

# Hiddenness and Transcendence<sup>‡</sup>

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For over two decades, the philosophical literature on divine hiddenness has been concerned with just one problem about divine hiddenness that arises out of one very particular concept of God. The problem—I’ll call it *the Schellenberg problem*—has J. L. Schellenberg as both its inventor and its most ardent defender. The concept of God in question construes God as a *perfect heavenly parent*, and seems to be the product of perfect being theology deployed within constraints imposed by modern ideals of parenthood. The idea that God is our heavenly Father is traditional within Christian theology (which shall be my focus in this paper, as it is the tradition that I know best), and the method of perfect being theology has enjoyed an important place in that tradition as well. Nevertheless, one might reasonably wonder to what extent it makes sense to allow modern ideals about parenthood to drive our theological reflections in the ways that it has done in the contemporary hiddenness literature.

Within the Christian tradition, theologians have typically allowed their views about the fatherhood of God to be shaped in light of their views about divine holiness and transcendence rather than the other way around. The same is true for the theology of divine motherhood that developed in monastic circles in the high Middle Ages. This is not to say that ideals about parenthood have been irrelevant to the theology of divine motherhood and fatherhood; far from it. But I think that it is fairly safe to say that, for the most part throughout the tradition, such ideals have rarely, if ever, played the sort of primary, driving role in theological reflection that they have done in the literature on the Schellenberg problem. Upon attending to this fact, one *might* conclude that Schellenberg and those who have embraced his method of theological reflection are simply taking Christian theology in a new and better direction. Alternatively, one might start to wonder whether the Schellenberg problem is in fact not a problem for traditional Christian theism at all, but rather an attack inadvertently mounted against a straw deity.

In this paper, I argue that the Schellenberg problem *is* an attack on a straw deity. More specifically, I argue that Schellenberg’s argument against the existence

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of God depends on certain theological claims that are not *commitments* of traditional Christian theology and that would, furthermore, be repudiated by many of the most important and influential theologians in the Christian tradition. I close with some very brief remarks about the implications of this conclusion for what I take to be the real import of the Schellenberg problem.

## 1.

Let me begin by stating the Schellenberg problem, with an eye to highlighting its most important underlying theological assumptions. The problem takes the form of an argument for the conclusion that God does not exist. In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Schellenberg formulates the argument as follows:<sup>2</sup>

S1. If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.

S2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.<sup>3</sup>

S3. Reasonable non-belief occurs.

S4. Therefore: No perfectly loving God exists.

S5. Therefore: there is no God.

Theists will not dispute S1; and, although S3 has been the subject of much dispute, it presupposes no substantive theological claims, nor are any such claims required for its defense. Accordingly, for the remainder of this paper I shall focus on S2.

Let me begin with some brief remarks about which God, exactly, Schellenberg has in view. Even Schellenberg acknowledges that not every conception of God is one on which S2 is plausible. For example, as we shall see in more detail at the beginning of section 2, he seems happy to concede that those who regard God as absolutely incomprehensible might find S2 unacceptable. But if so, then whose God, exactly, is in view with this argument? Schellenberg's answer to this question is quite explicit: the argument targets belief in "the personal God of traditional theism" (2005a: 209). But what God is that? Theism itself is not a religious tradition in its own right; and the various religions that are paradigmatically theistic—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and a few of their offshoots—embrace very different conceptions of God, very different views about how God is to be worshipped, and very different views on a wide range of other theological topics. Granted, all three of these religious traditions share *some* common views about God. Indeed, they have traditionally overlapped on a small family of theological claims that together comprise the philosophical-theological position known as *classical theism*. But there is no such thing as *theistic* orthodoxy to which one could appeal for support for S2; and, given the wide diversity of views about divine love and personality that have

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<sup>2</sup> Schellenberg has expressed the argument in several slightly different ways over the years (including in his contribution to the present volume). But the differences among these formulations do not make a difference to the arguments that follow; for, as readers can easily verify, they are all predicated on the same basic theological assumptions (T1 – T3 below). (See, e.g., pp. \$\$\$ of the present volume.)

