

Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism

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Abstract: According to the much-discussed argument from divine hiddenness, God's existence is disconfirmed by the fact that not everyone believes in God. The argument has provoked an impressive range of theistic replies, but none has overcome – or, I suggest, could overcome – the challenge posed by the *uneven distribution* of theistic belief around the world, a phenomenon for which naturalistic explanations seem more promising. The 'demographics of theism' confound any explanation of why non-belief is always blameworthy or of why God allows blameless non-belief. They also cast doubt on the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*: the awareness of God that Reformed epistemologists claim is innate in all normal human beings. Finally, the demographics make the argument from divine hiddenness in some ways a better atheological argument than the more familiar argument from evil.

The argument from divine hiddenness

According to the argument from divine hiddenness (ADH), God's existence is disconfirmed by the fact that not everyone believes in God. Over the years the argument has provoked an impressive range of theistic replies, and the topic has become the subject of a lively current debate. However, none of these replies has overcome – or, I suggest, could overcome – the challenge posed by the *uneven distribution* of theistic belief around the world, a phenomenon for which naturalistic explanations seem more promising.¹ The 'demographics of theism' not only confound theistic explanations of non-belief in God; they also cast doubt on the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, the awareness of God that theologians in the Reformed tradition claim is innate in all normal human beings. Furthermore, these facts make ADH in some ways a better atheological argument than the more familiar argument from evil.

ADH comes in two main versions, each of which I'll describe in just enough detail for present purposes. The first version starts with the premise that the

personal God described by traditional monotheism is unsurpassably loving.² It deduces from that premise the intermediate conclusion that God would seek a loving personal relationship with each of God's human creatures whenever such a relationship was cognitively and affectively possible. From that intermediate conclusion, it infers that God would bring it about that each such human being believed in the existence of God, given that the formation of a genuine loving relationship between two persons requires that each person believe in the other's existence. The argument then asserts what its proponents regard as uncontroversial: some human beings who fail to believe in God are nevertheless otherwise cognitively and affectively capable of enjoying a loving relationship with God. As its proponents see it, some people who in every relevant sense *could* believe in God do not, a situation that God would not permit if God existed. The argument concludes, on those grounds, that no God of the kind described by traditional monotheism exists.

The second version starts with a more particular premise concerning the God described by the New Testament, especially on the evangelical Christian interpretation of that text.³ According to this version of ADH, the (evangelically interpreted) New Testament makes it clear that God wants *all* of God's human creatures to believe the truth of 'the gospel message', one of whose crucial elements is that '[t]he ruler of the universe sent his son to be the savior of humanity'.⁴ The particularity of that initial premise allows the second version to go more quickly than the first: the God described by evangelical Christianity would see to it that all cognitively and affectively capable human beings believed the gospel message. Yet only a minority of all cognitively capable human beings have ever believed the gospel message, including the claim that the ruler of the universe sent his son to be the saviour of humanity. So no God of the kind described by evangelical Christianity exists.

I have described both versions of ADH in crude terms, but I hope not so crude that they obscure the at least apparent plausibility of each version. In the first version, we reason from the concept of an *unsurpassably* loving God to the claim that any such God would desire a reciprocal personal relationship with any other persons whom God has created: the love of one person for another, according to this reasoning, achieves its highest form only in a reciprocal personal relationship, and thus if God lacked the desire to relate to human persons in that way, God's love would be surpassable by a being just like God but who possessed the desire. We then note the conceptual impossibility of a reciprocal personal relationship in which either person fails to believe, or positively disbelieves, in the other person's existence. An omniscient God would also recognize this conceptual impossibility and so would recognize that human belief in God is necessary for the kind of relationship with human beings that God desires by virtue of being unsurpassably loving. If God desires the end, then why, in the case of every human non-believer, has God not taken the

necessary means to that end? The second version starts with the New Testament proclamation that God wants all human beings to believe the gospel message, and so it purportedly needs no assertion of God's unsurpassable love, or any inference from that assertion to God's desire to form loving relationships, or any inference from that desire to the absence of non-belief.⁵ If God desires that we all believe the gospel message, then why do many, or indeed any, of us not believe that message?

