Lamb, using Augustine, expanded the relational factors, as seen in the Christian idea of faith, to include a dynamic and fluid facet of belief that moves toward the object of affection. The cumulative weight of all these factors points to an understanding of belief that transcends narrow intellectualist positions. Instead, as beings-in-becoming, humans are a flowing river of belief. It is a river propelled by an amalgamation of interior and exterior influences, consisting of complex formative liturgies, and informed by socio-cultural narratives and kingdom-facing desires.

Schellenberg does not appear to take these factors into account. Rather, he is only recognizing those elements of belief that rise into the rational consciousness while remaining apathetic to how those beliefs became cognitive expressions in the first place. Nonresistant nonbelief, as defined by Schellenberg, cannot exist in beings that are fundamentally shaped by their imaginations and the narrative they ascribe to. Chapter 4 will revise Schellenberg's formulation of nonresistant nonbelief in light of the previous discussion. When exposed to the

liminal nature of human belief formation, his categories of belief and openness are shown to be at best inadequate, and at worst totally fail.

Chapter 4

Against Schellenberg: Belief as Dynamic Liminal Formation

The Way Forward

We have now arrived at the culmination of the case against Schellenberg. Fundamentally, his position considers belief formation within an intellectualist framework that forgets to incorporate the role of communities, desire, liturgy, and personal relationships in pointing one in the direction of the Good Life. As Waltman points out, "Perhaps cultural preunderstandings correctly prime the intuition in certain ways, but the open individual must recognize that the culture may very well prime the intuition in opposition to objective reality as well."[175] Belief has a teleological engine and eschatological goal. Rather than "I believe that" or "I believe in," it is "I have been believing." I do believe something at this moment, even if it is not clear what that is until future retrospective reflection. This is belief aimed continually, not merely a single, static cognitive state. The research presented throughout this thesis suggests that belief is dynamic, formed in liminal beings through a myriad of infraliminal influences.

This chapter has two questions at the forefront: Do the belief processes seen in contemporary psychology lead to the sort of belief that Schellenberg holds? And can Schellenberg modify his category of nonresistant nonbelief to include dynamic processes? These are formally discussed in three sections. First, challenges are raised against Schellenberg's understanding of belief and how it is attained. His quasi-rationalist assumptions surrounding belief formation are examined and denied as overly simplistic. This is shown to have a significant impact on the idea of genuine openness to a belief. It is then posited that his category of nonresistant unbelief needs to be modified in order to account for the lack of nuance. Second,

[175] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 76.

a potential new definition for nonresistant nonbelief is presented. This definition revises Schellenberg's original form to include the dynamic elements of belief formation in liminal creatures. Third, the revised models are shown to fail either due to internal contradictions or to the fundamental changes they introduce to the argument. The contrary nature of static and dynamic concepts disallows unity between Schellenberg's original definition and any definition that appropriately includes psychological and anthropological data. Finally, an anticipated response dealing with the irrelevancy of the considerations in this paper is presented and answered.

Challenges to Schellenberg's Concept of Nonresistant Nonbelief

Regarding Schellenberg's concept of nonresistant nonbelief, premise 4 of his PDH argument states, "Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists."[176] The existence of persons existing in a state of nonresistant nonbelief is one of the two crucial points on which his argument rests.[177] If it can be shown that nonresistant nonbelief does not occur due to the actual operation of human belief-forming processes, then his argument fails, or at least it would need modification to account for the new data. In order to properly assess if Schellenberg's position is problematic given the discussion thus far, it is helpful to formalize his view here.

Broadly, nonresistant nonbelief is an epistemic state where one lacks belief in the existence of God due to a lack of convincing, substantive evidence that would lend them to such a belief. Importantly, there is rational openness and no resistance to the notion that God does exist. In order to get a clear picture of exactly what the claim is, it is helpful to examine

[176] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 103.

[177] The other point is that a loving personal God would act a certain way, namely, appropriately revealing himself to open persons. See premises 1 and 3.

nonresistant nonbelief in premises. While Schellenberg never puts his definition into formal premises, incorporating all the contributing factors he presents produces this formulation:

1. A person does not believe in God if they have no belief in God's existence.
2. A person does not resist believing in God if they have no emotional, intellectual, moral, or volitional reasons preventing them from accepting God's existence.
3. A person is nonresistant to the idea of God if they are open to believing in God, should convincing evidence or persuasive experiences be presented.
4. If there is no convincing evidence or persuasive experiences presented to a person, they cannot form a belief in God.
5. Therefore, a person is in a state of nonresistant unbelief if they do not believe in God, are open to the idea of God, but find themselves unable to believe due to a lack of convincing evidence or persuasive experiences.[178]

In this framework, a person who is not resistant to belief or at least is not conscious of resistance, is genuinely open to belief if sufficient evidence is attained, and continues to maintain a state of openness regarding future evidence. While rhetorically forceful, there are significant issues with the assumptions informing this position. Further, his definition of belief inherently limits what openness would entail and precludes dynamic formation mechanisms.