<sup>3</sup> In discussing S2, Schellenberg has made it clear that by 'reasonable nonbelief' he means 'inculpable nonbelief', and that when he says that such belief 'does not occur' he means that it *never* occurs. So S2 should be understood as equivalent to the thesis that, if a perfectly loving God exists, inculpable nonbelief never occurs. (Cf. Schellenberg 1993: 25 – 29 and Schellenberg 2005: 201, 203.)

been developed within and across these various religious traditions, it is singularly implausible to suppose that there is any conception of either divine love or divine personality that could be considered a commitment of theism as such and that would be robust enough to lend support to S2.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Schellenberg's own defenses of S2 tend to appeal to very general considerations (e.g., analogies with human love, or alleged conceptual truths) rather than to particular theological doctrines. Moreover, when he does appeal to particular theological doctrines, he seems to draw only on small portions of the Christian tradition rather than either considering that tradition writ large or examining views about divine love and personality that are common to all three of the theistic traditions.<sup>4</sup> The result of this methodology has been a rather remarkable detachment of his defense of S2 from virtually all of the theological work on divine love and personality that has been done in any of the major theistic traditions. This is noteworthy; for one would expect that if each of the theistic religions is committed to S2, then the easiest and most straightforward way to defend that claim would be to cite a variety of theologians in each tradition who more or less explicitly endorse it. Likewise, showing that many of the most influential theologians in any one of these traditions are *not* committed to S2 would suffice to undermine the claim that S2 is a commitment of theism in general, or of that tradition in particular.

I am in no position to comment on the contours of Jewish or Islamic theology; but I think that one would be hard pressed to draw much unqualified support for S2 from the work of Christian theologians writing before the 20<sup>th</sup> century (or even *during* the 20<sup>th</sup> century, apart from the work of American evangelical protestants). Be that as it may, in section 2 I shall argue that many of the most influential theologians in the Christian tradition are, at any rate, not committed to S2. If that is correct, then the Schellenberg problem fails as an argument against the existence of the God of traditional Christianity, and *a fortiori*, it also fails as an argument against the God of theism in general.

Before turning to that argument, however, let us examine in a bit more detail Schellenberg's reasons for thinking that theists *are* committed to S2. Although Schellenberg has had a lot to say in support of S2 over the years, so far as I can tell, there is no final, master argument for that premise to be found in any one article or book chapter. Instead, what we find is an extended defense of S2 in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, followed by a variety of clarifications and supplementary remarks in subsequent articles written mostly in response to critics. Nevertheless, thanks to the steadfastness and internal coherence of Schellenberg's views about the nature of divine love over the years, it is not difficult to reconstruct a master argument on his behalf.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, we can also highlight some important underlying theological assumptions.

The crucial premise in Schellenberg's defense of S2 is the following claim:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. p. \$\$ below.

<sup>5</sup> In doing this, I draw on what I take to be his most important extended discussions of S2—specifically, Schellenberg 1993, 2003, and 2005.

- S6. Perfect love toward another person includes a strong disposition to seek *personal relationship* with him or her.

According to Schellenberg, a *personal relationship* is to be understood as an *explicit, reciprocally interactive* relationship. Given this, S6 implies the following two theological claims:

- T1. One has a personal relationship with God only if one is involved in an explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship with God.  
T2. Divine love manifests a bias toward explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship with human beings.

Schellenberg, does not define what he means by ‘explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship’, but he does give some illustrative examples. On God’s side, such a relationship with a human person would involve such things as giving guidance, support, forgiveness, and consolation; on the human side, it would involve such things as worship and obedience; and the relationship would count as *reciprocally interactive* at least in part because what God gives in the relationship is relevantly connected to what the human being gives, and vice versa. (Schellenberg 1993: 18 - 21) This suggests that what he has in mind is (at least) a relationship in which each participant is aware of the other as a person, and there is some kind of communicative interaction between the two such that each party to the relationship is evidentially in a position both to believe reasonably that the other person is intentionally communicating something to him or her and to understand the specific content of what is being communicated.

The route from S6 to S2 is fairly simple. Given S6 and T2, it follows that if God is perfectly loving toward *everyone*, God will be strongly disposed to seek explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship with everyone. God will, in other words, manifest a strong bias toward explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship with human beings. But manifesting such a bias, he thinks, will involve *at a minimum* supplying every non-resistant person with enough evidence to form rational belief in God. As he puts it, a perfectly loving God “would, as it were, have to be *convinced* that there was reason to deprive us of the evidence for belief which an opportunity to enter into personal relationship with God requires.” (Schellenberg 2005b: 288; emphasis in original) So, if God is perfectly loving, reasonable non-belief does not occur—which is just to say that S2 is true. I note in passing that, on Schellenberg’s view, *divine hiddenness*—a term which surprisingly appears nowhere in the summary formulation of his *argument* from divine hiddenness—is just the fact that God has *not* provided evidence sufficient to form belief in God to every human being capable of a personal relationship with God. Given this terminology, Schellenberg’s argument from S6 to S2 boils down to this: a perfectly loving being will be biased toward explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship with everyone who is not resisting such relationship, and therefore such a being will be hidden from nobody except those who are resisting. I will not here contest this argument (except to challenge its starting point, S6). I present it simply in order to highlight the importance of S6 to the case for S2. Rejecting S6 undermines the argument, and it is hard to see how S2 could be defended without appeal to something like S6.

