

Article

Interreligious Solidarity as a Benefit of Divine Hiddenness—On the Meaning of the Ambiguity of Religious Phenomena

Miłosz Hołda 

Department of Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Man, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, ul. Kanonicza 25, 31-002 Krakow, Poland; milosz.holda@upjp2.edu.pl

Abstract: Divine hiddenness appears today as one of the most important and serious religious problems. This problem has been posed most clearly by the proponents of the “argument from hiddenness”. They point to religious diversity as an important element working in the background of this argument and strengthening the force of its impact. In turn, religious diversity is seen as a result of the ambiguity of religious phenomena and the lack of conclusive testimony in favor of religious beliefs. In my paper, I pose the thesis that the ambiguity of religious phenomena can be counted among the “benefits of divine hiddenness”. This will be possible when the ambiguity of religious phenomena becomes the basis for the formation of interreligious solidarity. I define the concept of interreligious solidarity and show the theoretical aspects of this attitude. In discussing the theoretical aspect of interreligious solidarity, I draw attention to the possible role of phenomenology. I also argue that in the context of divine hiddenness, the most important question is not the one concerning the genesis of this problem (“why are religious phenomena not more unambiguous?”), but the question concerning the meaning of this problem (“what to do with the ambiguity of religious phenomena?”).

Keywords: divine hiddenness; religious diversity; religious phenomena; benefits of hiddenness; phenomenology



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1. Introduction

The problem of divine hiddenness seems to be, next to the problem of evil, the most serious challenge facing proponents of theism. However, it is not a purely academic problem, although the discussion around the argument proposed by John L. Schellenberg (Schellenberg 1993, p. 83; newer version Schellenberg 2015, p. 103) continues to strongly engage specialists in the philosophy of religion. It is primarily a problem for “ordinary believers” who ask themselves why God is not more obvious, try to cope with the experience of unheard prayer, and generally feel that the world or their lives do not look the way they expect them to, given what adherents of various religions say about the existence and nature of God. As Michael Rea (2018, p. 26) notes, the problem of hiddenness is a family of subproblems, each of which begins with an apparent contradiction between the content of traditional theological doctrines, which seem to promise the fulfillment of God-related desires, and the experience of not having those desires fulfilled.

In an attempt to find answers to the questions indicated above, theists formulate a variety of theodicy and defenses that seek to identify the values providing justification for people’s experience of divine hiddenness. In light of these values, divine hiddenness appears to be justified or at least becomes somewhat more understandable and, above all, more bearable (see Benton 2018; Blanshard 2016; Dobrzeniecki 2020; Dumsday 2014a; Hołda 2020; Oakes 2008; Wojtysiak 2023). The quality and quantity of these theodicies and defenses make the ‘argument from hiddenness’ far from being conclusive. In this article, I want to draw attention to a way of countering this argument other than the theodicy and defense. In the discussion around this problem, there are also proposals to indicate the “benefits” that would flow from the situation described as “divine hiddenness.” Associated

with their indication is the conviction that these goods could not be realized if the situation of divine hiddenness did not occur, or their realization would be significantly reduced if God were more obvious. The reference to “benefits of hiddenness” is an attempt to find an answer to this nagging problem. However, it is an attempt to indicate not so much the reasons (genesis) of divine hiddenness, but rather to find an answer to the question of the purpose and meaning of this situation. More precisely, it is about answering the question of what can be done with divine hiddenness.

Particularly interesting of the indicated “benefits of hiddenness” is solidarity. According to its proponents, the benefit lies in the fact that precisely because God is hidden, people can take care of each other, together seeking the right way to deal with this experience (see [Taylor 2006](#), pp. 165–66). I think a particularly important type of solidarity that could be pointed to as a benefit of hiddenness is interreligious solidarity. Importantly, in the discussion of divine hiddenness, religious diversity is pointed out as one of the phenomena whose occurrence strengthens the power of the “argument from hiddenness.” If interreligious solidarity could be considered a benefit of hiddenness, then we would have an explanation, which of course has limited force, for why God hides Himself. Before anything else, we would gain a hint of what we can do in a situation of divine hiddenness.

In the following text, using suggestions from the [World Council of Churches \(2020\)](#), I will try to define interreligious solidarity. I will show its theoretical dimension. In discussing the theoretical aspect of interreligious solidarity, I will draw attention to the possible role of phenomenology. Then, I will present the combinatorics of the possibilities that come into play and show how interreligious solidarity can be realized. All this will serve to justify the conviction that interreligious solidarity can be treated as a particularly significant benefit flowing from divine hiddenness.