(1) Assumptions

Schellenberg's assumptions follow a quasi-rationalistic or intellectualist tendency. This is clearly seen in his understanding of belief as propositions that one has, "a disposition to 'feel it true.'"[179] How does this disposition come about? Through a graded idea of belief where one cognitively assents to a proposition on the basis of "evidence that is sufficient to produce belief."[180] This evidence provides degrees of probability that lead one, implicitly upon rational consideration, to accept a propositional affirmation into one's worldview.[181] Thus, reaching a

[178] Developed utilizing an LLM.

[179] Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness*, 30.

[180] Ibid., 33.

[181] Ibid., 35-36.

state of belief is a stairway of probabilities created by evidential structures that one ascends. It is akin to a scientific endeavor where data is plugged in, and a probable outcome is produced. This intellectualist methodology, often implicit in Schellenberg's writing, is problematic if a holistic view of belief that includes narrative, imagination, socio-cultural rituals, and liminal belief-creating mechanisms is correct.

Paul Moser writes against the epistemological intellectualism that often colors this discussion,

> The shortcoming of a kind of 'intellectualism' that limits the relevant evidence to evidence already possessed by a person. If God is truly redemptive and hence relationally curative in seeking divine-human reconciliation, we should expect the evidence for God to be correspondingly redemptive and curative. The implications of this lesson for religious epistemology are significant but widely neglected.[182]

Moser further points out the difficulty of an intellectualist position to determine when the threshold of evidence is sufficient for belief, or even the inability for one to grasp the limitation regarding one's scope of "evidential adequacy."[183] It may be that a person does have enough evidence to rationally believe some proposition. Yet, their volitional condition disallows the appropriate actions and dispositions necessary for genuine belief.[184] This is perhaps a more significant issue regarding relational beliefs where one's desires and loves play a direct role in what kinds of relationships one is open to. To avoid these considerations due to a precommitment to a rationalistic, thinking-centric approach is to do a disservice to the dynamic nature of belief that goes far beyond explicit cognitive motivations. Schellenberg's understanding of belief is reductionistic and fails to recognize the multifaceted influences, such

[182] Moser, *The God Relationship*, 117.

[183] Ibid., 145-147.

[184] Ibid., 149-150.

as the teleological and liturgical elements, that continually guide the fluid condition of one's believing systems.[185]

(2) Belief Formation

Schellenberg does not spend much space discussing belief formation specifically. What he does say is largely in line with his intellectualist assumptions, "There is commonly a shift at the moment of belief formation from thinking *about* the proposition, its epistemic status, and so forth, to thinking *in terms* of it."[186] It seems like this is an all-or-nothing view of belief formation, belief is involuntary in that one only takes up a belief with sufficient or probable evidence. Formation exists in synchronic states that are passed through various epistemic judgments.

However, belief formation cannot be a process merely to reach a state of assent (biased or unbiased) due to the factors discussed in chapters 2 and 3. There is no way to avoid the infraliminal influences on one's emotional, volitional, desiring, and imaginative faculties. Liminal beings have a network of underlying streams motivating their beliefs and informing the type of openness they have. These contributing elements offer a multitude of explanations as to why a person may continue to be a nonbeliever. A liminal belief model is needed to depict a much thicker view of belief formation that incorporates an interdisciplinary evaluation of psychological readiness, teleological aims, embodied practices, and the role of love as priming a person's orientation toward, or away from, belief in God.

It must be considered whether or not one is in the position or has the capacity, to be genuinely open to a relationship with God. Their belief-forming processes may have oriented

[185] This seems a fair critique because though Schellenberg does sometimes mention other factors, he still severely underestimates the vast multilayered complexity of what belief practically entails.

