

Seeing the Face of Christ: An Ecclesiological Solution to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

DEREK S. KING

Logos Institute, University of St. Andrews

dsk4@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract: The problem of the hiddenness of God has at least two kinds: an experiential and an intellectual problem. Despite differences, a solution to either would require some account of how God is personally known. Yet for the Christian tradition, God is known in the man Jesus Christ. I suggest, then, a Christological reformulation of the hiddenness argument, and proceed to offer an account of how Christ is known. With special attention to the ecclesiology of Gregory of Nyssa, I offer an account of knowing Christ in the church. I then explore this as a response to the problems of divine hiddenness, and anticipate a considerable objection to my response.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Gregory of Nyssa, Divine Hiddenness, J. L. Schellenberg, Christology

The aim of this paper is to offer an ecclesiological solution to the problem of divine hiddenness. In the first section of the paper, I introduce and clarify the problem. There are at least two kinds of the problem: an experiential and an intellectual kind. In either case, a solution requires some account of how God is known. I suggest, however, that a Christological reformulation of the problem would be helpful and would instead require an account of how Jesus Christ is known. In the second section, I attempt to offer such an account with careful attention to the ecclesiology of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory's ecclesiology, I argue, implies that God can be "seen," or known, in the church. In the third section, I explore how Gregory's account of the church might be developed into a response to the hiddenness problems. I also anticipate the objection that, being limited, the church is a poor way for God to reveal himself.

1. God's Hiddenness and a Christological Reformulation

This section aims to introduce and clarify the problem of divine hiddenness—also called the problem of divine absence or divine silence.¹ There are at least two kinds of the problem, each of which Yujin Nagasawa lucidly defines:

The problem of divine absence can be presented as two distinct problems: an intellectual problem and an experiential problem. The intellectual problem, as I call it, which is formulated from a third-person perspective, involves logical consistency between the existence of God and the occurrence of divine absence...On the other hand, the experiential problem, which is formulated from a first-person perspective, involves emotional puzzlement and confusion about divine absence."² (Nagasawa 2016, 232)

The experiential problem assumes certain beliefs about God. God's hiddenness is only an emotional puzzle or confusing to those who believe in him and believe he is interested in relating to humans, for instance. An example of this is the Psalmist David, who cries out to God: "How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1).³

The intellectual problem refers to inquiring whether certain traditional claims about God are compatible with the existence of widespread nonbelief.⁴ J. L. Schellenberg's argument against God's existence is an example:

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable nonbelief occurs.
- (4) No perfectly loving God exists.

¹ Some theologians (for instance, Luther and Barth) might object to my framing God's hiddenness as a "problem," but they use hiddenness in a different sense. As a problem, I mean the specific senses of hiddenness discussed here.

² In Nagasawa's framing, the intellectual problem "asks how it is logically possible that an omnipotent and morally perfect God remains silent when devout believers suffer from horrendous evil." This is not exactly how I will understand it. Although he adds that "There is also a version of the intellectual problem that is concerned with whether or not divine absence constitutes good *evidence* against the existence of God." This is how I understand the intellectual problem.

³ Another famous, and oft-used, example of this is Saint Mother Teresa, who hardly felt the presence of Jesus in Calcutta despite her pleading. See Rea (2018, 90) for more.

⁴ Nagasawa further distinguishes between two kinds of intellectual problem. The first is synonymous with the problem of evil, but I refer only to the second kind, also called doxastic hiddenness. See also Rea (2018, 15).

(5) There is no God.⁵ (Schellenberg 2006, 83)

The idea behind (2) is that a perfectly loving God would want to be known by all persons, and this requires a belief that God exists. If God were all powerful, he presumably could ensure that all persons either believed that God exists or were unreasonable in their nonbelief. Reasonable nonbelief refers to, according to Schellenberg, the relatively clear phenomenon that some persons do not believe in God but might if given better evidence.

A response to either of these problems requires some account of how God is known. Although there might be a number of ways to know another person, one might think that merely knowing *about* God is insufficient. Schellenberg, for instance, argues that a perfectly loving person would seek a “*personal relationship*” with other persons, one that is “a conscious and reciprocal relationship...allowing for a deep sharing.” (Schellenberg 2015, 18) This kind of relationship, one might argue, requires a certain kind of knowing not reducible to knowing *about* a person. Instead, it might require a kind of personal knowledge, or what Eleonore Stump calls “Franciscan knowledge”—knowledge that is not wholly reducible to propositions or knowledge *that*. (Stump 2012, 56) Knowing a person in this way requires a kind of “second–person experience” (Stump 2012, 75) or “interaction” with another person.⁶ (Talbert 2015, 193–196) Although these second–person experiences or interactions “typically generate propositional knowledge as well,” they are not merely propositional in nature. (Talbert 2015, 197) For Stump, Paula has a second–person experience of Jerome only if:

1. Paula is aware of Jerome as a person.
2. Paula’s personal interaction with Jerome is of a direct and immediate sort.
3. Jerome is conscious. (2012, 75–76)

Matthew Benton, similarly, points out that while a spy or biographer might know *about* a subject, “interpersonal knowledge” is necessarily “two way,” or “running both directions between subjects.” (2018, 4) A second–person experience or interaction, for him, requires “reciprocal causal contact” between persons. (2018, 4)

⁵ Schellenberg’s argument has undergone alterations over the years, but this is a more primitive version. Although the newer versions are more forceful, and sensitive to recent critiques, this version is much simpler and, for my purposes, contains no relevant differences. For the newer versions, see especially Schellenberg 2015a & 2015b.