The demographics of theism

As they have become more cosmopolitan over the centuries, theists have become more aware that much of the world's population has never shared the theistic belief in a supreme, personal God and that in some places theists have never formed more than a tiny minority. Nowadays it is common knowledge among educated people that religious perspectives differ widely around the world and that theistic belief is by no means spread evenly among all cultures. A sixteenth-century European such as John Calvin can perhaps be forgiven for parochialism about belief in the existence of what he calls 'God the Creator':

Certainly, if there is any quarter where it may be supposed that God is unknown, the most likely for such an instance to exist is among the dullest tribes farthest removed from civilization. But, as a heathen [Cicero] tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.⁶

But we know better and have known it for some time.⁷ While anthropologists tell us that religion in the broadest sense of the term is found in all cultures, not so the 'conviction that there is' what Calvin would recognize as God. Moreover, of course, some quite advanced civilizations with impressive histories have never contained more than a small minority of theists.

Recall that the problem of divine hiddenness arises in the first place from the nature of theism's personal creator God, whose perfections include unsurpassable lovingness and who, according to evangelical Christianity anyway, wants everyone to believe the gospel message. Non-belief becomes puzzling if a being of *that* description exists. It therefore does not refute ADH to construe 'theism' more broadly as, say, the generic belief in the supernatural; it merely changes the subject. Granted, belief in the supernatural is more widespread and more evenly distributed than belief in God, but divine hiddenness is a problem for theism in particular, not for supernaturalism in general.

Contemporary demographic data illustrate the lopsided distribution of theistic belief. The populace of Saudi Arabia is at least 95 per cent Muslim and therefore at least 95 per cent theistic, while the populace of Thailand is 95 per cent Buddhist and therefore at most 5 per cent theistic. The approximate total populations are 26 million for Saudi Arabia and 65 million for Thailand.⁸ Presumably these

samples are large enough to make the differences statistically significant and not merely a statistical blip that would disappear if we took an appropriately long view of the matter. If those data are even roughly accurate, the distribution of theistic belief is at least highly uneven between those two countries, and they are hardly unique in this respect.

Published discussions of ADH, however, seldom refer to such disparities, perhaps because the core debate has concerned whether theism can explain the mere *existence* of non-belief, without regard to its distribution. In the introduction to their anthology *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (2002), editors Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser allude to the disparity only once and only obliquely, in the course of describing J. L. Schellenberg's contribution to the anthology, which itself only alludes to the disparity.⁹ None of the essays in the collection fully appreciates the problem. Instead, most contributors offer and assess explanations of divine hiddenness without seeing how those explanations fail to explain the striking geographic differences in the incidence of theistic belief.

Those contributors who explain all non-belief in terms of the epistemic or moral defectiveness of non-believers never address the question 'Why does that defectiveness vary dramatically with cultural and national boundaries?'. Moreover, given the widely held assumption that, generically speaking, epistemic and moral defects are evenly distributed among the world's peoples, it is hard to see how that question *could* be answered. Those contributors who grant the existence of blameless non-belief, and try to explain why God tolerates it, never ask why God tolerates it so unevenly. In sum, given the range of explanations offered by contributors of both kinds, their assumptions seem traceable to a period of European intellectual history in which the beliefs of non-Europeans were either unknown or ignored.

Responses to ADH

Theistic responses to God's permission of non-belief typically fall into three categories: responses (1) claiming that non-believers are always blame-worthy for their non-belief; (2) acknowledging blameless non-belief but insisting that God has specific good reasons for permitting it; or (3) failing to address the challenge or even to take it seriously. We can be fairly brief in our discussion of these responses, since it will become clear that all of them fail to account for the demographic facts that are the basis of my critique.

In category 1, we find, for example, the claim of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) that any otherwise normal human being's failure to believe in God must reflect 'a dreadful stupidity of mind, occasioning a sottish insensibility of [the] truth and importance' of theistic doctrines. Because, according to Edwards, human beings 'have voluntary actions about their thoughts', they are responsible for their

beliefs and culpable if they fail to believe in God.¹⁰ I won't pause to assess Edwards's assumption that one has voluntary control over whether one believes a given proposition, except to say that it is highly controversial: just try believing at will that the total number of stars is even. Nor will I question his assumption that one is always to blame for showing 'dreadful stupidity' or 'sottish insensibility'. Neither of those issues matters since, even granting Edwards those assumptions, his theory leaves the demographics unexplained, for presumably stupidity and insensibility afflict human beings in equal proportions worldwide.

