

GOD AND CHRISTIANITY ACCORDING TO SWINBURNE

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Abstract. In this paper I discuss critically Richard Swinburne's concept of God, which I find to be incoherent, and his understanding of Christianity, which I find to be based on a pre-critical use of the New Testament.

Richard Swinburne has written extensively in both the philosophy of religion and latterly philosophical and biblical theology. In this paper I discuss a central theme in each. The difficulty in assessing Richard Swinburne's philosophy of religion, and the philosophical theology into which it merges, is that it is spread over a number of books, several now in revised second editions, so that it would definitely require a whole book to discuss it fully. Probably one day someone will do that, but the present article is much less ambitious. I want to look briefly and critically at Swinburne's concept of God, and at his understanding of Christianity.

The most obvious feature of Richard Swinburne's approach to the philosophy of religion is its highly abstract nature. He is concerned above all with religious beliefs or propositions, the probability of their being true and the rationality of believing them. Religious beliefs are beliefs about 'transcendent reality, including beliefs about whether or not there is a God or an after-life, beliefs about what properties God has (what God is like), and what actions He has performed'; and we want 'to have beliefs on these matters as probably true as we can get'¹. In this he is part of a very prominent contemporary group of philosophers of religion which also includes Alvin Plantinga and the many influenced by him.

¹ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 83.

They all also happen to have in common a presupposed highly conservative Christian conviction, though this is not something that I am concerned with here.

Since Swinburne has referred to one of my own proposals, I can first illustrate the excessively propositional nature of his approach from the way in which he summarises my position: ‘that the ways of living commended by the major religions are of equal moral worth, and that the creeds of these religions are best understood as expressing the same eternal truth with the aid of different myths’². It is his propositional approach that leads Swinburne to the notion of ‘the same eternal truth’, an idea that fundamentally misrepresents my position. My ‘pluralistic hypothesis’ is that the major world religions are very different human responses, formed in different culturally conditioned human terms, to the same ultimate transcendent reality, which can be called the Ultimate Reality or the Real. This is in itself transcategorical, beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems; and the beliefs of the different religions describe their own different experiences of the impact upon them of the universal presence of the Real. My point here is that, for me, it is not a *truth* but a *reality* that is eternal and ultimate. It is only when we come to particular doctrines that myths come into the picture. I suggest, for example, that the notion of divine incarnation is metaphorical and that the Christian doctrine of divine incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth is therefore mythological, a myth being an extended and often highly developed metaphor, often developed into a story.

GOD

Swinburne says that (1) ‘God is a personal being – that is, in some sense *a person*. By a person I mean an individual with basic powers (to act intentionally), purposes, and beliefs’³. Further, says Swinburne, God is a unique individual, because he is (2) omnipotent – ‘he can bring about as a basic action any event he chooses’⁴. (3) He is omniscient: ‘whatever

² Ibid., v.

³ Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 4, italics in original.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

is true, God knows that it is true⁵. And (4) he is '*perfectly free*, in that desires never exert causal influence on him at all⁶. And (5) eternal: 'he exists at each moment of unending time⁷. In addition, God is (6) bodiless⁸, and (7) omnipresent⁹. Finally, (8) God is perfectly good¹⁰. This, in brief, is Swinburne's concept of God.

Some comments on some of these proposals. (1) God is in some sense a person. But in what sense? Surely, if this is to mean anything clear and distinct it must mean that God is literally a person. So Swinburne must mean that God is a person like ourselves, except for being infinite in power, knowledge, extension in time, and except also for being perfectly free and omnipresent and good. As Swinburne says, 'God is supposed to be like us, in having basic powers, beliefs, and purposes – but ones very different from ours'¹¹. But does the idea of an infinite person make sense? We know what it is to be a person because we are ourselves persons. And to be a person is to be a particular person, distinct from other persons, each with our own boundaries. When two people are interacting with each other as persons, this is only because they have their own individual borders – otherwise they would not be two distinct persons. In other words, personhood is essentially finite, allowing for the existence of other persons. And so an infinite person is a self-contradiction. God cannot be both a person and infinite.

How might Swinburne reply to this? Possibly like this: God, the infinite person, allows finite persons to exist in a created realm, distinct from himself. So God is infinite, and we are finite. But this would not do. If God is omnipresent he must be present throughout the created realm. There cannot be both an omnipresent God and an area in which he is not present. And if, in the created realm, God interacts with finite persons (as recorded in the Bible), then both God and the other persons must have their individual borders. So Swinburne would have to defend the notion of an infinite person in some other way.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 7 (*italics in original*).

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

(4) Why does God's freedom require that desires have no causal influence on his actions? It is part of Swinburne's definition of a person that a person can act intentionally and purposefully, though, as he also says, 'God acts only in so far as he sees reason for acting'¹². But what sort of reason might God have? Surely, only that he desires something to be the case. For example, God, in his goodness, decides to create a universe. He decides to create because, being good, he wants, i.e. desires there to be a created universe. Further, God might desire to love and to be loved and then decide whether to act on this desire by creating beings for him to love and to love him. But why would he ever do this unless he desires it? Surely if God is never caused by desires to act, he will never act. A perfect freedom which consists in being influenced by no desires would be a perfectly empty freedom. Reason without desires which one can decide whether or not to fulfil would never lead to anything. The picture of God as desireless reason creating a universe is incoherent. Without the divine desire to create there would be no creation.