⁶ Talbert particularly has in mind face–to–face interactions (193), but adds that these “interactive skills are largely intuitive and difficult to express in propositional terms” (196).

Personally knowing God, then, requires a second–person, reciprocal, experience between one and God that is not reducible to knowledge about or knowledge that.⁷

The possibility of personally knowing God might face a number of issues,⁸ but one major one is that it can be difficult to imagine what relating to such a being would be like because of the ambiguity of the name “God.” Severed from a specific religious context, talk of “God” tends to be abstract and often results in a variety of understandings of who or what “God” is. Schellenberg does define God as a perfectly loving, all–powerful person, but it is not always easy to imagine what a second–person experience with such a being would be like. In the Christian tradition, a human person, Jesus Christ, is worshipped as divine, and thus fundamental to the Christian understanding of who God is. A Christological reformulation of the hiddenness problem, then, shifts the object of the problem from the more general “God” to the more specific “Jesus Christ.”⁹ This has two advantages over a non–Christological formulation. First, it makes the problem less abstract and more concrete. Although Schellenberg defines “God” as a person, the traditional view of God varies greatly, and in a number of ways, from all other examples of person one might use.¹⁰ Those differences might make relating with God more difficult to conceive of, but relating to Jesus Christ is far easier to conceive of because he is a human person.¹¹ Second, it makes the problem stronger and more relevant to a particular religious tradition.¹² A foundational claim of Christian theology is that God is uniquely revealed, or known, in Jesus Christ.¹³ God,

⁷ Benton and Talbert both identify other epistemological issues that I do not cover, but here I assume that a second–person reciprocal experience does provide a kind of knowledge not otherwise available propositionally. I call this knowledge “personal knowledge” to remain consistent with Schellenberg’s insistence that God would seek a “personal relationship.”

⁸ Benton spends much of his essay covering these issues.

⁹ I say “reformulated” because, for the Christian theologian, the question of how God is known and how Jesus is known is not altogether different because Jesus is divine.

¹⁰ I have in mind attributes like simplicity, immutability, impassability, and atemporality, to name a few, which are found in what is often called “Classical Theism.”

¹¹ To be fair, relating to a crucified, resurrected, and ascended human might be different than relating to other humans, but it is still conceptually easier to imagine relating to Jesus than to the more abstract “God.”

¹² Of course, a *Christological* reformulation is unlikely to have much force against non–Christian traditions. It seems to me, however, that the hiddenness problem would be more forceful if it were made tradition–specific. This is not to suggest that the general formulation has no force, but it is easier for particular traditions to dismiss.

¹³ Here I use “revelation” and “know” in a similar sense. Revelation need not be understood, as I am using “to know” here, in a personal way. The emphasis is, nonetheless, on how God makes

otherwise invisible and unknowable, is seen and known in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ My attempt to solve the hiddenness problems, then, will center around an account of how Jesus Christ is personally known.

2. Gregory of Nyssa and Knowing Christ in the Church

The aim of this section is to provide an account of how Jesus Christ is known.¹⁵ Specifically, I develop an account of knowing Christ in the church¹⁶ with careful attention to the theology of Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁷ In the first part of this section, I examine an important theme in Gregory's ecclesiology and an implication of seeing Christ in the church. In the second part, I show how the liturgy and the Eucharist are, for Gregory, specific ways one can have a second-person experience with Jesus Christ through one's participation in the church.

2.1. The Body of Christ: Seeing Christ in the Church

In his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory makes use of a common illustration in the Apostle Paul: the church as the body of Christ.¹⁸ For Paul, this "is a long way from being a mere illustration."¹⁹ (Wright 2013, 396) It is meant to show how individual members of local church communities are not merely a collection of individuals, but constitute a larger, unified whole. Gregory uses the language in a similar sense, insisting that "the whole church is one body of Christ" (Gregory of

Godself known to humanity. For more, see especially: Dulles (1992); Gerald O' Collins (2016); Schwöbel (1992).

¹⁴ The Scriptural verses John 1:18 and Colossians 1:15 are particularly instructive.

¹⁵ This need not be the only one.

¹⁶ The word "church" can be used in at least three different senses: (a) a physical building or location, (b) a particular local community, or (c) a universal community of believers in Jesus Christ. My use of Gregory is best characterized as a blend of (b) and (c), since (c) is the focus but is expressed to people only in (b).