Edwards was a staunch Calvinist, and category 1 includes Calvin's equally unflinching explanation of divine hiddenness: non-belief is caused by, and thus a sign of, unregenerate sinfulness. It is not entirely clear whether Calvin attributes non-belief to the personal sinfulness of particular non-believers or, instead, to the original sin that taints every member of fallen humanity at birth. If the latter, then it is not obvious that non-believers are *blameworthy* for being in that condition, even if, according to Calvin's doctrine, they are condemned because of it. Furthermore, given Calvin's doctrine that those among us who enjoy a personal relationship with God have been predestined that way, it is not obvious that non-believers deserve blame for their condition any more than believers deserve credit for theirs. Finally, even if we accept category 1 explanations and therefore blame all non-believers for their non-belief, the problem of divine hiddenness may still persist. A loving parent can often be expected to help his or her child out of a miserable predicament, even if the child is in some sense to blame for being in the predicament. All the more so for an *unsurpassably* loving God: the culpability of non-believers would not automatically excuse God from an obligation to cure them of non-belief, nor would it automatically lessen the legitimate expectation that God do so. In any case, however, none of these theological considerations matters for present purposes, since Calvin's explanation of non-belief makes a hash of the demographics. Why on earth (literally) should the territory of Thailand harbour a high proportion of souls predestined for damnation and that of Saudi Arabia or (better, for Calvin) post-Reformation Europe a much smaller proportion?

The far more popular responses of category 2 try to explain why God might allow blameless non-belief. In their introduction, Howard-Snyder and Moser summarize several such explanations.¹¹ God might allow blameless non-belief:

- (1) in order to enable people *freely* to love, trust, and obey Him; otherwise, we would be coerced in a matter incompatible with love;
- (2) in order to prevent a human response based on improper motives (such as fear of punishment);
- (3) because [otherwise] humans would relate to God and to their knowledge of God in presumptuous ways [and thence fail to develop] the inner attitudes essential to a proper relationship with Him;

- (4) because this hiding prompts us to recognize the wretchedness of life on our own, without God, and thereby stimulates us to search for Him contritely and humbly;
- (5) because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable non-belief, then the sense of risk required for passionate faith would be objectionably reduced;
- (6) because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable non-belief, temptation to doubt His existence would not be possible, religious diversity would be objectionably reduced, and believers would not have as much opportunity to assist others in starting personal relationships with God;

or,

- (7) in order to allow inculpable non-believers the chance to develop the disposition to love God at such time as they become believers or else, if they already have that disposition but for the wrong reasons, in order to let them form the disposition for the right reasons.

Two problems confront these category 2 explanations and any like them. First, with perhaps one exception, they fail to address, let alone explain, the demographics of theism. Second, in their attempt to explain the value of non-belief in terms of the goods it makes possible and the evils it avoids, these explanations risk making a mystery out of belief in God. If, for instance, allowing the important ‘sense of risk required for passionate faith’ entails allowing blameless non-belief, then what can be said in favour of the kind of steadfast, unwavering belief in God that clergy often praise in their parishioners, especially when their parishioners show it amid suffering? Would those stalwart believers show a religiously more admirable attitude if instead they let the lack of conclusive theistic evidence weaken their confidence? Likewise, if evidence that would make belief in God irresistible would also deprive believers of an important kind of freedom, then what happens to the freedom of those many believers who claim that God’s existence is as certain for them as anything they believe?¹² If God’s permission of blameless non-belief brings with it so many benefits, then why do the major monotheistic scriptures, especially those of Christianity and Islam, not only praise belief but also sometimes vehemently denounce non-belief? Why denounce an unavoidable by-product of God’s wise plan? Given our focus on the demographics of theism, these questions about the relative value of belief and non-belief can be left rhetorical.

Of the responses listed by Howard-Snyder and Moser, only response (6) comes close to addressing the geographic disparity of theistic belief, and then only because it broaches the possibility that ‘religious diversity would be objectionably reduced’ if God were less hidden. One might of course question the net value of the religious diversity found in today’s world, since much of