So S6 is important. Why think it is true? Schellenberg has offered several different reasons. In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, he defends it by appeal

to the following two claims: (i) divine love, insofar as it is analogous to the *best human love*, would seek to maximize the well-being of God's beloved, and (ii) participating in a personal relationship with God would greatly enhance the well-being of any human person. Elsewhere, he takes a more direct route, defending S6 by saying that divine love would be analogous to *parental love*. Ideal parental love has been variously conceived across times and cultures; but in our time and culture, at any rate, ideal parental love is widely understood to include an overwhelming disposition to seek ongoing explicit and reciprocally interactive relationship with one's child. Thus, taking modern ideals of parenthood for granted, the parent analogy seems to lend a great deal of support to S6. (Schellenberg 2003: 32 - 35) In a later article, he claims that S2 is a conceptual truth about divine love; and part of his basis for saying this seems to be the thought that S6 is a conceptual truth. (Schellenberg 2005a: 212 - 213)

By invoking the parent analogy, Schellenberg presupposes a further theological claim:

T3: The fact that normal human parental love manifests a strong bias toward explicit reciprocally interactive relationship with one's child is weighty evidence in support of the truth of T2.

Moreover, each of the other two lines of defense seems to depend on it as well. If T3 were false, it would be implausible to suggest that S6 is a conceptual truth about divine love (cf. again Schellenberg 2005a: 212 - 213); and it would likewise be untenable to rest a case for S6 on an analogy with the *best human love*, given that parental love has strong claim to being among the best forms of human love.

So Schellenberg's case for S2 depends importantly on all three of the theological assumptions just highlighted. However, in the next section I will argue that each of these claims is an uneasy fit with the broad theological framework endorsed by many of the most important and influential theologians in the Christian tradition and that, as a result, neither they nor S6 nor s2 can sensibly be thought to be commitments of traditional Christian theology.

## 2.

In his own discussions of the implications of divine transcendence for the Schellenberg problem, Schellenberg has focused exclusively on the question whether and to what extent a transcendent God could act so as to render theistic belief reasonable. He grants that a strong theology of divine transcendence—one according to which God is *absolutely incomprehensible*, such that human concepts do not even analogically apply to God—makes it hard to see either how theistic belief could be evidentially supported or how one could meaningfully say that God has acted so as to provide evidence of God's existence. (1993: 46) But he says that *only* a doctrine of absolute incomprehensibility would have this result. So long as familiar predicates like 'is just' or 'is loving' at least analogically apply to God, God *can* supply us with evidence for theistic belief and, furthermore, divine love would *require* that God do so. Moreover, he insists that, in the context of the Schellenberg problem,

...reference is being made not to an incomprehensible God, but to the personal God of traditional theism, whose love and justice, and so on,

are conceived as sharing properties with their human counterparts, though of course they are thought of as perfected in various ways, and the *manner* of their instantiation or exercise might well be incomprehensible to us. (2005a: 209, emphasis in original)

On the strength of these considerations, and particularly in light of the alleged contrast between an incomprehensible God and the God of “traditional theism,” Schellenberg seems to think that the doctrine of divine transcendence has no significant bearing on the premises of the Schellenberg problem.

I am with Schellenberg in thinking that many human predicates apply to God at least analogically. Indeed, I think that plenty of human predicates (e.g., *is transcendent, is uncreated, and is either simple or not*) apply univocally to God. I am also with Schellenberg in thinking that the method of perfect being theology, properly construed and implemented, is a route to genuine, even if only partial, understanding of the divine nature. Despite these points of agreement, however, I think that Schellenberg is mistaken both in his views about the importance of divine transcendence generally in the Christian tradition and in his understanding of the potential bearing of even a modest doctrine of transcendence for the premises of his argument.