[186] Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness*, 32.

them in a stream of belief away from God. While they think they are open to evidential considerations that affirm or deny God's existence, they are, in fact, incapable of making that judgment. This is not to say that it is impossible, or totally arational, to shift one's belief. It is possible to change the *telos* of belief, although not by voluntarily choosing a different thing to believe in. Rather, it is by immersing oneself in those formative practices that reorient one to a new kingdom. This is not counter to rationality; indeed, reason plays a role in determining what is a good object to aim at. It is to say that reason is not the *foremost* factor influencing one's disposition and belief-forming processes. This is even more relevant in discussing how a loving God might desire beliefs to be formed. If the goal of continually "believing in" God is a reciprocal relationship, then the way one attains that belief will look very different than the affirmation that 2+2=4.[187] A liminal space is needed where the fullness of a participatory relationship can be achieved and formed through transitions in one's understanding as one deconstructs and reconstructs desires influenced by their communities and the narratives they embody.

Schellenberg's goal in PDH is not to explore the psychological underpinnings of belief but rather to show a conflict between certain classically described divine attributes and certain epistemic states in human beings. Nonetheless, neither of those can be properly exposited without a concrete definitional foundation. Without a holistic and workable heuristic of belief actualization, his view becomes little more than empty musings about what could be instead of what is. As it stands, his position on belief formation is static and fragile.

[187] As mentioned earlier, I prefer the phrase "I have been believing" as both an epistemic realization and a continual, transient orientation toward a *telos*.

(3) Implications for Openness

The complex operation of belief formation also has significant implications for Schellenberg's view of openness. While not the main focus of this paper, openness in PDH is an integral part of how he understands nonresistant nonbelief. Openness is a dispositional category that entails one is open to evidence that would lead one to belief in God. This is an intellectual availability and rational receptivity, without resistance, to changing a belief based on new data.[188] However, this idea is too narrow to capture the inherent difficulty of being *actually* open. As Waltman points out,

> Schellenberg's problem of divine hiddenness requires just one instance of openness that resulted in a lack of belief, but proposing that even one such instance has occurred is not a claim that seems likely to be substantiated effectively . . . To substantiate the proposition, one must demonstrate openness to a supernatural worldview, openness to acknowledge spiritual disposition, openness to moral transformation, openness to communion with the Spirit, and openness to worshipful submission . . . if one is spiritually blind because of the resistance which characterizes his or her own spiritual disposition, then it seems plausible that this blindness would also color the evaluation of the openness of others, making an accurate assessment of the spiritual criteria a failed project from the very start . . . This being the case, one would need to demonstrate objectivity in one's own spiritual disposition in order to then ensure that the assessment of others is not colored accordingly. If this is not shown, then the possibility of a skewed perspective remains an uncontrolled variable which removes the credibility and plausibility of the proposition.[189]

Real openness becomes an unhelpful category once the complexity of determining that openness demonstrably shows it to be a nearly impossible task. If belief formation is influenced by a myriad of fluctuating factors that shape one's orientation, then genuine openness must also be described as an evolving condition impacted by fluid infraliminal influences. My argument against Schellenberg's view of openness differs from Waltman's in this way: it is not that I think

[188] Waltman, *Why Does God Seem So Hidden?*, 75-76.

[189] Ibid., 86.

openness is impossible because it fails to meet Waltman's criteria, or because sin produces a continual spirit of resistance.[190] Rather, nonresistant nonbelief is an impossible category because human beings *cannot have openness to the sort of belief Schellenberg espouses*. That is, both openness and belief look radically different once humans are understood to be liminal beings liturgically formed. There can easily be factors contributing to underlying modes of resistance, environmental or social elements that preclude belief in God, or dispositions that skew the weight of perceived evidence for belief. At the very least, Schellenberg should expand his view of openness beyond mere receptivity to abstract belief in God to include the transformative, spiritual, and relational aspects necessary for true openness. As Moser points out, "Without suitable openness to transformation toward God's character, we may be blinded by our own counterfeit 'intelligence' . . . we would be guilty of *idolatry*, perhaps even a kind of *cognitive* idolatry where we demand a certain sort of knowledge or evidence for God inappropriate to a filial relationship with God."[191]

A Revised Definition of Nonresistant Nonbelief

Considering the psychological data and liminal being model, it seems clear that Schellenberg needs to update and modify his category of nonresistant nonbelief, or potentially develop a new category entirely. A revised model must include a dynamic, liminal understanding of belief and its formation. Several influential elements must be accounted for, including but not limited to continual belief modification processes, precognitive and cognitive-emotional states,

[190] Waltman's five-fold criteria for openness demonstrate that one must have certain spiritual dispositions in order to be genuinely open. If anyone does not meet one of the criteria, then they are not genuinely open to belief in, and relationship with, God. He denies the existence of nonresistant nonbelief on the grounds that no nonbelievers fulfill all five categories of openness.