the world's strife, and arguably an increasing share of it, stems at least partly from the clash of conflicting religions. One might also question the value of diverse systems of belief in the eyes of those who take themselves to know the *truth* concerning some crucial issue. No sensible person thinks it would be good if the world contained divergent beliefs about whether adding turpentine to your diet is good for you: on the contrary, there is a known fact of the matter which it is important for people to get right. The same goes for the issue of God's existence, particularly from the perspective of someone committed to traditional monotheism: even if a diversity of beliefs helps us investigate when we don't know the answer, theists believe they *do* know the answer, from which perspective religious diversity is just the proliferation of error on an all-important issue. But even if one concedes the value of the world's religious diversity, response (6) does nothing to explain why this diversity manifests itself so often in *clusters* of believers, many of which exist in isolation from one another; why doesn't this valuable diversity flourish *within* the cultures of Saudi Arabia and Thailand? Theistic explanations must account for this geographic patchiness in terms of reasons God might have for allowing it, and such reasons seem hard to find. Non-theistic explanations, including cultural and political explanations offered by social science, have an easier time of it. According to these latter explanations, the patchiness of theistic belief has everything to do with the notoriously haphazard play of human culture and politics and nothing to do with God: the messy, uneven data have messy, uneven causes.

William J. Wainwright, the contributor to the *Divine Hiddenness* anthology who comes closest to confronting the demographic challenge, sketches a potential reply to it: members of non-theistic cultures lack the benefit of theistic belief, not because they are more sinful than members of theistic cultures and thus more deserving of such deprivation, but because they are epistemically disadvantaged. The San of the Kalahari, he writes, lack scientific and moral sophistication relative to what we find in modern cultures,

... [a]nd what is true of science and morality also seems true of religion. The post-axial religions are spiritually more sophisticated or advanced than those they displaced None of this implies that the San were less intelligent, less moral, or even less spiritual than modern Christians, or Muslims, or Hindus. It *does* imply that they were less likely to possess many valuable religious truths The San weren't, as a group, more sinful than modern Christians or Muslims or Hindus. They were only less lucky.¹³

Why should the San, or any culture, be 'less lucky' in this regard? Why does God, as Wainwright puts it, 'bestow saving grace on some [cultures] and not others'? To these questions Wainwright offers a specifically Christian answer modelled on explanations found in Calvin and Edwards: 'The illumination of the Holy Spirit is needed for the discernment of God's goodness in Christ without which salvation is a real possibility for no one. This illumination is freely bestowed on only some.'¹⁴

However, precisely because it is specifically Christian, Wainwright's answer fails to cohere with his explanation in terms of the spiritual backwardness of primitive cultures. According to specifically Christian explanations, God bestows saving grace on Christians, and not on followers of Judaism and Islam, despite the fact that the latter two theistic religions are just as spiritually sophisticated as Christianity. Wainwright invokes a culture's backwardness to explain the absence of belief in God among its members, but then he explains the uneven distribution of spiritual sophistication in a way that fails to account for the genuine belief in God among Jews and Muslims, adherents of what he concedes are spiritually advanced religions. His explanation therefore unravels.

Howard-Snyder and Moser conclude their discussion of category 2 responses by issuing a challenge:

[N]o single explanation may be the whole explanation of divine hiddenness ... It thus won't do to object to an explanation that it does not apply to certain kinds of people; nor will it do to object that each explanation fails to apply to each candidate for inculpable nonbelief. An objection to such explanations must invoke something like the claim that they fail, collectively as well as individually, to account for what we take to be, at first glance, inculpable nonbelief. Here a distinctively epistemic problem for the proponent of the argument from hiddenness arises. Human beings are enormously complicated, and it is no easy task to tell whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that putatively explain their inculpable nonbelief.¹⁵

The demographic objection meets that challenge. Because it abstracts from individual cases and considers the large-scale distribution of non-belief, it need not ask 'whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that putatively explain their inculpable nonbelief'. Instead, the demographic objection assumes, plausibly, that the observed large-scale patterns iron out individual differences with regard to any of the 'motivations, attitudes, and dispositions' invoked by category 1 *or* 2 responses, such as stupidity, insensibility, presumptuousness, susceptibility to fear of punishment, lack of contrition or humility, and even one's predestination as non-elect. The objection assumes that individuals with these characteristics do not cluster by country or culture so as to show up twenty times more often in Thailand than in Saudi Arabia. These dispositions thus resemble other fundamental human characteristics, such as the ability to hear; despite marked differences among individuals, we don't find entire countries whose citizens are nearly all deaf. Finally, even if it should turn out that all those who die blameless non-believers *later* become believers, it remains unexplained why such a high proportion of those needing post-mortem conversion belong to certain cultural groups and not others: even if it gets smoothed out in the end, why does the distribution of belief start out so lopsided and in just the kind of patterns

we would expect if such natural forces as culture and politics alone were driving it?

