

Divine Hiddenness, by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser

reviewed by [Lois Malcolm](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

If God exists, then why hasn't he made his existence sufficiently clear? The philosopher J. L. Schellenberg asked this question and concluded that God does not exist (*Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 1993). If there were a perfectly loving God, this God would see to it that everyone capable and desirous of a personal relationship with him had the evidence to believe that he exists. But since there are such people who simply cannot on rational grounds believe that God exists, there cannot be a perfectly loving God.

The essays in this book respond to Schellenberg's argument, drawing on Maimonides, St. John of the Cross, Jonathan Edwards, Søren Kierkegaard and various biblical writers. They do so from a range of perspectives, including Jewish, Christian, atheist and agnostic ones.

Three essays agree with the way Schellenberg presupposes God and how we can know God--though they arrive at different conclusions. Michael Murray contends that God has refrained from making himself self-evident precisely in order to give creatures freedom in their task of "soul-making." Jonathan Kvanvig argues that the evidence for God's hiddenness is merely subjective and does not count as substantive evidence for God's nonexistence. Paul Draper contends that ambiguous evidence about God's existence leads to agnosticism--not atheism or theism--and asks what kind of religious behavior is appropriate for agnostics.

The rest of the essays respond by presenting very different understandings of and ways of knowing God. Jacob Joshua Ross suggests that language about God be conceived as nets (webs of ideas), each of which captures some part of the richness of religious experience. Schellenberg, he notes, has pointed out the imperfections of one ("simplistic") monotheistic net. But that, he argues, does not render "alternative and more sophisticated nets" inefficacious.

In a dialogue between an agnostic and a believer, Schellenberg himself presents the argument that if one takes seriously the idea of God's unsurpassable greatness, one must consider it possible that God may not be loving or personal--at least not in the human sense of those terms. Similarly, M. Jamie Ferreira uses Kierkegaard to argue that any "grammar" for talking about God must take God's absoluteness seriously. And William Wainwright presents Jonathan Edwards's "Calvinian story" as a version of Christian themes that can account for unbelief. He acknowledges that this leaves us with a sticking point: Why does God choose to save some and not others?

At the heart of these and the other essays is the contention, in Peter Van Inwagen's words, that God expects a good deal more from us than mere belief in his existence. Belief is only a small (though essential) part of the complex of things God expects of us. It is, for example, conceivable that a person who believes in God because she has experienced a miracle may find it difficult to acquire other characteristics, viewpoints and behaviors God wants of us. Making a similar argument, Laura Garcia draws on St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas to suggest that God seeks a complex set of goods, some of them good in themselves and others instrumentally good for the achievement of other goods. Divine hiddenness exists as part of God's total plan for realizing these goods.

Paul Moser contends that divine hiddenness keeps divine revelation from being cheap and easy. God wants humans "to appreciate, treasure, and be transformed by divine love, not just think about it." Finally, Nicholas Wolterstorff asserts that the person answerable to biblical renderings of God's speech is also answerable to biblical accounts of God's silence--especially in the face of untimely death and unredemptive suffering.

A key, if implicit, theme of this volume is its presentation of "alternative and more sophisticated nets" than the simpler one Schellenberg presupposed. It is surprising to me, therefore, that the volume makes no reference to a key problem in biblical webs of ideas about divine hiddenness. As sociologists have pointed out, this century will be characterized not so much by unbelief as by belief. Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophers will increasingly be forced to examine the actual practices and beliefs of faith communities--and in some cases the violence (especially among competing monotheistic groups) often identified with those practices and beliefs.

For many believers, such violence is sanctioned by biblical conceptions of divine hiddenness: God shows himself only to his chosen; everyone else must and can be rejected. If monotheistic philosophers are to be responsible public intellectuals in the

societies and world in which they live, they may need to attend to such ideas about divine hiddenness and not just to the more pacific musings of agnostics in universities.