Note again the unqualified contrast between an incomprehensible deity on the one hand and “the personal God of traditional theism” on the other. Divine incomprehensibility and divine transcendence go hand-in-hand as divine attributes. Often enough the terms ‘transcendence’, ‘incomprehensibility’, and ‘hiddenness’ are used interchangeably. But the claim that God is *both* transcendent and personal enjoys overwhelming support from the Christian tradition, and is a crucial part of the theological framework endorsed by theologians as diverse as Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, and many others.<sup>6</sup> In short, the personal God of traditional Christianity *is* a transcendent, incomprehensible deity. Indeed, many theologians would say that the personal God of traditional Christianity is *absolutely* transcendent.

Witness, for example, the opening remarks of Elizabeth Johnson’s “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God as Male and Female”:

The holiness and utter transcendence of God over all of creation has always been an absolutely central affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. God as God—source, redeemer, and goal of all—is illimitable mystery who, while immanently present, cannot be measured or controlled. The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is a corollary of this divine transcendence. In essence, God’s unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total; hence we simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. (1984: 441)

Johnson’s gloss on (absolute) divine transcendence is controversial. But that is neither here nor there as far as the present point is concerned. Her understanding

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nick Trakakis’s contribution to the present volume and references therein.

of the *tradition* is entirely typical,<sup>7</sup> whereas Schellenberg is committed to the first three sentences of the quoted paragraph being fundamentally mistaken. His unqualified contrast between the personal God of the tradition and an incomprehensible deity presupposes the following broad theological claim:

- T4. The Christian tradition as such is committed to an understanding of God's personal attributes (love, justice, etc.) that straightforwardly conflicts with the claim that God is absolutely transcendent.

T4 might indeed be true, but, at best, it will be extremely controversial. This is due partly to the fact that there are diverse understandings of 'absolutely transcendent' in the tradition, not all of which are identical to Schellenberg's (or Johnson's, for that matter). But it is also due to the fact that there are diverse understandings within the tradition of the nature of divine love, justice, and other personal attributes. Thus, T4 cannot simply be taken for granted in an argument that relies heavily on a particular understanding of God's personal attributes en route to the conclusion that the God of traditional Christianity does not exist.

Schellenberg might insist that even if T4 is false on some precisifications, at least the following claim (which replaces the term 'absolutely transcendent' with Schellenberg's own particular understanding of absolute transcendence) is true:

- T5. The Christian tradition as such is committed to an understanding of God's personal attributes that straightforwardly conflicts with the claim that familiar predicates like 'is just' and 'is loving' neither univocally nor analogically apply to God.

But T5 will also be extremely controversial. For many theologians will want to distinguish between analogy and metaphor, and will want to say that claims like "God is loving" and "God is just" are true or apt metaphors rather than univocal or analogical truths. Thus, again, insofar as Schellenberg's target is the God of traditional Christianity, T4 and T5 cannot simply be taken for granted; they stand in need of substantial defense.

But suppose we grant the truth of T5. Suppose we furthermore allow, as I think we must in order for Elizabeth Johnson's understanding of the tradition to be genuinely uncontroversial, that the claim that God is *utterly* or *absolutely* transcendent admits of interpretations that are fully consistent with the claim that familiar predicates like "is loving" apply analogically or even univocally to God. Let us also insist, as Schellenberg must, given the way in which he defends his premises, on the legitimacy of the method of perfect being theology as way of discovering truths about God. Should we then agree that, despite the centrality of divine transcendence to the Christian tradition, the doctrine has no bearing on the premises of the Schellenberg problem? I think that we should not, and this largely for methodological reasons. In the remainder of this section I explain why.

Commitment to the method of perfect being theology is, first and foremost, commitment both to the thesis that God is a perfect being and to the viability of relying on at least some of our intuitions about perfection—e.g., about what it would

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed, and extremely useful, survey of the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility from the patristic period on through the Reformation, see Bavinck 2004: 36 - 41.

take for a being to be perfectly loving, or perfectly knowledgeable—as a means for arriving at further true claims about God. Importantly, it is no part of perfect being theology to suppose that this method is perfectly reliable, or that intuitions about perfection are evidentially superior to or even on a par with the claims of scripture as evidence about what God is like. Nor is it any part of perfect being theology to suppose that the thesis that *God is perfect* (or any other claim about God) can be known independently of divine revelation. One can, I believe, deploy the method of perfect being theology even within Barthian constraints, affirming that God is known, independently of revelation, only by God, that unaided human cognitive activity is inadequate to the task of arriving at substantive theological truths, and that “[n]o one has ever said, or can say, of himself...what God is; God is inexpressible.... He is, therefore, visible only to faith and can be attested only by faith.” (Barth 1957: 190. Cf. the distinction between ontotheology and “theo-ontology” in Vanhoozer 2010: 104.)