¹⁷ I use Gregory because of the implications he draws to his account of union between Christ and church, but this is not to suggest that Gregory is completely unique in this regard. Similar accounts could be offered for other theologians. My intention is not, it should be said, to offer a fully developed Gregorian ecclesiology. Although I do make use of various texts from his corpus, I mostly focus on Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

¹⁸ The most prevalent Pauline usage of this is 1 Corinthians 12, but also featured prominently in Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:12; Colossians 1:24.

¹⁹ Rather, for Wright, it is "at the center of Paul's newly framed symbolic universe" (p 387).

Nyssa 2012, 227) even if there are individual members.²⁰ He adds that “the church is Christ’s body, while Christ is the Head of the body.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 269) Gregory’s account of the church, consistent with Paul, is one of unity not only between the individual members of the church, but between the community and Christ himself. Between Christ and church there is both unity and distinction. He tellingly compares this unity to the union of the divine and human natures in the incarnation. The “mingling” of the natures in the incarnate Word can provide something of an analog for how Christ and church “mingle” with one another. (2012, 121) Rowan Williams points out the similarity of Gregory’s understanding here, along with that of other theologians, with later Chalcedonian language: “a union without confusion or separation.” (2018, 77) As the head of the body, Christ is “forming the countenance (*prosopon*) of the church with the stamp of his own identity.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 269) Without conceptually conflating the two, Gregory says that Christ and the church mingle in such a way that the church receives in itself the identity of Christ.²¹

Even if Gregory does not develop this account of unity and identity between Christ and church metaphysically or ontologically,²² he is clear what it functionally implies. He says that “anyone, therefore, who focuses attention on the church is in fact looking at Christ.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 403) Later in the same homily, he adds that “the person who attends to this new cosmos that appears in the creation of the church sees in it the One who is and is becoming ‘all in all’ (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).” (2012, 407) Just as one might see the sun by its manifestations rather than looking at the actual disc, one might “look upon the Son of Righteousness as in the clear mirror of the church, grasping it through its manifestation.” (2012, 269–271) Hans Boersma

²⁰ Hans Boersma argues that Gregory’s view of the body of Christ includes “the entire human nature united to Christ by faith.” This is an eschatological view, however, and the body of Christ remains synonymous with the church now, including only those “united to Christ by faith.” See Boersma (2013, 194–196)

²¹ Williams adds a constructive warning: “this cannot mean that the existence of community simply *is* the presence of Christ. The community is what it is in virtue of the inexhaustible act of God summoning, judging, and sustaining it—just as the life of Jesus is not simply ‘the same thing as’ the life of the Word, since it is what it is because of the inexhaustible action that pervades and structures it.” (2018, 77)

²² In Homily 4, Gregory quotes Paul’s insistence that Christ and church are, much like how husband and wife become one flesh, mysteriously united (Ephesians 5:32). So whatever his account might include, there is an unavoidable degree of mystery.

points out that there is “a sense,” for Gregory, in which Christ and the church are “indistinguishable.” (2013, 206) In the church one can *see* or *look at* Christ.²³

What does it mean to *see* or *look at* the ascended Christ, or even God? Gregory uses these vision verbs in at least two senses when referencing otherwise non-visible realities. The first is *seeing-as-vision*, by which I mean that Gregory uses “to see” in the ordinary sense of a sensory perception of a physical reality. In some physical reality, we see, in a sense, beyond the physical to the divine. In this sense, “we know [God] from what we can see of his activity in the created world.” (Harrison 1992, 39) For instance, Gregory claims to see the divine face in his sister Macrina. (Gregory of Nyssa 1979, 71) The second sense is *seeing-as-contemplation*, by which I mean that Gregory uses the vision verbs in a specific religious or mystical sense. In this sense, there is no physical reality that one sees or looks at. David Bentley Hart says this of Gregory’s thinking: “Though in one sense it is true that ‘none has ever seen God,’ still the grace of the Spirit elevates human nature to the contemplation of God.” (Hart 2017, 131) By “seeing what cannot be seen,”²⁴ Gregory refers to a God-given “sense of his presence.” (Harrison 1992, 76–77) When Gregory says that one can see Christ in the church, he uses this vision verb in the *seeing-as-vision* sense. The church is a physical, and visible, reality which somehow communicates the characteristics of Christ to the one who looks at it.²⁵

Importantly, *seeing-as-vision* is a way to learn about Christ or even know him in a personal way. Brian E. Daley argues that, for Gregory, “the believer always knows Jesus Christ in two ways, both as a human being and as God—‘human in what is seen, God in what is known to the mind.’” (Daley 2003, 71) This is not to suggest, however, that knowing Christ in visible realities (through *seeing-as-vision*) is only knowing his human nature. Rather, Christ’s humanity—being hypostatically united to divinity²⁶ (2003, 72)—is the means by which humans participate in and are united

²³ It is true that individuals can “mirror” Christ (e.g. Homily 5, p.163; Homily 15, p. 471; 475), although Lewis Ayers argues that in the “true unity of the body of Christ...true human identity is...found within a greater unity and life outside the realm of our experience of ‘individuals’” See Ayers (2006, 308).