[191] Paul K. Moser, "Divine Hiddenness Does Not Justify Atheism," in *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon, (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 47-48.

infraliminal influences, socio-cultural imaginaries, and active temporal dynamics aiming belief on a moment-by-moment basis. As will be demonstrated in the next section, I suspect that even if such a formulation can be made, it would cause significant problems for Schellenberg's overall argument. If belief is not primarily an intellectual endeavor, and there is no state of passive openness to belief, then Schellenberg lacks a substantially nuanced category of belief on which to build his case.

A revised definition that a proponent of Schellenberg's argument could develop is attempted here. This definition is constructed out of Schellenberg's original concept of nonresistant nonbelief with the addition of the complex belief-forming mechanisms described throughout this paper. It incorporates Schellenberg's fundamental claim in PDH regarding how God would act regarding openness and belief, a revised view of nonresistance that holds to dynamic influences on openness, and contextually fluid liminal belief formation. The three premises and conclusion created from these elements are as follows:

1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no person who is genuinely open and nonresistant to the existence of God should remain in a state of nonbelief.
2. A person is nonresistant to belief in God if they do not actively resist the idea of God's existence and their state of belief or nonbelief is continually influenced by dynamic cognitive processes, social environments, and cultural narratives.
3. Human beliefs, including belief in God, are dynamic, influenced by changing psychological states, information, experiences, and cultural contexts.
4. Therefore, a state of nonresistant nonbelief in God is dynamic and subject to change over time due to new information, experiences, or cognitive shifts.[192]

This concluding definition seems to allow the proponent to retain the basic meaning of nonresistant nonbelief as an epistemic state that lacks belief, while also admitting the complex nature of how belief is formed. The outcome of this reformulation shows that infraliminal factors can be accounted for and may change one's openness to certain types of belief. By permitting a

[192] Developed utilizing an LLM.

degree of active fluctuation within belief creation, the problems relating to the passive openness of his original definition are resolved. While this seems good on the surface, I suspect that even with this revised formulation Schellenberg's argument remains untenable due to the rigidity of the underlying intellectualist assumptions.

The Failure of Revised Models

Fundamentally, there is an unavoidable issue at the core of Schellenberg's understanding of nonresistant nonbelief. Namely, his intellectualist assumptions view belief as static and rational events that do not allow for a dynamic and liminal model of belief formation. Any attempt made to reconcile his view of belief with the practical reality of liminal models will fail to result in an appropriately holistic and nuanced framework that fully embraces the complexity of belief-forming processes. Every modification must incorporate the dynamic nature of belief, the teleological motivations aiming belief, and the eschatological goals informing belief. This leads to two problematic outcomes when adopted alongside Schellenberg's definition of nonresistant nonbelief. First, it leads to an inherent contradiction between static state and dynamic process models. Second, even if there is no contradiction, a new framework is produced and PDH is radically altered into an entirely different argument that does not resemble the original.

Utilizing the basic formulation in the previous section demonstrates the difficulty of harmonizing nonresistant nonbelief and the psychological data without stumbling into a contradiction. Premises 3 and 4 affirm the infraliminal dynamic reality of belief formation taking into account the data discussed earlier. However, premise 1 is latent with Schellenberg's static intellectualist assumptions that allow for a passive openness to belief apart from infraliminal influences. This leads to a conflict between static and dynamic models where belief is held to be

stable and rationally determined, but also fluid and changing in every moment. It is not clear that this is an easily resolvable tension given the complexity of belief actualization. Indeed, even if there is not a contradiction, it is dubious ground to build an argument denying the existence of God when the processes leading to such nonbelief are not adequately understood.