The import of all of this is as follows. One *can*, as a perfect being theologian, start with the thesis that God is perfectly loving or that God is a perfect parent and rely on one’s intuitions about love in general or about parental love in particular to arrive at conclusions like T1 – T3. In doing so, one would then very naturally attenuate one’s understanding of divine transcendence (or other divine attributes) in light of one’s understanding of divine love or divine parenthood. But that is just *one way* of deploying the method. Alternatively, one might start with the thesis that God is transcendent (or with other theses that lead via the method of perfect being theology to the conclusion that God is transcendent) and allow one’s understanding of divine transcendence to shape one’s understanding of divine love and divine parenthood. Moreover, in taking this alternative approach, one need not abandon the idea that divine love is analogous to human love in general or to parental love in particular; but one might well endorse very different views from Schellenberg about the *extent* to which these loves are analogous, or about which features of human love or human parenthood are most salient for understanding the nature and attributes of God.

The alternative approach just described is not merely hypothetical; it, or something very much like it, has dominated the Christian tradition. The personal God of *traditional* Christianity has, for many of the most important and influential theologians throughout history, been the transcendent, simple, immutable, and *a se* God of classical theism. The idea that these are non-negotiable divine attributes has traditionally been seen to be one of the results of the method of perfect being theology, and it has exerted enormous influence both on the conceptions of divine love that are to be found in the tradition and also on the conceptions of what it might look like to enter into unitive, loving relationship with God.

In the work of theologians who lay emphasis on transcendence as a divine attribute, divine love toward creatures is commonly understood not as the homey yearning of a human parent for an explicitly communicative and mutually reassuring relationship with her child, but rather simply as God’s *goodness* toward creation, God’s *willing* the good for particular creatures, God’s use of creation for good purposes, God’s grounding and illuminating creaturely goodness, or some



combination of these.<sup>8</sup> Some of these theologians seem to eschew talk of divine desire as a component of divine love altogether.<sup>9</sup> Others identify the desire(s) involved in divine love either as a desire for the good of human creatures (or creation generally), or a desire for union with human creatures, or both. But even those who identify the desire for union as a component of divine love typically do not envision such union as something that God longs to have with every human being under just any conditions whatsoever, nor do they envision it as something that requires rationally supported belief in God. Instead, union with God is typically seen as something that God brings about in a person only after she has directed her *will and desire* toward God, apparently wholly independently of the degree or epistemic status of her belief in God.<sup>10</sup>

In the writings of the apophatic mystics—among the most important works in the Christian tradition on the subject of just how human beings might achieve union with God—the concept of contemplative union seems to stand in for the notion of a personal relationship with God. But the idea that this might regularly, reliably, or essentially involve anything like *explicit, reciprocal interaction* is largely foreign to that tradition. Instead, achieving contemplative union is commonly construed as mainly a matter of bringing one’s will into conformity with the will of God. To be sure, most of these authors envision the process of attaining contemplative union as one in which God sometimes causes within a person intense and vivid religious experiences and provides various “consolations” in prayer. But the experiences in question are generally not seen as the ultimate goal of our quest for union with God, nor are they even typically seen as favors that ought to be explicitly sought for their own sake.<sup>11</sup>

Broadly speaking, then, in the work of those theologians who lay heavy emphasis on God’s transcendence, aseity, simplicity, and immutability, we find no substantial support for the idea that God might have anything like a bias toward mutual reciprocal interaction, or that a relationship with God would have to be what Schellenberg would think of as mutually reciprocally interactive, or that empirical

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius c1988: 79 - 84; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.31.34; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.20; and the discussion of divine love in the work of John of the Cross in Williams 2014. See also Bavinck 2004: 215 - 16, and Peckham 2015, esp. Ch. 2. Cf. also Anselm’s treatment of divine mercy (*Proslogion* 8), according to which God counts as merciful simply by virtue of the fact that God *acts* as merciful people do rather than by virtue of possessing any of the characteristic emotions or desires of mercy. Similar things have been said, mutatis mutandis, about divine love throughout the history of Christianity. (Thanks to Jordan Wessling for this last point. Thanks also to Jordan Wessling and Peter Martens for the references to Augustine and Aquinas.)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.31.34; Peckham 2015: 66, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.20; Pseudo-Dionysius c1988: 81 - 82; Anonymous 1981, sec. 34; Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* IV.1.7 (Rodriguez and Kavanaugh 1980: 319) and John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk 2, Ch 5.3 (Kavanaugh 1988: 89) See also Muller 2003: 561 - 69, esp. 564 - 65, 567.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, IV.2.9 (Rodriguez and Kavanaugh 1980: 326), and John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* 1.5 (Kavanaugh 1988: 173 - 5). For John of the Cross, such consolations seem to be little more than an impediment and distraction that one must hope to overcome in pursuing union with God.