²⁴ “Our inability to comprehend God fully is never overcome but, rather, the realization of its lack is a positive achievement in which God has properly been revealed in ‘the seeing that consists in not seeing’ because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.” (Jones Farmer 2005, 73)

²⁵ Early reformers made a distinction between the *visible* and *invisible* church. This distinction, suggesting that the elect are different than who attends church in a local parish, is not relevant here.

²⁶ I use this phrase for ease of reference, but it should be pointed out that Gregory does not always easily conform to later Christological standards or language. In fact, Daley sketches some of the ways

to God.²⁷ (2003, 71–72) One comes to know God through Christ, and one can know Christ through physical realities like the church. In Gregory’s language, “the Word who is worshiped by the whole creation transmitted the divine mysteries through the medium of flesh.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 7) He is clear that, by being the body of Christ, the church shares in this role. Even if not exclusively so, “it is through the church that ‘the multiform wisdom of God’...is made known.” (2012, 267) The church is a way to see “the invisible more clearly.” (2012, 269) It is nothing less than the visible presence of God on earth; in a sense, it is the “pure mirror” of God. (Behr 2004, 472) For Gregory, the “unveiling of the divine likeness” on earth, that likeness which human persons were created but failed to imitate, “can be glimpsed even now in the church.” (Hart 2017, 124)

2.2. Experiencing Christ in the Church: The Liturgy and Eucharist

I have shown that, for Gregory, it is true that one can know Jesus Christ and, through him, God, in the church.²⁸ Yet what specific practices or level of participation is required for knowing Christ? Put another way: how can participation in the church bring about a second–person experience with Christ? Here I focus on two ways that, by participation in the church, one can have a second–person experience with Christ: the liturgy and the Eucharist. “Liturgy” can mean a number of things, but here I mean it to refer to the certain practices of a gathered church community.²⁹ This can include, but is not limited to, the giving and receiving of the sacraments, confessing sins, singing songs, professing beliefs, and listening to the Scriptures read and taught.

Before showing how the liturgy itself can be a way of knowing Christ, it is important to show that, for Gregory, the very gathering itself to perform a liturgy is itself a participation in Christ. This is true for two reasons. First, because one can see the divine face reflected in individual congregants. “The true life,” says Gregory of the Christian believer, “is Christ...manifested in us.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 277)

in which Gregory’s Christological language is “certainly strange, even shocking, by post-Chalcedonian standards” (p 72).

²⁷ Maspero adds: “Restoration and access to the Trinitarian *perichoresis* are possible in the human nature of Christ, through which unity and simplicity are diffused to all men whose nature is the same as Christ’s, permitting an analogous human *perichoresis*.” (2007, 75).

²⁸ Of course, Gregory’s understanding of “knowing God” is more complicated than this. God remains in a sense “unknowable” or “ineffable,” and we actually come to know him as unknowable, in a way. Yet it remains true that there are ways in which we can know and relate to God. See especially Harrison (1992, 62–130).

²⁹ For more on the different definitions of liturgy, see Cockayne (2018).

The Apostle Paul is exemplary in this regard, because he “became the palpable dwelling of the impalpable Nature in that it was no longer he who lived, but he shows Christ living in him and gives proof of Christ speaking in him.” (2012, 101) Again, Gregory sees the divine face reflected in his sister Macrina (1979, 71). The individual soul, by focusing its attention on Jesus Christ, can become a mirror through which Christ is reflected.³⁰ The second reason one can know Christ in gathering is that by participating in the community one is actually participating in Christ. Gregory at one point says that a growing church community is Christ “building himself up” and “augmenting himself,” (2012, 403) and by doing so makes no distinction between being in the gathered community and being in Christ. An individual, by participating in a church gathering, is both individually and communally united with Christ: “the head conforms its body to itself, and each individual members specifically.” (Mateo–Seco and Maspero 2009, 251) Boersma helpfully clarifies: “United as they all are to Christ as their head, the many members of the church all contribute to the further strengthening of this union with Christ.” (2013, 200) The gathered community is more than a collection of individuals, but constitutes a more unified whole in which one participates—the body of Christ.³¹

In addition to gathering, the liturgy is an important way that one knows Christ in the church. In *Beyond ‘Belief’: Liturgy and the Cognitive Apprehension of God*, Sarah Coakley shows how Gregory advocates for a kind of spiritual training in the liturgy that she calls the development of a “spiritual sense” (Coakley 2013, 134):

Gregory actually makes explicit the possibility of training the gross physical senses so that they may come to anticipate something of the capacities of the resurrection body, and so not only sense Christ himself, but actually sense *as* he senses. (2013, 143)

As Coakley conceives of it, the development of this “spiritual sense” takes time and training.³² This involves learning how to experience Christ in the liturgy where

³⁰ “Such is the soul’s ‘glassy essence’ that it cannot help but assume the aspect of that toward which it is turned, and thus its intrinsic mutability and plasticity make of it also a ‘stable’ surface in which anything—however noble or debased—can be made manifest.” (Hart 2017, 125)

³¹ Though the oneness to which I refer here is the body of Christ, Joshua Cockayne has shown how the church might be considered an agent with close attention to modern philosophical work on group agency. See Cockayne (2019).