Now to category 3 responses, which, as I suggested earlier, either deny the problem of distribution or refuse to explain it. They include (a) the claim that many people ‘implicitly’ believe in God who might appear (even to themselves) to be non-believers, and (b) the strategy that goes by the label ‘sceptical theism’. Regarding (a), Howard-Snyder and Moser write as follows:

Another suggestion is that every human being can believe in God by *implicitly* believing in Him, even though one does not know that this is what one is doing. This can be done by pursuing a moral life and thus relating to God by way of relating to His chief attribute, goodness. Alternatively, one can implicitly believe by acting *as one would if* one were explicitly to believe in Him.¹⁶

The force of strategy (a) for present purposes would be to deny that theistic belief is as unevenly distributed around the world as it seems to be. If merely pursuing a moral life makes one a believer in (the monotheistic, personal) God, then many more people believe that God exists than would admit to it; some believe that God exists while explicitly and sincerely denying it; and some believe that God exists without understanding the proposition they allegedly believe. These consequences not only cast doubt on the claim that pursuing a moral life makes one an implicit theist. They also make it hard to see how merely implicit believers could ‘act as [they] would if’ they were explicit believers, since a common (if imperfect) sign of one’s explicitly believing the proposition that *p* is one’s answering affirmatively if asked ‘Do you believe that *p*?’. In such cases, implicit believers could act like explicit believers only by answering insincerely.

Perhaps instead the response from ‘implicit belief’ is meant to suggest that anyone who pursues a moral life is *committed*, if sometimes only implicitly, to the existence of God. Suggestions of this sort appear in Kant, for whom the coherent pursuit of a moral life requires the ‘practical postulation’ of both God and human immortality, and in versions of the moral argument, such as C. S. Lewis’s, that reason from the existence of an inner moral sense to the existence of an external moral law-maker. These suggestions about the *presuppositions* or *implications* of pursuing a moral life are controversial, but they are nevertheless more plausible than the idea that whoever pursues a moral life automatically *believes* in God in some sense of ‘believes’. Furthermore, even if we grant the further controversial claim that, in terms of God’s purposes, implicit belief is an adequate substitute for explicit belief, it remains mysterious why God requires the populations of some entire countries to get by with the substitute while the populations of other countries get to enjoy the genuine article. Finally, if from God’s perspective implicit belief is not merely an adequate substitute but is every bit as good as explicit belief, it becomes hard to explain the scriptural praise of explicit belief and denunciation of its absence that I referred to earlier.

Judging from the philosophical effort devoted to defending it, strategy (b) is an increasingly important rebuttal to ‘evidential’ (or ‘empirical’) versions of the argument from evil, and it is flexible enough to be turned against other evidential arguments such as ADH. In response to the argument from evil, sceptical theism concedes to atheology that no known theodicy works: none adequately explains – none gives morally sufficient reasons for – God’s permitting the amount and variety of suffering our world contains. But sceptical theism insists that the failure of all our theodicies is predictable. According to sceptical theism, theists and atheists alike should accept the conditional claim ‘If God exists, then God’s morally sufficient reasons for permitting suffering may well be outside our ken’, given how feeble our minds are when compared to the divine mind. So, too, with regard to God’s reasons for permitting non-belief, as Howard-Snyder and Moser note:

One might grant that God does not make Himself sufficiently well-known (especially to inculpable nonbelievers) and admit that we do not know of any good explanation for why He would do that. Perhaps there *is* some reason *we do not know*. Indeed, when we are dealing with the purposes involved in divine permission of some (bad) state of affairs, this seems to be a *plausible* option, not just some remote possibility. Evidently, it would not be surprising if we were unable to explain God’s not being more forthcoming about His existence.¹⁷

What can we say about a response that refuses to explain the data, beyond objecting that it refuses to explain the data? Sceptical theism evidently takes a very dim view of the human capacity to discern morally deep reasons for permitting suffering and non-belief, and some of its critics accuse it of collapsing into scepticism about morality in general, including about the moral status of obviously immoral human actions.¹⁸ Other critics of sceptical theism charge that it invites not just moral scepticism but global scepticism.¹⁹ A proper treatment of these complex issues goes well beyond the bounds of this essay, but whether or not such criticisms of sceptical theism succeed it is clear that sceptical theism – by design – leaves the demographics of theism totally unexplained. Sceptical theists purport to *explain* the failure of all theistic explanations of the demographics, but for my purposes it is enough that they acknowledge the failure in the first place.