and a priori evidence might be a necessary condition for such a relationship.<sup>12</sup> Not only this, but when we look to the details of what these theologians have had to say about divine love and union with God, Schellenberg's ideas about the nature divine love and about the nature of "personal relationship" with God are, at best, an uneasy fit.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that such authors *never* speak of God as relating to human beings in a mode of explicit, mutually reciprocal interaction. Aquinas, for example, seems to think that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit involves (or can involve) something like relationship in that mode.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, John of the Cross seems to think that the highest mode of divine presence to believers involves at least what Schellenberg would call *explicit* relationship.<sup>15</sup> Rather, my point is that, in contrast to Schellenberg, none of these authors seem to think that God counts as perfectly loving only if God has a *bias* toward this sort of relationship and brings it about that everyone can have this sort of relationship with God just by willing it. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is available only to believers; and it was surely as obvious to Aquinas as it is to us that not even every believer has what Schellenberg would call an explicit, mutually interactive relationship with God. Similarly, the highest mode of divine presence is, according to John of the Cross, available only to those who have devoted a lot of effort toward progressing along the route to contemplative union; but there is no indication in his works that God counts as less than perfectly loving to those who do not—and, in their present state, *cannot*, even if they desire it—enjoy that mode of presence with God.

But what about the force of the parent analogy in its own right? The idea that God is our heavenly Father is a scriptural and creedal mainstay of the Christian tradition; and if God is perfect and a Father, then God is a perfect Father. Thus, if we are prepared to grant (as I think that many of us would) that *perfect parental love* is much like what Schellenberg takes it to be, one might very well wonder what would justify leaving that analogy and our intuitions about parental love in the dust as we theologize about the nature of divine love.<sup>16</sup> The answer, in short, is that, although

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<sup>12</sup> See Peckham 2015, esp. chs. 2 – 3, for a brief survey of different conceptions of divine love in the history of Christian theology and for detailed discussion of what he calls the "transcendent-voluntarist model", which develops a conception of divine love within constraints imposed by an emphasis on divine transcendence.

<sup>13</sup> In discussing Augustine's conception of divine love, for example, John Peckham writes: "Augustine's ontology...prohibits a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between God and creatures." (2015: 66)

<sup>14</sup> On this, see Stump 2011: 36 - 39.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Payne 1990: 53 - 54.

<sup>16</sup> One interesting answer, which I will not pursue in detail here, is that the force of the parent analogy needs to be understood, and perhaps somewhat mitigated, in light of other scriptural imagery apparently aimed at illuminating the nature of divine love for creatures. For example, God is portrayed (e.g., in the divine speeches of the book of Job) as showing loving concern for non-human animals; but presumably God's love toward those creatures would not have to involve a quest for personal relationship as Schellenberg perceives it. Likewise, God's concern for human beings is communicated in the New Testament not only via parent analogies but also via shepherd analogies, which themselves lend no support whatsoever to the idea that divine love for humans would involve a bias toward explicit, reciprocally interactive relationship. (Thanks to Helen DeCruz and Rebecca Chan for suggestion along these lines.)

the claim that God is our heavenly Father is entrenched in the tradition, and although the claim that God is our Mother also has a surprisingly important place in the tradition, these claims have not nearly always been seen as telling us anything important about divine biases toward relationship with human beings in general.