³² For instance, Gregory says: “God the Word himself will be manifested to those who have been purified: not in cloud and wind and sound of trumpet, not in the terrifying fire that smolders its way from the base of the mountain to its crown, but sweetly and agreeably, having given up that fearsome aspect so as to fit in with the joys of a wedding.” (2012, 81)

Christ is present. In learning this, one gains “a particular kind of access to ‘truth’ that only liturgy can supply.” (Coakley 2013, 133) This is not merely truth in the cognitive or informational sense, but “something akin to truth-by-acquaintance or knowledge-by-relationship.” (2013, 134) “Truth” in this sense is a kind of personal knowing, or a kind of second-person experience. When one develops this “spiritual sense,” the liturgy has the “capacity to train one’s sensibility to the presence of Christ in the same liturgy, and to knit one more deeply into his ‘true body’ through sacramental ingestion, attention to his Word, and the sharing of his communal love in the Spirit.” (2013, 134) In this way, liturgy is “the means of a full integration of all aspects of embodied selfhood into the life of Christ.” (2013, 144)

The Eucharist, although a part of liturgy, is a unique act in which one can have a second-person experience of Christ. In *The Great Catechism*, Gregory says that individual members of a community become one in Christ’s body through receiving the Eucharist. By partaking in the bread that is Christ’s body and the wine that is Christ’s blood, Christ’s body and blood become our own and are in the form of our body. (Gregory of Nyssa 2007, 505) In this way, Christ “disseminates himself” through the bread and wine of the Eucharist. (2007, 506) By taking this meal, mortals have “union with the immortal,” and by this union the mortal “may be a sharer in incorruption.” (2007, 506) Boersma adds that, for Gregory, “the bodily sacramental channels...are the means by which we ascend into the church and through which we are anagogically transposed into the life of God himself.” (2013, 188) What Coakley says of liturgy can be just as easily said of the Eucharist—it might be that a “spiritual sense” is required, or must be developed, for the Eucharist to be experienced in this way. Nonetheless, both the liturgy and the Eucharist offer a second-person experience of Jesus Christ and, through him, God.

3. Finding Jesus: The Church and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

In the first section, I introduced the experiential and intellectual problems of divine hiddenness and suggested that a Christological reformulation of the problem would be helpful. In the second section, I developed an account of knowing Christ in the church with attention to Gregory of Nyssa’s ecclesiology. The aim of this section is to show how the account of the church in the second section might be used as a response to the problems of the first, and to reply to a considerable objection.

3.1 An Ecclesiological Response to Divine Hiddenness

Although knowing Christ in the church is the central response to the problem of divine hiddenness, each version of the problem—the experiential and intellectual—require slightly different versions of this response. First, I respond to the experiential problem, then the intellectual one. In ‘Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God,’ Michael Rea has offered his own response to the experiential problem from the liturgy and the Eucharist.³³ (Rea 2009, 90–92) He compares the experience of God in the church with Derek Parfit’s “q–memories.”³⁴ (2009, 89) These are a kind of “mediated” experience, and can communicate a second–person experience. (2009, 90–91) When undertaken in certain ways, the Eucharist and liturgy “can be ways of experiencing the mediated presence of God.” (2009, 92) This is an example of divine self–disclosure: “God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him and experiencing his presence despite his silence.” (2009, 88) For him, this effectively dissolves the experiential problem of divine hiddenness.³⁵ (2009, 93)

To the Christologically reformulated hiddenness problem, Gregory’s account of knowing Christ in the church can provide a similar kind of response. Rea argues that the liturgy and Eucharist are mediated experiences of God, and, although this is true for Gregory, it is true in a different way. For Gregory, these are *unmediated* experiences of Jesus Christ. Christ, in Gregory’s language, “transmitted the divine mysteries through the medium of flesh,” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 7) thus it is Christ himself who is the mediator between God and humanity. As Maspero says of Gregory: “Everything moves through the mediation of Christ.” (Maspero 2007, 134) One’s participation in the liturgy or the Eucharist, though, are not mediations of Christ—as with q–memories—but a participation in Christ himself. For an example of this, Cockayne, Eford, Haynes, Molto, Tamburro, Warman, and Ludwigs show how the Eucharist might communicate the real presence of Christ in their shared–attention model. (Cockayne et al. 2017, 175–96) “Shared–attention, put briefly, is a kind of mutual awareness between persons, this is the kind of experience infants and caregivers have through engaging in mutual eye contact with one another, for

³³ Although Rea does not use Nagasawa’s taxonomy, he does appear to have in mind a similar distinction between the intellectual and experiential problem. He offers a different response to the intellectual problem elsewhere, but, as far as I can tell, his liturgy response applies to the experiential problem.