Even if one could develop a model of nonresistant nonbelief that incorporates the dynamic, teleological, and eschatological elements of belief there would still be a considerable issue to consider.[193] Namely, it would be a radically different argument! Any modifications that change belief into a fluid, liturgically formed, and infraliminally influenced process fundamentally alter Schellenberg's original definition of nonresistant nonbelief. Further, a new epistemology and anthropology would be needed to accompany the updated version of nonresistant nonbelief to explain how such a modification best explains the psychological data. This would have ramifications for the idea of openness as well. Openness would likely be redefined as being willing to engage in new practices, communities, and spiritual relationships. This is far from Schellenberg's initial definition. While it is impossible to say exactly what a modified PDH might look like, an updated argument is necessary given the inadequacies of Schellenberg's version.[194]

The simple fact is that Schellenberg's assumptions do not match the reality of actualized belief. As demonstrated above, Schellenberg cannot genuinely account for belief complexity, formation, and change if he maintains his intellectualist position that produces a largely static view of openness and belief. He does not have the facilities necessary in his model to grasp the

[193] It seems increasingly likely that this is necessary for future formulations of PDH given the trajectory of contemporary belief psychology. While not everyone will agree with the system I have established here, it is meant to be a small example of the broader movement away from intellectualist models within psychology.

[194] I leave the heavy lifting of developing a new argument to those with greater ability than I. My aim in this paper is merely to point out the failings of Schellenberg's PDH in light of the contemporary data.

ever-moving, socially informed, infraliminally influenced reality of a belief. At best, his notion of nonresistant nonbelief is unhelpful to the discussion of the possibility of belief in God and needs to be modified. At worst, there is no such category as nonresistant nonbelief, and it should be eliminated from the academic discussion around divine hiddenness. Philosophy alone will not provide the answer here. An interdisciplinary dialogue is needed to develop a holistic definition of belief formation that goes beyond strictly epistemic concerns and narrow rational judgments that dominate the discussion of PDH within the philosophy of religion.[195]

Anticipated Response

Before concluding this paper, I want to briefly respond to a challenge that may be brought against the endeavor presented thus far. One could argue that I am pushing PDH beyond the bounds of Schellenberg's intent. They could claim that by introducing concepts and data from psychology and theology the discussion is being inappropriately diverting away from the primary aim of PDH which focuses on the problematic nature of divine personal love and finite epistemic states of openness and belief in human beings. In this way, the discussion is unnecessarily complicated and prevents one from seeing the core philosophical issues Schellenberg is dealing with. While there may be some value in understanding belief formation, one could contend that the epistemic concerns focus only on what evidence is consciously available to the nonresistant person.

However, this challenge misunderstands the purpose of this thesis. Namely, to point out that Schellenberg cannot even begin the discussion without an effective and meaningfully grounded view of belief that incorporates the dynamic factors of formation readily recognized in

[195] The logical problems presented here do not even scratch the surface of the complex issues that arise for Schellenberg once the practical, psychological, and anthropological factors are presented. There is nothing added within the examined premises regarding the type of relational data and dispositions that nonresistant nonbelief would need to account for in a person's belief orienting structures.

psychology and an infraliminally influenced liturgical anthropology. Indeed, if he does not consider these factors, then his case is doomed from the beginning. If Schellenberg is willing to meaningfully ground belief, then he can potentially strengthen his argument by broadening his framework to include more than the typical dichotomous philosophical conversations of faith and reason, rationality and irrationality, and sufficient evidential thresholds for belief. By engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue, a more holistic understanding of belief as a liminal, liturgically oriented, and communally influenced process can be established in such a way as to accurately reflect belief formation as it actually occurs.[196] This helps avoid the common failure of philosophical discussions becoming disconnected from reality. The way beliefs arise matters because it determines one's disposition to the idea of divine hiddenness, or God's potential existence, in the first place. Either Schellenberg needs to revise his definition of openness or change his understanding of belief and belief formation.

Finally, the claim that only consciously available evidence is relevant in discussing nonresistant nonbelief is overly simplistic and is not at all what might be expected if a loving God does exist. It does not unnecessarily complicate the discussion if complexity is needed to have a fuller understanding of the topic at hand. A thick definition of openness, belief, and belief formation must incorporate both dynamic factors and the divine desire for a relationship. Of course, this adds layers of nuance where philosophy may need to rely on other disciplines to move the conversation forward. Only one's assumptions would prevent psychology and theology from providing insights. Once this is admitted, the "dynamic of aesthetic truth" can break in like an invader that is "not content to merely present itself as an idea to be impartially considered by

[196] Seitz, et. al. makes an excellent point to this effect, "This means that the most complete understanding of the processes of believing and communicating among humans requires that we examine the processes from micro to macro levels within a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm." See R. J. Seitz, R. F. Paloutzian, and H. F. Angel, "Processes of believing: Where do they come from? What are they good for?" *F1000Research* 5, (2016): 25-73.

the mind."[197] The door is open to many types of 'evidence' that can be best explained by the existence of a loving God who created desiring beings. As Moser contends, "God would seek to engage humans redemptively as agents, not just thinkers, and we should expect evidence of God to be elusive, variable, and challenging to that end. We should expect salient evidence of God to come through a Gethsemane crisis rather than mere casual reflection on our evidence."[198] This type of belief formation is essential to the discussion precisely because it allows for more clarity and necessary complexity, not less.