According to Peter Widdicombe (1994: 255), for example, in the writings of Athanasius, Origen, and other Patristic authors, the fatherhood of the first person of the trinity is understood in terms of his being “the unoriginate first principle,” the creator of all things, an “inherently generative” deity, and “the fount of the Godhead”. Moreover, he writes:

... It is notable that Origen and Athanasius, and the other Fathers discussed in this study, did not support their picture of God as Father either by drawing on the biological or on the psychological and sociological dimensions of human fatherhood. Contemporary ideas about the family and about adoption play no role in their discussions of the divine being or of the Father's relation to us. (255)

Widdicombe makes this remark at the beginning of a discussion of how the views of Origen, Athanasius, and other church Fathers about the Fatherhood of God might be brought to bear on contemporary controversies about the *patriarchal* assumptions that might be involved in calling God ‘Father’ rather than ‘Mother’ or ‘Parent’ or something else entirely. But what he says here bears just as much on the question whether biblical, creedal, or historical theological affirmations of the fatherhood of God presuppose anything about the distinctively parental nature of divine love. In a word, they do not, at least not in the writings of the Patristics.<sup>17</sup>

It is also worth noting that even when scriptural affirmations of divine fatherhood do seem to tell us something about the nature of God’s love for human beings, it is almost always God’s love for *believers*, or for *Israel*, or for others who already believe in and in some sense worship God (e.g., ‘those who fear him’ in Psalm 103:13) that is in view in these verses. There is little, if any, scriptural support for the claim that God is a father to *everyone*; thus, even if perfect parental love were as Schellenberg envisions it, one would be hard pressed to find support from scriptural affirmations of divine fatherhood for anything as strong as T1 or S6.

In light of all this, I am inclined to think that anyone looking to support general claims about traditional Christianity’s understanding of divine love by appeal to parental imagery found in the tradition would do better to draw on the theology of divine *motherhood* that developed and flourished in the high Middle Ages. Unlike paternal imagery for God, maternal imagery in theological writings has often been used in a way that is clearly designed to exploit for theological use human understandings of parental love. Still, such imagery seems not to have been employed to convey anything like the idea that divine love manifests a bias toward explicit, reciprocal interaction. Rather, its most central uses were to convey by way

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<sup>17</sup> But not just the Patristics. Bavinck, for example, seems to reduce God’s fatherhood to his unbegottenness (2004: 306) and says explicitly that the name of ‘Father’ is “not a metaphor derived from the earth and attributed to God. Exactly the opposite is true: fatherhood on earth is but a distant and vague reflection of the fatherhood of God.” (307) He cites Eph 3:14-15 in support of this claim.

of maternal metaphors facts about how God nourishes us through scripture and the teachings of the church, facts about divine compassion, and facts about human dependence upon God. (Bynum 1982: 146 - 69)

My point is *not* that there is no precedent at all in the Christian tradition for thinking that the fact that God is our Father (or Mother) tells us something about the nature of God's love for human beings. Rather, my point is simply that certain very prominent and influential understandings of the significance of paternal and maternal imagery as applied to God lend no support whatsoever to T1 - T3. Likewise, the main point of my earlier discussion about divine love and unitive knowledge of God was not to say that the Christian tradition speaks unequivocally against T1 - T3, but rather that the tradition neither unequivocally *endorses* them nor even relegates their denials to the outer fringes.

Let me be clear, then, about how the response to the Schellenberg problem offered in this paper differs from other responses in the literature. Most responses to the Schellenberg problem—at least those that focus on S2 rather than other premises of the argument—have operated with a specific conception of God (usually Schellenberg's) and have tried to find some reason that might justify God thus conceived in permitting the occurrence of reasonable non-belief. What I have done instead is to argue that the whole problem is predicated on a theology that is not part of traditional Christianity and is, furthermore, an uneasy fit with commitment to one of the historically major tenets of traditional Christianity—namely, the view that God is transcendent. In short, the theological credentials of T1 - T3 are shaky at best. Although they are not outright denied by the Christian tradition, they can hardly be regarded as commitments of traditional Christian theology. Insofar as S2 and S6 depend on them, the same is true for those theses as well.

As I mentioned earlier, Schellenberg himself shows some concern for the theological credentials of S2; but he treats the topic only briefly and, interestingly, the theological case he offers rests not on insights about divine love that are common to the theistic religions, but rather more on claims about the nature of Christian salvation. He says that his case for the conclusion that theologians as such are committed to S2 is summed up “nicely” by the following quotation from Grace Jantzen:

Salvation is not (or at least not primarily) about our future destiny but about our relationship to God and the gradual transforming effect of that relationship in our lives.... If religious experience is centrally the sense of the loving presence of God, gradually helping people to reorient and integrate their lives in accordance with their love for him, is this not precisely what salvation is? Salvation must, surely, be religious experience if anything ever is: not in the sense of being a single climactic experience...but in the sense of a gradual opening of all life, all of experience to the wholemaking love of God. (Jantzen 1987: 128 - 29, quoted in Schellenberg 1993: 29)