2. Discussion

2.1. Divine Hiddenness and Religious Diversity

Let us start by formulating the problem of hiddenness. Ebrahim [Azadegan \(2013, p. 49\)](#) defines the problem this way:

Many people are perplexed that God should permit a situation in which human beings live in incomprehension and bewilderment regarding His existence, while all the time He could save humanity from such a predicament. The problem of “divine hiddenness” refers to the epistemic situation where we human beings live in a world in which God is transcendent, we have limited cognitive faculties, and the knowledge of God is essential for our flourishing in this-worldly and otherworldly life; and where in addition it is supposed that God, the omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving, has permitted us to live in bewilderment and perplexity regarding His attributes and existence, all the while knowing that it is essential for our well-being during our eternal life to believe in His existence and so to act according to His commandments.

Thus, the problem of hiddenness is another name for describing our epistemic situation, an essential element of which is the impossibility of unequivocally resolving the question of God’s existence and the content of God’s attributes. This situation is problematic because the knowledge of God is crucial to our temporal and eternal life (insofar as one accepts the thesis of God’s existence). Thus, the problem of hiddenness arises with the difficulty of understanding how God, who cares about our well-being, can allow such a situation.

It is puzzling why it is precisely in our time that the “argument from hiddenness” not only arose at all, but also still enjoys great popularity. It also raises the question of why it has just now begun to seem convincing to many people, although the problem of divine hiddenness has been raised in the past. One may wonder why it is precisely in our time that divine hiddenness has begun to be treated as an argument against the existence of God, or at least against the existence of a personal God. The key to answering this question seems to be the significant phenomena of a psychological and social nature that we can observe in our time. Particularly relevant from our point of interest is the issue of religious diversity.

According to Schellenberg (2015, p. 32), it is only in our time that people clearly realize that there are other faiths, other life practices, and that their best representatives are at least as wise and decent as the best among the representatives of their own cultural tradition or their own religion. It is not so easy today, he stresses, to claim that unbelief or agnosticism is simply the result of negligence or mistake, while it is not difficult to see that there are thoughtful and reflective people who, through no fault of their own, do not believe in God or understand Him differently.

Philip Quinn (2005, pp. 392–93), on the other hand, points out that religious diversity has become a challenge for the philosophy of religion not only in the context of the problem of hiddenness. He writes:

At the beginning of the third millennium of the common era, religious diversity seems to be increasing in importance to philosophical thought. Among the factors responsible for this change is the fact that educated people have become better acquainted than ever before with religions other than their own. Modern technologies of travel and communication facilitate contacts between the adherents of different religions. Modern scholarship has made texts from a variety of religious traditions available in many languages. And cultural anthropologists have provided fascinating thick descriptions of an enormous range of religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, those of us who live in religiously pluralistic democracies have ample opportunities to develop face-to-face familiarity with practitioners of religions other than own.

Thus, the problem of hiddenness arises from the multiplicity of testimonies to different possibilities of experiencing and understanding religious phenomena, as well as from their ambiguity. Precisely because they are ambiguous, the questions raised by Robert McKim (2001, p. 4) may arise. He asks why God's existence and nature are not obvious to everyone. He asks why, if there is a God, it is not irrational to be, for example, a non-theistic Hindu, atheist or polytheist. Other questions are related to the presence in theism of a number of such interpretations of the nature and actions of God that seem difficult to agree with each other or even contradictory. The premise of all these questions is the belief that if the testimonies concerning God were more unambiguous, the situations described by these questions would not have occurred. Thus, the phenomenon of religious diversity is not only a topic for the philosophy of religion, but, as we have seen, is also a very important part of the background of the "argument from hiddenness" that makes it convincing to the people of our time.

The above description of religious diversity, however, opens up an additional perspective. The intensification of contacts between adherents of different religions makes it possible to learn about the content of religious belief systems that differ from one's own. It also makes it possible to become familiar with the discussions taking place within different religions around the issue of divine hiddenness. It also allows one to learn about the ways in which adherents of different religions deal with this problem, and, above all, it gives one a chance to realize that this problem poses a challenge of both theoretical and practical nature to people of other religions. Religious diversity, while reinforcing the problem of hiddenness, also opens up an opportunity to deal with it. This is only possible if it is treated not as a source of additional doubts about the existence of God, but rather as a basis for developing the theoretical and practical aspects of interreligious solidarity.