The *sensus divinitatis*

Some philosophers in the Reformed tradition assert that all normal human beings have an innate capacity designed to produce belief in God, an assertion they claim to find adumbrated by Calvin:

That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [*sensus Divinitatis*], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his

Godhead this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget.²⁰

This capacity, however, is fragile, and human sinfulness easily hinders its proper functioning, as Mark Talbot explains: ‘God, then, according to Calvin, made it natural for us to believe in him. Sin causes these natural inclinations to degenerate until they are no longer spiritually fruitful Only sinless human beings naturally acquire [genuine belief in God]; none of us have it until we are regenerate.’²¹

The demographics of theism, I claim, make unlikely the existence of any such innate human capacity, however corruptible it may be when exposed to sinfulness. Innate human capacities, such as hearing or the capacity to learn spoken language, tend to be spread evenly across the human species. Again, however, the kind of belief in God that this innate capacity is allegedly designed to produce is quite unevenly distributed among human societies. Its defenders will reply that original sin prevents the capacity from accomplishing its purpose and that only God’s regenerating grace can restore the capacity to good working order. But that reply only pushes the question back a step: why has God bestowed this restorative grace so unevenly, contributing to a pattern of non-belief that, coincidentally, social scientists say they can explain entirely in terms of culture?

Those who call themselves ‘Reformed epistemologists’ often advert to the *sensus divinitatis* to defend the epistemic credentials of theistic belief against the challenge posed by *evidentialism*, the view that theistic belief is justified only when supported by sufficient evidence. As Stephen J. Wykstra writes,

To be sure, such evidentialism is sensible about things like electrons. But this is because we have no non-inferential access to electrons (we cannot just perceive them); electron belief hence needs inferential support from things we can perceive. But why should we suppose that humans have no non-inferential access to God? The traditional theistic religions teach, after all, that God made us with a faculty – what Calvin calls a *Sensus Divinitatis* – by which we can, under suitable conditions, ‘sense’ God’s presence, character, and activity in our lives.²²

To the degree to which the demographic data cast doubt on the existence of such an innate faculty in human beings, they also undermine that particular defence of theistic belief.

Hiddenness and evil

One objection sometimes raised against ADH is that it adds nothing to the more familiar argument from evil. After all, isn’t God’s hiddenness from some of those who earnestly seek God just another form of suffering of the kind that atheologists say we should not expect to see if God exists? Jonathan Kvanvig presents a forceful version of this ‘nothing new’ objection. According to Kvanvig,

ADH improves on the argument from evil if, but only if, ADH *evades* at least some of the rebuttals – what he calls ‘delimiting defeaters’ – that confront the argument from evil:

... it is hard to see what evidential force could be added by the problem of hiddenness. This problem could tip the scales toward atheism if the delimiting defeaters for the problem of evil failed to delimit the implications of divine hiddenness. In this way, hiddenness would constitute a different *kind* of problem for theism than the general problem of evil No one has argued such, and it is hard to see how such an argument could be successful. If we consider the plausible candidates for such delimiting defeaters ... there is no particular reason to think that such responses succeed only for the general problem of evil but not for the specific problem of divine hiddenness.²³

Among the standard ‘delimiting defeaters’ for the problem of evil Kvanvig includes the ‘necessity [of evil] for a [specified] greater good, soul-making, the importance of freedom, or simply the fact that we do not know what all the good things are’.²⁴ By the last item on that list I gather Kvanvig means to refer to the sceptical theist’s response, which I described as declining to take seriously the problems of evil and divine hiddenness. The other three items on the list count as serious responses, but I will argue that Kvanvig is mistaken in claiming that they neutralize ADH just as effectively as they neutralize the argument from evil. However effectively they may defang the argument from evil, they leave ADH untouched.

