

Derek King. *The Church and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness: Mirrors of God*. Routledge, 2023. 170pp. \$128.00 (hbk); \$39.19 (pbk).

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This book addresses the problem of divine hiddenness. The problem is something like: if God wants relationships with us, then why does God allow so many people to fail to believe in him through no apparent fault of their own, since not believing in him seems to be an impediment to having a relationship with him? If we add that God, being perfectly loving, would want relationships with us, this provides grounds for an argument against theism. If we add that God, according to some specific religion, wants relationships with us, this can provide grounds for an argument against that specific religion.

The response given in this book is that through the liturgy, the sacraments, and the lives of the members of the Church, “God is operating through the Church to reveal himself to the world” (4). This is not the only way to know God, but is, in some sense, the primary and best way, and the one any other ways will ideally lead to. At times, King writes as if this means that “God is not hidden but knowable to all willing to know him in the specific way he desires to be known” (143-144), since even nonresistant nonbelievers can know God through participation in the Church. But I think his real position is that this eliminates some hiddenness and allows us to explain other hiddenness, since “Insofar as he is hidden, he is hidden because the ongoing presence of Christ in the Church is how God desires to be known” (4). As the author realizes, this is a bit similar to earlier work by Mike Rea (e.g., 2009), and certain elements are similar to different work on the so-called “responsibility argument” by me (Crummett 2015) and others. The primary novel component is that most of the book is spent developing a detailed account of exactly how the revelation of God through the Church might work, drawing heavily on Gregory of Nyssa. This is all of intrinsic theological and historical interest, and is well worth reading for those interested in these topics. However, as an analytic philosopher of religion, my primary interest is whether these developments make our response to the problem of divine hiddenness more plausible than it would otherwise be. Unfortunately, I don’t see that King’s response ultimately represents an improvement over earlier responses.

Chapter 1 discusses the argument from hiddenness for atheism and various possible responses to it, giving pride of place to J.L. Schellenberg’s influential formulation. Chapter 2 develops Gregory of Nyssa’s idea that we possess knowledge of God through participation in God, contrasting this with Schellenberg’s epistemology. Chapter 3 develops the idea that the Church is the body of Christ in such a way that participation in it constitutes a way of participating in, and thereby knowing, God. Chapter 4 develops the claim that God can be known through the liturgy, including by nonresistant nonbelievers, thus providing them with

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a way to know God. Chapter 5 does the same for the sacraments (leading to an interesting discussion about how this works where nonbelievers are forbidden from taking the sacraments). Chapter 6 is about how individual members of the Church can “reflect” God to others through their lives. This comes together as a response to the argument from hiddenness in Chapter 7, which is just ten pages long. As mentioned, I think chapters 2 – 6 are well worth reading for those independently interested in the topics (Gregory of Nyssa’s religious epistemology, etc.). For analytic philosophers interested specifically in the problem of hiddenness, on the other hand, this might seem like a lot of setup for not much payoff. As the upshot at the end of the book *is* what I’m specifically interested in, I’ll spend the rest of the review on it.

Someone might suppose that this account, if correct, immediately solves the problem of hiddenness: nonresistant nonbelievers can simply obtain knowledge of God by attending church. As mentioned, King does sometimes write as if he thinks this is the case. However, it is clear in other places that he realizes things are more complicated, for reasons having to do with what he calls “the Problem of Imperfection,” the problem posed for this response by the fact that the Church arguably seems to be “a poor mediator of God” (148).

King acknowledges that the Problem of Imperfection “may be the single best objection to the ecclesiological response” (148). Here is how I would press it. The issue is that God’s purported revelation through the Church doesn’t seem nearly as effective as potential other means of revelation, and anyway doesn’t seem effective enough to actually give all nonresistant nonbelievers a realistically-exercisable ability to gain knowledge of God. Plenty of people have, through no fault of their own, been temporally or spatially isolated from the Church (e.g., everybody living five thousand years ago), and so literally have had no ability to relate to God through it. If I find that my long-lost father is actually alive and I wonder why he never contacted me, it does no good for him to say that he was waiting for me the whole time at his house on the moon, which I have no way to reach. Plenty of people, though not isolated from the Church in that way, through no fault of their own have had no idea that participating in the Church was how they were supposed to relate to God. They have been given implausible or unconvincing pictures of Christianity, or anyway pictures which made it no more plausible than all the other religions they could be participating in. If my long-lost father tells me he was calling me every day at a particular payphone in Holts Summit, Missouri, this does no good unless I should have been able to figure that out. Plenty of people have been harmed by the Church in ways which make participation in it painful and unfruitful. It does no good for my father to tell me I could have seen him anytime at his favorite hangout spot, the local neo-Nazi bar, especially if I’m someone the neo-Nazis might target. And, also, there are plenty of people who try to participate and, through no fault of their own, just find that it doesn’t do anything for them – if they are nonetheless relating to God in *some* sense, it seems a seriously suboptimal one. It does no good for my father to tell me he was willing to relate to me at any time through his favorite medium, creating beautiful pictures containing hidden messages using the dots of an Ishihara test, if he knows I’m colorblind and can’t appreciate the art or discern the messages. And then, finally, it seems pretty easy for God to fix all this: e.g., God could let people know that the Christian Church is how people are supposed to obtain knowledge of him by writing this in clear messages in the sky.