2.2. Interreligious Solidarity as Another Benefit of Divine Hiddenness

The literature on the issue of divine hiddenness offers clues as to what good can come from the situation described by this metaphor. According to Travis Dumsday (2014b, p. 286), God hides Himself in order to allow man to achieve the humility necessary to know Him. Richard Corrigan (2008, p. 74) writes that God hides Himself so that people can form a proper, i.e., free and loving response to the love He offers them. Taylor (2006, pp. 165–66), quoted above, cites explanations according to which God hides Himself in order to check whether man is responding to Him for the wrong reasons, and thus whether he is seeking Him in purity of heart, or through a sense of risking human faith, which

would weaken if the testimonies in favor of God's existence were better and if there were more of them. According to yet another proposition described by Taylor, divine hiddenness is necessary for man to learn to depend on God in faith, which would be impossible if he had his destiny and meaning of life under control. Taylor also points to the proposition that divine hiddenness is an opportunity for people to draw closer to each other and learn to rely more on each other in drawing closer to God and abiding by Him, and that in this way, they can fulfill the commandment to love their neighbor. This is where the issue of solidarity appears before us.

In our time, interreligious solidarity may become an important new form of realizing solidarity in the broadest sense. After all, helping each other to come closer to God and fulfilling the commandment to love one's neighbor need not be confined within the confines of the followers of one's own religion. But what would interreligious solidarity be? What forms could it take? In what dimensions could it be realized? Finding answers to these questions seems to be an extremely important issue in a situation where the problem of divine hiddenness is becoming a very important challenge, and, moreover, transcends the boundaries that separate the various religions.

In the document on interreligious solidarity ([World Council of Churches 2020](#), p. 5), we read that in realizing this value, it is a matter of overcoming "religious prejudice and cultural biases in relation both to those whom we serve, and to those with whom we serve, as we strive to alleviate suffering and to restore healing and wholeness in a pluralistic world." Overcoming prejudice can be thought of as a tendency to look for what unites adherents of different religions instead of emphasizing what divides them. The way to do this is through mutual understanding, which is made possible by meeting and listening to each other about what followers of other religions have to say about the problem of divine hiddenness, how they experience it, define it, and how they try to deal with it.

The second element of the definition quoted above is that prejudice must be overcome both toward those whom one serves and toward those with whom one serves. One way of realizing interreligious solidarity, therefore, is to be willing to cross the boundaries of one's own religion toward those who belong to other religions, and another is to be willing to work together for the benefit of humanity along with followers of other religions.

The third is to define the values that interreligious solidarity is meant to realize. Listed explicitly are: "to alleviate suffering and to restore healing and wholeness in a pluralistic world" ([World Council of Churches 2020](#), p. 5). These values are stated in rather general terms. However, the formulation is very capacious, making it possible to build into this postulate a variety of specific experiences and challenges faced by people who are ready to undertake interreligious solidarity.

The question arises whether this definition can be applied to the situation of divine hiddenness. The document was formulated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but contains the word "beyond," which indicates that the demand to serve the "wounded world" does not apply only to this particular situation. Suffering takes many forms. The need to "restore health and wholeness" to the people of our time also manifests itself in various ways. It can also be related to the problem of divine hiddenness.

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a "wound." This term can be understood as anything that brings suffering to people and makes them in need of restoration of health and fullness of life. So, can the experience of divine hiddenness also be understood as a "wound"?

In discussions of divine hiddenness, an important theme emerges concerning the relationship between the problem of hiddenness and the problem of evil, which is usually defined as the occurrence in the world of suffering that is not culpable for human beings. From the point of view of the issue we are interested in, non-inflicted suffering is a "wound" experienced by a person, in the face of which, the need for help in the framework of interreligious solidarity arises.

As [Van Inwagen \(2002, pp. 29–30\)](#) suggests, both the problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness in its epistemic sense are versions of the broader problem of hiddenness.

Both aspects of this broader problem of hiddenness involve the belief that the world is not as it should be if God existed, because there is too much suffering in it and not enough signs and wonders. If the problem of hiddenness is interpreted in this way, it can be suggested that it is God's hiddenness that can be considered the deepest "wound" suffered by human beings. For if suffering becomes suffering because God hides Himself, or at least because of God's hiddenness, the suffering of human beings deepens, one can conclude that at the root of all "wounds" is precisely that most fundamental "wound", which is divine hiddenness. Therefore, if one wants to serve the wounded world in the framework of interreligious solidarity and through this give a response to these wounds, one must not forget the wound that is the deepest and most fundamental, which is divine hiddenness.

Showing the connection between the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of evil also makes us realize that understanding who God is and how He works is of utmost importance. If man's suffering becomes greater when he recognizes that he has been abandoned by God, while it diminishes when he finds, however imperfectly, an answer to the question of divine hiddenness, it is easy to understand how extremely momentous the theoretical issues are, or, in other words, how vitally important it is that the problem of hiddenness be properly understood and interpreted. Thus, it is not enough to deal with this problem on a purely practical level, although it seems that dealing with it on this particular level is something more important and more easily attainable. The theoretical level of the problem cannot be ignored either.