Kvanvig is not quite correct in suggesting that ‘no one has argued’ that ADH and the argument from evil differ in crucial ways, if not in kind.²⁵ Theodore M. Drange, for instance, mentions several ways in which the ‘argument from non-belief’ (his label for ADH) improves on the argument from evil, including the following. First, the scriptural evidence, particularly from the New Testament, establishes that God wants human beings to *believe in* and *love* God more clearly than it establishes God’s desire to reduce or eliminate human and animal suffering. Second, the goal of eliminating non-belief seems easier to achieve in a world governed by natural laws than does the goal of eliminating suffering in such a world. Third, ADH avoids the ‘regress objection’ that confronts the argument from evil: ‘if God were to keep ... reducing suffering in the world in an effort to make its residents satisfied, then at what point would they say, “Stop, we’re maximally happy now”?’²⁶ Arguably, any ideal law-governed universe containing beings like us will contain some degree of suffering that is unavoidable if only because of natural regularities; it becomes hard to specify, or even conceive of, that ideal minimum degree. Not so, says Drange, where the elimination of non-belief is concerned: there the ideal minimum – zero – is easy to specify, and thus it becomes safer to conclude that our world does not contain the ideal degree of non-belief than to conclude that it does not contain the ideal degree of suffering.

To my knowledge, however, no one has argued on demographic grounds for the superiority of ADH over the argument from evil. The key difference, I suggest,

between suffering and non-belief in God is that suffering is far more *evenly* distributed than is non-belief. Indeed, some psychological research suggests that suffering of the morally relevant sort – i.e. the subjective *experience* of suffering – is, in fact, quite evenly distributed around the world, despite initial appearances to the contrary.²⁷ Even if this strict egalitarian thesis is too callous to accept, it surely remains true that the sum total of suffering is *more* evenly distributed worldwide than is non-belief in God. This claim gains further credibility if we take into account animal suffering, since there is reason to think that industrial farming greatly increases the total suffering experienced by animals in just those places where it decreases the hunger-based suffering experienced by people. Suffering does not respect geography the way non-belief does. We have no reason to think that the residents of Thailand experience twenty times the suffering experienced by the residents of Saudi Arabia, but they do exhibit twenty times the rate of non-belief in the monotheistic God.

This difference matters. Consider the three genuine theodicies that Kvanvig mentions: specific greater good, soul-making, and freedom. A hypothesis that tries to explain the suffering in our world as necessary for producing an allegedly compensating good, such as compassion, has a chance of working because the hypothesis is compatible with the distribution of suffering we observe. Arguably, such a hypothesis predicts uniformity in the distribution of suffering: compassion is a good thing anywhere it occurs, and so we should expect to see worldwide uniformity in the suffering from which alone true compassion grows. Likewise for soul-making: moral self-development and hard-won spiritual growth are supposed to be good for people in general, so the suffering that God permits as a stimulus to those processes ought to be spread around evenly, and arguably it is. The freedom theodicy predicts uniformly distributed suffering as well, on the plausible assumption that the power to make free choices of the kind that produce suffering is an evenly distributed human power, not the special preserve of people in only some parts of the world. By contrast, non-belief in God is anything but uniformly distributed worldwide, and consequently any explanation purely in terms of features, such as human freedom, that *are* uniformly distributed will not work. To use Kvanvig's term, the 'delimiting defeaters' for the problem of suffering fail to defeat ADH because they apply only to features that, from a large-scale perspective at least, are evenly distributed among the human populace, and non-belief is not one of those features.²⁸

Notes

1. A similar problem may arise from the uneven distribution of theistic belief *over time*, since, especially compared to naturalistic explanations, none of the theistic explanations of blameworthy or blameless non-belief (see 'Responses to ADH', below) accounts for how the global incidence of theistic belief has varied dramatically during the existence of the human species. For the sake of simplicity, however, and because current data are more likely than historical data to be reliable, I will focus on the current