Conclusion

The practical apologetic value of this project should not be lost in the weeds of academic debate. The rhetorical and existential force of Schellenberg's argument has the hallmarks of an easily repeatable atheistic argument that is already showing signs of deeply impacting those who wrestle with God's perceived absence. What can be shown and modeled, using the critique in this paper, is that Christianity has been demonstrating for two thousand years what contemporary psychology is just now discovering. Human beings are fickle, complex creatures guided by their imaginations, loves, and desires. The apologist can respond to someone struggling with PDH by showing them the dynamic infraliminal influences on one's belief, expositing the nature of divine love, and inviting them to reexamine the deep desires of their heart. In this, there is ample opportunity to introduce them to the ancient practices of the Church. A path well-worn by the footsteps of saints and inscribed in Holy Writ. This practice is the way of Jesus, where he extends his hand and bids one, "Come follow me."

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[197] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 208-209.

[198] Moser, *The God Relationship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 191.

The process of belief in liminal beings presents significant challenges for Schellenberg's understanding of nonresistant nonbelief. His lack of a substantively holistic definition of belief means that the rigid intellectualist assumptions that color his discussion of reason, culpability, evidence, and belief create a weak foundation for his category of nonresistant nonbelief. This fragility is seen with greater clarity once the psychological data is examined and an alternate anthropology with a thick view of human belief processes is expounded. Contemporary psychology demonstrates that belief is not the product of evidential evaluation and intellectual assent. Instead, belief is a multilayered, dynamic, infraliminally influenced, fluid process where a person is motivated toward a particular *telos*. Thus, belief is not a static category of rational inquiry.

The psychological data requires a new understanding of what humans are and how they form aimed beliefs. A liminal anthropology that conceives humans as beings-in-becoming is needed. Within this framework, humans are liturgically formed, desiring lovers constantly shaping and reshaping their ultimate orientation of belief. As Smith and Taylor demonstrate, beliefs emerge out of social imaginaries and embodied practices. These flow out of infraliminal factors that inform the belief prior to conscious realization. This type of complex belief formation is what might be expected if a loving personal God desires reciprocal relationships with his creatures because it allows the affective and revisionary elements necessary for genuine spiritual relationships.

If the liminal being model formulated above best explains the relevant psychological and anthropological data, then it seems increasingly improbable that persons can have the kind of neutral intellectual openness to belief that Schellenberg espouses. His category of nonresistant nonbelief is too thin to account for the reality of actual belief formation. Schellenberg's

intellectualist assumptions, built on a fundamentally rationalistic worldview, prevent him from being able to incorporate the new dynamic data into his argument. Attempts to do so lead to inherent contradictions or, at best, create an irrelevant category. Ultimately, Schellenberg's category of nonresistant nonbelief fails to actualize due to his inadequate and underdeveloped definitions of openness and belief. The complexity of liminal beings requires a definition of belief that goes beyond static cognitive states and into the beautiful world of purposeful relationships aimed at a final *telos*.

Finally, three areas seem particularly fruitful for future research. First, a linguistic analysis of synchronic and diachronic approaches to understanding how humans come to understand belief in God. The way that one contextualizes belief, and all the various contributing factors, is often limited by their linguistic scope. A better grasp of linguistic developments could be useful to understand the contemporary discussion around belief and PDH. Second, the ability of liminality, liminal being, and liminal spaces to properly frame much of human experience. As philosophy moves away from empirical and purely rational methods, there is a need for language and spaces that provide fuller, more holistic, understandings of human beings, knowledge, belief, and practice. The conceptual framework of liminality and liminal spaces may establish a fruitful new window into the transient nature of life and the world. Lastly, it is possible that the process of change and belief formation is an experience of the presence, not the absence of God. As human beings move through the transient spectrum of belief, being formed and informed by infraliminal factors, they are experiencing something of the ever-growing relational love of God. The apparent hiddenness then becomes the result of a false expectation of how God's love operates. Research and development in these areas can extrapolate some of the ideas that are introduced in this work.

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