Taking this into account, therefore, I propose to expand the definition of interreligious solidarity suggested in the World Council of Churches Document cited above to include precisely this theoretical thread. The point of interreligious solidarity would thus be to overcome religious prejudice and cultural biases, both on a theoretical and practical level, in relation both to those whom we serve, and to those with whom we serve, as we strive to alleviate suffering and to restore healing and wholeness in a pluralistic world.

With such a definition, it is clear that interreligious solidarity can have two levels. One—practical—is the service to the representatives of other religions and the joint service of the followers of different religions to the "wounded world." The second level—theoretical—includes crossing the boundaries of one's own religion toward the followers of other religions to testify to the way in which the issue of divine hiddenness is understood within one's own religion and how the problem is addressed, and jointly defending certain theses about God in the discussion that revolves around the issue of divine hiddenness.

2.3. Possible Ways to Realize Interreligious Solidarity

If we take into account the above distinctions: directing the vector of interreligious solidarity to the followers of other religions or joint action "outward" (to the "wounded world"), as well as the practical and theoretical dimensions of the issue of interest, we can indicate the following ways in which interreligious solidarity is realized:

- solidarity at the theoretical level directed at the followers of another religion;
- solidarity at the theoretical level directed "outward" (to the "wounded world");
- solidarity at the practical level addressed to the followers of another religion;
- solidarity at the practical level directed "outward" (to the "wounded world").

It is not difficult to calculate that, taking into account these four possibilities, we can purely combinatorially achieve sixteen possible ways of realizing interreligious solidarity, assuming that we consider only the relationship between the adherents of two different religions. Taking into account more of them would significantly increase the number of possible combinations.

It should be emphasized, however, that the above distinction is not pure combinatorics or a game of logic, but defines real possibilities for the realization of interreligious solidarity, which can be taken either as descriptions of situations actually occurring, or as a postulate of how the realization of interreligious solidarity should or at least could look like.

The most dramatic situation is, of course, the one depicted by the empty set. In such a situation, no kind of interreligious solidarity takes place: communities live separated

from each other and focused only on themselves, nor do they try to make any effort to serve the “wounded world” together. The most optimal situation is therefore one in which religious communities share beliefs about divine hiddenness and help each other, while appearing together outside in disputes and making joint efforts to serve the “wounded world.” Each of the other possibilities lacks something. However, they represent a more favorable situation than the one symbolized by the empty set. The realization of each of the incomplete possibilities can also be seen as a stage on the road to the realization of full interreligious solidarity, encompassing all possible dimensions and all possible directions.

2.4. Interreligious Solidarity at the Theoretical Level

Without a doubt, the practical ways of realizing interreligious solidarity are the ways that are more popular and more accessible to a larger number of believers. It has been taking place for a long time in smaller and larger scales. The ways of practicing it are well known. In the context that interests us, however, it may be an important addition to point out an important motivation that may be behind actions that constitute theoretical manifestations of interreligious solidarity.

Let us now try to answer the question of what the theoretical level of interreligious solidarity may concern. With regard to adherents of other religions, attention should be paid to sharing an understanding of the problem of divine hiddenness that arises within one’s religion and ideas on how to deal with the problem. What can be learned is, first of all, that adherents of other religions also struggle with the challenge of divine hiddenness. One can also see interesting analogies and similarities in the ways of dealing with this problem by followers of other religions. Representatives of different religions can also clearly indicate what their religion brings to the understanding of the problem of hiddenness itself and how the content of their religion could help deal with this problem. The document on “Serving a Wounded World” ([World Council of Churches 2020](#), p. 19) encourages us “to create space for dialogues [. . .] that are embracing and inclusive” and to “learn from members of other religions about their motivation, principles and recommendations for working in interreligious solidarity, so that we may grow closer both in understanding and cooperation.”

Interreligious solidarity can manifest itself in engaging in serious interreligious dialogue. Yujin [Nagasawa \(2017, pp. 34–39, 44–46\)](#) believes that dialogue between representatives of different religions is needed primarily because the most relevant topics we face today in the field of philosophy of religion are evil and suffering. The realization of interreligious solidarity at the theoretical level is, in this light, a manifestation of shared responsibility for each other and for the world in which we live.