- geographic distribution of theistic belief. Historians and social scientists have, of course, offered various naturalistic explanations of the emergence and current distribution of theistic and non-theistic worldviews; for references to some recent literature, see the bibliography in Jonathan Kirsch *God Against the Gods: the History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism* (New York NY: Penguin, 2004).
2. A leading contemporary proponent of the first version of ADH is J. L. Schellenberg, whose contributions include *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); 'Response to Howard-Snyder', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (1996), 455–462; 'What the hiddenness of God reveals: a collaborative discussion', in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), hereafter *DHNE*, 33–61; and 'Divine hiddenness justifies atheism', in Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (eds) *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 30–41.
 3. A leading contemporary proponent of the second version of ADH is Theodore M. Drange, who labels ADH the 'argument from non-belief'. His contributions include 'The argument from non-belief', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 417–432; 'Nonbelief vs lack of evidence: two atheological arguments', *Philo*, 1 (1998), 105–114; *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1998); and 'McHugh's expectations dashed', *Philo*, 5 (2002), 242–248.
 4. Drange *Nonbelief and Evil*, 59–60.
 5. I say 'purportedly' because it is unclear that either version can, without appealing to God's loving nature, rebut the following Calvinistic explanation from predestination: the reason so many non-believers exist who thereby lose out on a personal relationship with God is that God does not *want* to relate personally to every human being or *want* every human being to believe in God; for inscrutable reasons, God has predestined some human beings for salvation and the rest for damnation. In an internet debate with Douglas Wilson, Drange considers and rejects this explanation, partly for scriptural reasons but also because of assumptions about God's nature: 'In general, Wilson should clarify his point of view regarding God and non-Christians. Are all of them really damned? And is it really true that God predestined them for damnation before they were even born? Why would he do such a thing? And how come he picked so few for salvation and so many for damnation? He sounds like a rather mean deity, and not at all like the God of Christianity that I have often heard about.' See http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore_drange/drange-wilson/drange3.html.
 6. John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I, iii, 1), Henry Beveridge (tr.) (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1846).
 7. Compare the ethnographic data cited by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), 1, iii, 8 ('Idea of God not innate').
 8. *CIA World Factbook 2004*, <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.
 9. 'Introduction: the hiddenness of God', *DHNE*, 12, alluding to Schellenberg 'What the hiddenness of God reveals', *DHNE*, 52. Drange alludes to the disparity on 138 and 141 of *Nonbelief and Evil* and again in his internet debate with Wilson (see n. 5), but he does not draw out the consequences of the disparity for the standard explanations of divine hiddenness.
 10. Both quotations of Edwards appear in William J. Wainwright 'Jonathan Edwards and the hiddenness of God', *DHNE*, 102, 103.
 11. Explanations 1 through 6 are taken verbatim from *DHNE*, 9–10; explanation 7 is my paraphrase of the last item on their list, *DHNE*, 10.
 12. According to Kai Nielsen, 'In a recent survey taken in the United States, 88 per cent of the population (if the sample taken was accurate) maintained that they had never had any doubts about the existence of God'; *Naturalism and Religion* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 14. Unfortunately, Nielsen does not cite the source of this statistic.
 13. Wainwright 'Jonathan Edwards and the hiddenness of God', 114.
 14. *Ibid.*, 113.
 15. 'Introduction: the hiddenness of God', *DHNE*, 10–11.
 16. *Ibid.*, 9, emphases in original.
 17. *Ibid.*, 11, emphases in original.
 18. See, for instance, Michael J. Almeida and Graham Oppy 'Sceptical theism and evidential arguments from evil', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003), 496–516, replied to in Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea 'In defence of sceptical theism: a reply to Almeida and Oppy', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83 (2005), 241–251.

19. See Bruce Russell 'Defenseless', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 193–205; and *idem* 'The problem of evil: why is there so much suffering?', in Louis P. Pojman (ed.) *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 207–213.
20. Calvin *Institutes*, I, iii, 1; I, iii, 3.
21. Mark Talbot 'Is it natural to believe in God?', *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989): 155–171, 159.
22. Stephen J. Wykstra 'Toward a sensible evidentialism: on the notion of "needing evidence"', in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (eds) *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 2nd edn (New York NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 426–437, 434.
23. Jonathan L. Kvanvig 'Divine hiddenness: what is the problem?', *DHNE*, 161–162.
24. *Ibid.*, 161.
25. Peter van Inwagen argues for the difference in 'What is the problem of the hiddenness of God?', *DHNE*, 24–32, an original essay appearing in the same volume as Kvanvig's; Kvanvig was perhaps unaware of the contents of van Inwagen's essay.
26. Drange *Nonbelief and Evil*, 288. All three of the advantages of ADH listed here are discussed on 286–291.
27. See E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. M. Lucas, and H. L. Smith 'Subjective well-being: three decades of progress', *Psychological Bulletin*, 125 (1999), 276–302, cited in Ronald de Sousa 'Paradoxes of happiness', available at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/%7Esousa/happinew.pdf>.
28. For helpful comments, I thank Andrew Graham, members of the Philosophy and Public Affairs group at Acadia University, my audience at an Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association annual conference, and an anonymous referee for this journal.