³⁴ “As Parfit characterizes them, quasi–memories, or ‘q–memories’, are apparent memories that are genuinely about *someone’s* experiences, though not necessarily about experiences of the person having the q–memory.” For example, if you are duplicated, your duplicate will have q–memories but not genuine memories.

³⁵ He says if divine self–disclosure is true, then the problem of “divine silence” is unproblematic.

example.” (2017, 182) For them, when one receives the Eucharist this is the kind of unmediated second-person experience that is possible. However, like Coakley’s account of developing spiritual senses, they leave room for this to be a kind of learned skill:

Communicants may enter into, and experience this union—the richness of the relationship, to varying degrees. This may be because of their maturity in understanding their relationship with Christ, and their own need for God. But it may also be due to inattention to some or all aspects of how Christ is presenting himself to them—the communicant may just not be receptive at that time.” (2017, 189)

The liturgy in general, and the Eucharist in particular, are actually means by which we are integrated into the church, which in Gregory’s account is *the very body of Christ*. A participation in church is a participation in Christ or, as Coakley put it, “the means of a full integration of all aspects of embodied selfhood into the life of Christ.” (2013, 144)

This is, as Rea points out, an example of divine self-disclosure. The liturgy and the Eucharist are kinds of second-person experiences that are widely available to all. This experience is available to all despite God’s relative “hiddenness,” or despite feelings of frustration or confusion. The one who struggles with experiential hiddenness is, by definition, a believer in God and God’s desire to personally know persons. The availability of a second-person experience of Christ in the church, then, is a good response to experiential hiddenness because it offers the believer a place to “seek and find.” It remains true, of course, that this response is a third-person response to a first-person problem, and so bound to be inadequate to some degree. Yet the solution is necessarily a second-person experience, which is found by one’s participation in the church.

The intellectual problem of divine hiddenness, despite similarities with the experiential problem, requires a response of a different sort. Even if Christ is known in the church, the challenge is to demonstrate how the existence of reasonable nonbelief is consistent with God’s perfect love. There are at least two responses to this problem. The first is that *God values church-building*.³⁶ What I mean is that the growth and development of the church is a good that God pursues at the expense of allowing reasonable nonbelief.³⁷ God values church-building for at least two reasons. The first is that the church is the body of Christ, and so where Christ is

³⁶ Meghan Sullivan briefly suggests this as a response. See Sullivan (2016, 36).

³⁷ Joshua Blanchard similarly argues that God would want a relationship with communities and not just individuals. See Blanchard (2016).

known. This is where the Christological reformulation is a helpful guide: if Christian theology is right that Christ is himself divine, then this is an enormous clue for God's preferred mode of personally knowing and relating to humanity. While God might have other means available for providing second-person experiences of himself—say, writing a message in the clouds or speaking in a booming voice—perhaps knowing God through Christ is a better and more accurate way to know God. As the body of Christ, the church can be a continuing physical representation of Christ on earth. It provides a way for seeing Christ in a *seeing-as-vision* kind of way rather than a *seeing-as-contemplation* kind of way, which would be a more concrete way of knowing Christ. The second reason that God would value church-building is that the church is an end in itself. What I mean is that the union between individuals that the church affords is itself an end that God would pursue, even if it served no other purpose.³⁸ In *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine argues that the dependence of humans on other humans for knowledge is a good thing because it allows for the intermingling of souls. (Augustine 2011, 5) The church, in the liturgy and Eucharist, is a way that individuals are not only growing closer to God, but also to one another—there is a greater possibility of deep communion.³⁹ This sort of teaching and learning “ties people together in the bonds of unity.” (Augustine 2011, 5) These are goods that God could pursue, even at the cost of reasonable nonbelief for a time.

Why, however, would these ends require reasonable nonbelief? To be clear, the good of church-building does not *require* reasonable nonbelief, but reasonable nonbelief for a time is a possible consequence. If God in some sense depends on the church to disseminate knowledge of God through Christ, then failures of the church would be virtually inevitable and result in reasonable nonbelief. If Augustine is right that teaching one another about Christ is a great good which allows for deep communion, it may be that God thinks that communion is so great that it is worth allowing reasonable nonbelief so that that communion might be realized at a later time.⁴⁰ Even if church-building does not explain every case of reasonable nonbelief,

³⁸ For a similar response, see Crummett (2015).

³⁹ This is broadly similar with the “responsibility argument,” which I do not consider here. Depending on how it is development, the responsibility argument could be seen as a compliment or augment to my response. I did not have the space to cover it here, however. For a good overview of the argument in Richard Swinburne, and its treatment in Schellenberg, see Dumsday (2010).