In responding to this problem in my own work, I appealed to the value of human responsibility and of various other goods with which it is associated. Maybe, I said, there is something very valuable in our being responsible for one another’s spiritual development, and in relationships with God and each other which involve our correctly exercising this

responsibility. And maybe, I said, it's also true that the most meaningful responsibility requires the ability to make a real difference, and so consequently to ruin everything if we don't fulfill our responsibility – which, unfortunately, seems to happen pretty often. I suggested that this might allow us to explain many, or even all, cases of nonresistant nonbelief in terms of wrongful human action. For instance, if people did a better job of cooperating in good faith to investigate religious questions, of cultivating spiritual disciplines, of living moral lives and thereby, in King's terms, reflecting God to others – and if, conversely, people avoided doing things like abusing their religious positions for personal gain or to sow bigotry – it seems quite plausible that it would be easier for people to figure out what they were supposed to be doing and to experience God in worship, that fewer people would have to deal with religious trauma, and so forth. I even suggested that this account might be able to address the problem of spatially and temporally isolated non-theists, if we were willing to admit an *outré* posit or two (14-15).

King's response to the Problem of Imperfection draws to some extent upon mine. In explaining why God wants to be known through the Church, specifically, he appeals to goods like relationship formation and specifically to the sort of responsibility I discuss (147-149). However, King also thinks his account improves on my response. He “shares the doubt” of a hypothetical objector who rejects the idea that “a loving God would allow some persons to remain in a state of nonresistant nonbelief just so some other persons could have a certain responsibility” (148). His account is supposed to alleviate this because on his view “a nonbeliever is not sealed off from knowing God because some irresponsible believer is responsible for his faith,” but rather “Even if a human mediator is imperfect, the nonbeliever has an opportunity and a means to know God in the Church” (149).

I am not convinced. First, for reasons laid out above, it doesn't seem to me that the idea that nonresistant nonbelievers have, in some sense, the opportunity to know God in the Church is helpful in the hard cases. (Even if they technically had the opportunity, they couldn't be expected to know this was the means by which to seize the opportunity, or..., etc.) Second, it was already open to defenders of the responsibility arguments to say that nonresistant nonbelievers can be, in some sense, related to God (or productively laying the groundwork for later relationship to God) by living a moral life, pursuing whatever spiritual promptings they might have, etc. (Crummett 2015, 16). In this way, it was already open to us to say that those who are failed by others have *some* means of relating to God. And this response seems to me superior to one specifically invoking the Church anyway, since it avoids, e.g., questions about those who have no contact with the Christian Church. Third, I did try to respond in my earlier work to King's worry, and King does not address what I said. Most notably, while King suggests that the responsibility argument portrays God as allowing “some persons to remain in a state of nonresistant nonbelief just so some other persons could have a certain responsibility,” I denied that it had to do this (6, 9-10, 17). My idea was that people of many religions, and none, could *all* contribute to the project of achieving greater knowledge of and relationship with God, both now and potentially also in the afterlife. So, for instance, atheists here and now might contribute to this project by critiquing immoral and implausible religious conceptions. The responsibility is not the responsibility of we the enlightened for they the unenlightened, but rather mutual responsibility to contribute to a cooperative effort among all people of good will, even if inevitably some people, being closer to the truth, are positioned to make more of a contribution than others. Fourth, even if the availability of God in the liturgy, etc. *does* help with Imperfection Problem, the possibility of appealing to this as a response to the problem of hiddenness has already been

discussed by authors like Mike Rea (e.g., 2009), and I don't see how King's account is stronger than his on this point.

For these reasons, though the four chapters on Gregory, ecclesiology, etc. are, again, of intrinsic interest, it doesn't seem to me that they leave us particularly any better positioned than we were to respond to the Imperfection Problem. Nor does it seem to me that King's other suggested advantages hold up. For instance, one is that "Schellenberg's argument adopts assumptions that conflict with the Christian doctrine of God" (142). I think the idea here is that Christianity teaches that God wishes to be known primarily through the Church, and so if Schellenberg's argument assumes that God would wish to be known primarily in some other way instead, he is just not targeting the Christian view. However, as King realizes (143), this point is really of limited utility. Schellenberg's argument is meant to follow from the idea of God as perfectly loving, and Christianity does, indeed, teach that God is supposed to be perfectly loving. If one can show that a perfectly loving God would make himself known in some other way, then that would show an inconsistency within Christianity. On the other hand, if Schellenberg fails to show that a perfectly loving God would make himself known in some other way, it doesn't really matter how his view fits in with Christian doctrine – his argument just fails independently of that.

A final, unrelated and admittedly fairly petty complaint is that King sometimes misunderstands or misuses concepts or terminology from analytic philosophy. An example: he writes that "Even if certain nonbelievers are spatially or temporally isolated from other believers at time t , it does not follow that they will always be isolated at t' " (149). But it does follow, unless it is possible to change the past. I say it is a fairly petty complaint because it's clear enough what King means – it doesn't follow from the fact that someone is isolated at $t1$ that they will be isolated at $t2$. Still, things like this are a little distracting, especially where they are unnecessary anyway (it would have been fine to cut the instances of "at time t' " from the sentence).

My overall evaluation is that there are something like two different books here. Chapters 2 – 6 could essentially be their own short book about Gregory of Nyssa's ecclesiology and religious epistemology, constructively developing it using the tools of analytic theology. This book should be read by anyone interested in that project. There is material about divine hiddenness in these chapters, but they would still be worth reading even for someone who was only interested in, say, ecclesiology, and not at all in responding to arguments against theism. The addition of chapters 1 and 7 create a different, larger book focused more squarely on divine hiddenness. However, the book feels disjointed: I am not really convinced that the smaller book in the middle does much to help us respond to the argument from hiddenness, or would be worth reading for someone exclusively interested in the hiddenness problem. Whether it should be recommended, then, depends on what you're looking for.

References

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