Another important way in which interreligious solidarity can be realized at the theoretical level is by jointly defending a place at the “common table” at which religious topics are discussed for proponents of different understandings of the divine. Under the guise of caring about respecting “rational disagreement” and preventing religious content from “spilling over” too quickly into philosophical discussions, the proponents of personalistic versions of theism are often excluded from discussions today. A common solidarity action among the representatives of religions that advocate such types of theism would therefore be to insist on a place for such views. A possible manifestation of solidarity between representatives of religions that do not recognize the personalistic concept of divinity, or between conveners of personalistic theism and non-personalistic varieties, could be a joint struggle to allow all possible options to speak in interreligious dialogue, without arbitrarily excluding some of them.

An extremely important element of acting “outwardly” (in the face of the “wounded world”) is the joint testimony of the followers of different religions, which can be helpful to people (also non-religious ones) unable to cope with the problems of life, and above all to those who experience suffering. It is about witnessing to the spirituality and value of religious life. Testimony to the value of faith can be very valuable if given together. The document we are discussing puts it in a very interesting way (see [World Council of](#)

[Churches 2020](#), p. 14): “we learn to live our witness as with-ness”. In this perspective, interreligious solidarity becomes a convincing testimony in favor of the value of living life in a religious perspective. The absence of such solidarity would constitute an anti-testimony that could lead people to reject the thesis of God’s existence.

Phenomenology can play an important role in grappling with the problem of hiddenness on a theoretical level. On the one hand, undertaking a reflection on the phenomenon of ‘hiddenness’ offers an opportunity to clarify what this phenomenon consists of and to distinguish it from phenomena such as invisibility (see [Nitsche 2020](#)), as well as to show the relationship between ‘hiddenness’ and openness and closure. Daniel [Sobota \(2019, pp. 159–60\)](#) suggests that a reflection of a phenomenological nature makes it possible to weaken the force of Schellenberg’s argument, which not only examines the question of God’s existence ‘from above’ (i.e., from reflection on the general attributes of God), but also presupposes a particular understanding of the phenomenon of ‘hiddenness’. As he rightly observes: “If we identify God with infinite love and define this love as openness, we must realize that with this openness comes a whole series of closures. Openness and closure are closely related. On the contrary, hiddenness is not the opposite of openness and does not enter into any significant relationship with it. Therefore, to oppose openness and hiddenness is a mistake” ([Sobota 2019](#), p. 166).

On the other hand, a phenomenological approach to the question of hiddenness can allow us to understand that a key element in grappling with this experience is the seeking. In the article cited above, [Sobota \(2019, p. 168\)](#) points out that, from a phenomenological point of view, the relationship between existence and hiddenness can be seen most quickly in the context of the closely related concepts of finding and seeking. It is the category of seeking that holds the most promise for thinking about the problem of hiddenness, including the hiddenness of God. Taking this into account, it can be suggested that interreligious solidarity could consist in the sharing of ways of seeking God by adherents of different religions. It would also be manifested in a common witness to the conviction that faith involves an effort to seek and that it is the seeking of God that should constitute the response (also on the part of the non-religious) to the wounding that is associated with the situation of the absence of God, which is experienced as evil suffering and death.

Interreligious solidarity is therefore a challenge that seems to be the most essential part of answering the question of what can be done about divine hiddenness. Even if we cannot answer the question of why God is not more overt and cannot pinpoint the genesis of the ambiguity of religious phenomena, we are not completely helpless in the face of the problem of God’s hiddenness. By making efforts to develop interreligious solidarity, we are able to give the challenge of divine hiddenness a profound meaning.

3. Conclusions

Our deliberations were aimed at answering the question of what we can do with divine hiddenness. If one treats it as the most fundamental “wound,” it cannot be disregarded as an irrelevant element of our lives. It is no coincidence that the issue of divine hiddenness is becoming such an important topic of reflection in the field of the philosophy of religion today. This interest stems from the fact that the wounding experience of divine hiddenness has become the experience of great multitudes of people today.

Interreligious solidarity is a need of our time. The more clearly we realize the ambiguity of religious phenomena, and the more religious diversity becomes the driving force behind the “argument from hiddenness,” the more reflection on what can be done with divine hiddenness is needed. The attempt to define interreligious solidarity is not meant to lead only to an increase in the level of theoretical complexity of this issue, but to find the broadest and most convincing way in which this postulate can be realized.

When realized in the ways indicated above, interreligious solidarity can help us understand the meaning of religious diversity. And while it is difficult to consider it explicitly as a kind of theodicy in the context of the problem of divine hiddenness, it can be treated as an important good that can be born out of divine hiddenness. As we have seen,

religious diversity can act as an argument against the existence of God, and is sometimes treated as such. If the task of realizing interreligious solidarity can be undertaken, then it will become more likely that religious diversity will be seen as something beneficial and as a testament to God, rather than providing a convincing argument to many against His existence.

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