Schellenberg follows this quotation immediately with the remark, “Hence theologians, too, seem committed to the affirmation of [S2].” (29) But, of course, that is true (of the Christian tradition, anyway) only if the Christian tradition generally is on board with the claim that salvation is religious experience, and that the religious

experience that salvation consists in is something that God's love would lead God to provide for everyone at every moment of his or her life. Not even Jantzen seems to affirm the latter of these two claims; and, as is readily seen from my earlier discussion of what the apophatic mystics have to say about unitive knowledge of God, the conjunction of these two claims is neither an unequivocal affirmation of the Christian tradition nor even a clear majority view.

### 3.

I noted earlier that Schellenberg regards S2 as a *conceptual truth* about divine love. Although he does not say it explicitly, he pretty clearly also takes S6 and T2 to be conceptual truths as well. If he is right, then all that I have said in section 2 might seem irrelevant to the Schellenberg problem, for the Christian tradition would then be committed to S2 and S6 *regardless* of what anyone has had to say about the nature of divine love or about what it might be like to enter into a unitive relationship with God.

But here again the centrality of divine transcendence to the Christian tradition is vitally important. For one very plausible consequence of even a very modest doctrine of divine transcendence is that we have no revelation-independent concept of divine love. There may well be purely conceptual truths about creaturely love, and about perfected creaturely love; but insofar as God is transcendent, there is good reason to think that it will always be at least partly an exegetical or systematic-theological question (rather than a matter of mere conceptual analysis) to what extent divine love would resemble a hypothetically perfected creaturely love.

Karl Barth, toward the beginning of his discussion of the perfections of divine freedom, makes roughly the same point in a very general way. Having already asserted that divine hiddenness (which, for him, is equivalent to divine incomprehensibility) is "the first word of the knowledge of God instituted by God himself", (1957: 183) Barth writes:

The recognition of divine attributes cannot be taken to mean that for us God is subsumed under general notions, under the loftiest ideas of our knowledge of creaturely reality, and that He participates in its perfections. It is not that we recognize and acknowledge the infinity, justice, wisdom, etc. of God because we already know from other sources what all this means and we apply it to God in an eminent sense, thus fashioning for ourselves an image of God after the pattern of our image of the world, i.e., in the last analysis after our own image.... God is subordinate to no idea in which He can be conceived as rooted or by which He can be properly measured. There are not first of all power, goodness, knowledge, will, etc. in general, and then in particular God also as one of the subjects to whom all these things accrue as a predicate. (Barth 1957: 333 -334)

The idea here and in the surrounding context is that our knowledge of attributes like wisdom, power, goodness, *and love* is subordinate to what we learn by way of revelation, rather than the other way around. This has not been a minority view in

the tradition; nor is it a minority view among contemporary theologians. But, if it is correct, it has as a straightforward consequence the claim that we have no revelation-independent concept of divine love; and if *that* is correct, then S2 and S6 are conceptual truths about divine love only if the concept of divine love that they presuppose is one that is somehow grounded in divine revelation. I have no argument for the conclusion that this is *not* the case; but neither has Schellenberg done the exegetical or systematic-theological work that would be required to show that it *is* the case.

Suppose I am right about all of this. What conclusions should we draw about the significance of the Schellenberg problem? Even if the Schellenberg problem fails as an argument against the existence of the God of theism in general, or as an argument against the existence of the God of traditional Christian theism in particular, it still poses a threat to belief in a God about whom Schellenberg's theological assumptions are true. Many theists do accept those assumptions; so, although it is an attack on a straw deity if the God whose existence it targets is supposed to be the God of theism or of traditional Christianity, the Schellenberg problem can easily be reframed as an argument with a real, definite target. I suspect that Schellenberg's God has some claim to being the God of certain strands of contemporary American evangelicalism. Thus, in light of the arguments of the present paper, one might reasonably see the Schellenberg problem as a referendum on *that* concept of God, and as a general challenge to rethink the biblical and systematic-theological warrants for thinking about divine love and about personal relationship with God in a way that privileges parent analogies understood in light of contemporary (probably also predominantly American) ideals of parenthood. For the most part, respondents to the Schellenberg problem have tacitly agreed with Schellenberg in thinking that the salient questions about the nature of divine love and personal relationship can mostly be settled a priori rather than by taking a more systematic- or historical- theological approach. The arguments of the present paper are meant primarily to pose a challenge to that way of thinking.

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