⁴⁰ At this point, Schellenberg would surely object that all goods are “relationship-compatible goods.” In other words, the good of intra-person communion in the church would surely be available without reasonable nonbelief. In fact, could not those intra-person relationships be enhanced by a shared relationship with God? There is considerable merit to this rejoinder, and I cannot give it its sufficient due here. In brief, my response would be that it is far from clear the degree to which could

it is a plausible response as to why God might allow reasonable nonbelief for a time.⁴¹

A second ecclesiological response to the intellectual problem is that God would allow reasonable nonbelief for a time *to make a relationship with God more likely at a later time*. What I mean is that certain reasonable nonbelievers, although reasonable in their nonbelief, might be negatively disposed to a long-lasting relationship with God.⁴² If a reasonable nonbeliever was negatively disposed to a relationship with God at some time, then God might prefer to remain hidden for a time in order to pursue some strategy aimed at changing that nonbeliever's negative disposition into a positive one. This is where the church comes in. The church can be a means by which the negative dispositions toward a relationship with God in reasonable nonbelievers are changed into positive dispositions.

How can the church change a negative disposition to a positive one if God himself cannot do it? The idea is a simple one that holds true in our relationships: we are more likely to respond positively to a relationship with someone we do not know (a stranger) if we are introduced by a mutual friend than if we met the stranger on our own. If I meet a stranger at a party, my interest in them, and my interest in being in a continuing or long-lasting relationship with them, raises significantly if a friend I already know and trust introduces us and says: "you two would be great friends!" This is particularly so when the friend offers a good description of the stranger, perhaps highlighting positive attributes. I am suggesting that the church can play the role of the mutual friend, introducing the nonbeliever to the person they do not already know—God. If some reasonable nonbelievers are apprehensive about a relationship with God, God might prefer to mediate his love through persons who already love him—the church—even if it requires allowing reasonable nonbelief for a time.

would need to be hidden in order to allow for the sharing of testimony in a meaningful way. See Schellenberg (2015b, 47).

⁴¹ I am skeptical of any attempt to explain every case of reasonable nonbelief, and indeed whether or not there is such a thing. I assume there is, for the sake of argument, but I agree with Rea that it does not appear to be the kind of thing for which we could have good evidence. I think our epistemic limitations are worth considering, here. See Rea (2018, 17).

⁴² By negatively disposed, I mean unlikely to enter a relationship, for whatever reason. This is opposed to positively disposed, by which I mean likely to enter a relationship.

3.2 Anticipating an Objection

There are other objections to these views that I do not consider here, but the most forceful objection, in my view, is what I call *the limited–church objection*. This objection argues that the limits of the church make it such that there are many cases where the church is inadequate to accomplish its task of showing Christ to the world, and so it is a poor way for God to personally relate to people. There are two limits that this objection might point to: (a) the church is limited by space and time, and (b) the church is limited by its imperfection. I consider each form of the objection in turn.

(a) The church is limited by space and time.

In one sense, the universal church is *not* limited by space in time because it has existed through time and in different spaces. For instance, Gregory of Nyssa was in “the church” while living in 4th century modern day Turkey just like I am in “the church” while living in 21st century America. In one sense, the church in either case refers to the same thing. However, it is true that the church is limited in a different way because it does not exist in *every* space at *every* time.⁴³ Most pertinently, there are some places in the world in which the church has not been present, is not present, and perhaps never will be present. Yet, in some of those places, there are people who do not believe in God and also, plausibly, reasonable nonbelievers.

There are two important points of response. The first point is that the very mission of the church is to overcome this limitation. This is similar to the “responsibility argument” offered in response to Schellenberg’s argument.⁴⁴ An important difference, however, is that God does not purposely put reasonable nonbelievers in such a state for the sake of the moral formation responsibility might provide. Like Dustin Crummett’s responsibility account, my account does not *require* that there be reasonable nonbelievers that are spatially or temporally isolated, but it is *possible*.⁴⁵ Since God does not desire that nonbelievers be isolated from the church, part of the mission of the church is precisely to eradicate this problem. Two Scriptural passages underscore the point; Jesus speaks to his disciples in each:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to

⁴³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

⁴⁴ For instance, those responsibility arguments made in Swinburne (1998) and Dumsday (2010).

⁴⁵ Crummett, “We Are Here to Help Each Other,” 58.

obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Assuming these remain relevant to the larger mission of the church and not merely his disciples, then it is reasonable to conclude that part of the church’s mission is overcoming this limitation.

The second point of response, then, is God desires to be known through Christ in the church, and that other ways of knowing him are less effective for bringing about a relationship with God.⁴⁶ In section 2.1, I offered reasons why God would value church–building, and reasons why a relationship with God might be more likely when mediated to nonbelievers in the church. The church, made up of physical and necessarily limited persons, is itself necessarily limited, but despite this limitation it is a unique way that God can communicate Christ to nonbelievers. Although some nonbelievers will be, for a time, isolated from the church, part of the mission of the church, and the mission of God, is to eradicate this problem.

(b) The church is limited by its imperfection.

To outside observers, the church often appears to be so imperfect and often very un–Christ–like. This is a considerable objection to Gregory’s view that “anyone, therefore, who focuses attention on the church is in fact looking at Christ.” (Gregory of Nyssa 2012, 403) There have been times when the church is overtly hypocritical, racist, exclusive, or engages in any number of actions or teachings that are decidedly non–Christian. In these cases, it is difficult to see how the church could be a reliable way to know Christ.

There are at least two responses to this kind of worry. The first response is that every gathered community that calls themselves a church is not necessarily a church. Hitler and the Nazi’s famously professed to be “Christian,” but we might say that, in Gregory’s account of church, a “Nazi–church” is nothing but an imposter. Gregory’s view of church is that a community is a church only if they are, as

⁴⁶ This response has broad similarity with Chris Tucker’s response to hiddenness, though I develop it in a different way. (Tucker 2008)

individuals and a community,⁴⁷ being integrated into Christ's life and body. It is only by participating in the life of God that the church can give that life "freely."⁴⁸ (Harrison 1992, 104) Gregory quotes Paul in support of the position that the church is only Christ's body "when each part is working properly" (Ephesians 4:15–16). Paul's very use of the body analogy was originally meant, at least in part, to combat harmful division in the church. The assumption is that individual members could act in accordance with their own interests and not those of the entire body. Similarly, Gregory insists that individual members will not reflect Christ if they are not themselves looking at him—the same could be extended to church communities. Coakley's account of developing spiritual senses is an important reminder that participation in the church might, and probably will, require time and careful attention to Christ. A church that does not do this is not, at least for Gregory, properly considered a church. This does not entirely alleviate the worry, but it is important to recognize that Gregory's account will allow for some communities to be labeled imposters rather than churches.

The second response is that God's making himself known in the church despite imperfection actually teaches us something important about the nature of God. God's choosing a man, Jesus Christ, and the church as his body, to reveal himself would be a relatively obscure way to do so. This all but guarantees a degree of hiddenness. Yet it is worth considering what this hiddenness might teach us about the nature of God.⁴⁹ My responses in 2.1 share a core assumption: God is interested in *how* he is revealed, not only *that* he is revealed. Martin Luther's account of divine hiddenness is instructive here. For Luther, "God hides *in order to be found* where God

⁴⁷ It seems plausible to me that the community, not merely the individuals within it, might have some responsibility here. If, that is, communities can themselves be agents. For a helpful conversation on group agency and the church, see Cockayne (2019).

⁴⁸ Harrison actually makes this point about the individual soul, but adds that it extends to "the Church as a whole."

⁴⁹ Trakakis says it well: "Hiddenness is revelatory. That is the thesis of this paper, in a nutshell. Revelatory of what? Of God. More precisely, of the nature of God." He takes a much different approach than I, however. He focuses on the unknowability of God and the apophatic stream of the Christian tradition, suggesting that God's hiddenness teaches us principally that God is not just another 'thing' we experience. Rather, he is "supra personal" (p 207). He adds: "It seems that ascribing a personality or subjectivity to God, replete with an unexpressed interiority or motivational structure that has to be lived out in relation to, if not in competition with, the deliberations and dispositions of external realities (in this case, human persons), is to ascribe the kind of dependent finitude to God that the classical traditions of East and West have consistently sought to avoid." Generally, I think Trakakis is right, and onto something important that I do not have the space to cover here, but a very different approach than the Christological approach I am taking here. See Trakakis (2016).

wills to be found.” (Paulson 1999, 366) For him, God most principally wills to be found in the cross of Christ.⁵⁰ This extends, however, to the life of the church as well: “God hides in the preacher, in the bread, wine, and water, in order to be found there in Christ alone reconciling the world to himself.” (1999, 366) If Christian theology is right, God has always confounded our expectations about how he should reveal himself. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself, and unites himself, to a powerless people group who were often unfaithful and imperfect. In Jesus Christ, God reveals himself in apparent weakness, being born into poverty, living in poverty, and dying in relative obscurity and in a humiliating way. It should not surprise us, then, to see this pattern of God’s revelation of himself in relative imperfection to continue in the church. It was Jesus, after all, who said that he would known as a stranger, sick person, and a prison inmate (Matthew 25:31–40). By being known in the limited and imperfect church, God teaches us something very important about his nature: that perfection is, mercifully, not required to be full participants in the church of Christ. By uniting himself to imperfection, God demonstrates that he is the kind of God who joins himself to imperfection and makes it perfect.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced and clarified the problem of divine hiddenness, and suggested that a Christological reformulation of the problem would be helpful. This reformulation makes the problem more concrete and makes it specific to a particular theological tradition. Since this reformulation requires an account of how Jesus Christ is known, I developed an account of knowing Christ in the church with attention to the ecclesiology of Gregory of Nyssa. Finally, I showed how Gregory’s account of the church might be used to offer a response to the problem of divine hiddenness.

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⁵⁰ “God both reveals and hides in the cross of Christ.” (Paulson 1999, 368)

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