However at this point Swinburne will perhaps say that God creates because it is good that he should create, and God always does what is good, in this case supererogatively good, i.e. good but not obligatory. But if creating is not required of God, then he does so because he wants to. There must be innumerable good but not obligatory things that God could have done but has not done – such as creating a different but equally good universe, or a million such, or within this universe, additional layers of angelic beings. So why has God done some but not other of the good things that he might decide to create? Must it not be because he prefers, i.e. wishes, to create what he has chosen to create?

(3) 'Whatever is true, God knows that it is true'. It is propositions that are true or false. So whatever propositions are true, God knows that they are true. But does God really think in propositions? Is this not a gratuitous assumption, arising from a presupposed anthropomorphic conception of God? It seems to me quite arbitrary, a picture of God as the Great Analytical Philosopher – created in the human philosopher's own image. Indeed, a great deal of Swinburne's thought about God rests upon this anthropomorphic image of God.

Further, in ordinary life, whilst we do know many propositions, our primary awareness is of things, both individually and, more usually, as

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

components of situations. When we see a table or a tree or a human body or a crowded street, or anything else, we see it, rather than 'knowing that it is true that there is a table'. Seeing is a very complex process, but nevertheless it is perception, not a knowing of propositions. And so God's omniscience will consist in his being simultaneously aware of *everything*, not primarily in his knowing that hundreds of millions of propositions are true.

(5) God is eternal in that he exists at each moment of unending time. It would seem, then, that time is co-ultimate with God: time exists unendingly independently of God, who, as eternal, exists throughout it. For it is an essential attribute of God that he is eternal. So we have two ultimates: God and Time. On this view of time it would even be possible for time to exist without there being a God – though because he has necessary existence, this is not the case. So there cannot be a God without there also being Time, and Time is, like God, an ultimate brute fact.

There seems also to be, for Swinburne, a third ultimate in addition to God and Time. For, Swinburne says, God is perfectly good. 'His being perfectly good follows from his being perfectly free and omniscient. A perfectly free person will inevitably do what he believes to be (overall) the best action and never do what he believes to be an (overall) bad action'¹³. Socrates asked, do the gods love an action because it is good, or is it good because the gods love it? Translating this into monotheistic terms, Swinburne's answer is that God does what is good because it is good, rather than its being good because God commands it. In other words, morality is independent of God. For, 'if there are moral truths – truths about what is morally good and bad – an omniscient person will know what they are'¹⁴. And so, he says, 'I side with [Aquinas and Scotus] in holding that there are moral truths independent of the will of God. God can only enforce them, not alter them.'¹⁵ It follows that God can have moral obligations: 'God before he creates any other persons has no obligations, though it is a supererogatory good act for him to create many other persons including humans. If he does create them, he will then incur certain obligations towards them. Exactly what those are may be disputed, but the Christian tradition has normally maintained, for

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

example, that, if God makes promises to us, he is obliged to keep them¹⁶.

The third ultimate is thus morality – God, Time, and Morality. One is reminded at this point of A.N. Whitehead's metaphysical system, in which there are also three ultimates: God, Creativity, and Matter. This in turn reminds us that Swinburne is (perhaps without being aware of it) in the business of building his own speculative metaphysical system, and in this respect is unlike most of the other contemporary analytical philosophers I mentioned earlier.

Turning now to the probability of God's existence, Swinburne says that 'If, as theism maintains, there is a God who is essentially eternally omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free, then he will be the ultimate brute fact which explains everything else'¹⁷. In the light of Swinburne's own explanations we must amend this. According to him, there are three ultimate brute facts. For God cannot be eternal without Time, since to be eternal is to exist throughout all time. And he cannot be omniscient without Morality, since to be omniscient is to know all true propositions, including the truths of morality – such as that it is a supererogatory good deed to create other persons. The ultimate brute fact is thus a complex of God, Time and Morality.

However Swinburne's central argument for there being a God is that God is the simplest possible explanation of everything else. 'It is extraordinary that there should exist anything at all. Surely the most natural state of affairs is simply nothing: no universe, no god, nothing. But there is something . . . If we can explain the many bits of the universe by one simple being which keeps them in existence, we should do so – even if inevitably we cannot explain the existence of that simple being'¹⁸.

There are two problems here. The first is that, according to Swinburne's Christianity God is not simple but is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and obviously a divine trinity is not maximally simple. But even if we waive this – though I don't see how Swinburne can waive it – God may be simple in himself, but not as the ultimate brute fact which explains everything else. For he cannot exist except as part of a complex of God, Time and Morality. This complex is less complex than the cre-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-9.

ated universe, which is virtually infinitely complex. So it may be argued that we should explain the more complex by the less complex. But this is a much weaker argument than the one Swinburne intends – that the ultimate brute fact is simple and thus provides the simplest possible explanation of the universe.

Further, if it is right to look for the simplest available brute fact, this is not the complex of God, Time and Morality. According to the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe it began with the densest possible particle of matter, something as simple as matter can be. It seems that even this cannot have been absolutely simple. For the infinite complexity that came about with the evolution of matter through immense periods of time required some slight imbalance or complexity in the expanding universe, which must have been prefigured in the original particle. But that particle will nevertheless have been considerably less complex than the God-Time-Morality complex. So is not the original particle at least as good a candidate for the position of ultimate brute fact? Or indeed an even better one?

In short, it seems to me that Swinburne's argument for God – whose existence turns out to involve the co-existence of Time and Morality – is far from persuasive. If the Big Bang theory is correct, the original particle, and the universe which it has produced, is much more likely to be itself the ultimate brute fact. But perhaps the Big Bang theory is mistaken and the universe consists instead in a beginningless series of expansions and contractions. In that case the universe, in the enlarged sense of this oscillating series, will be the ultimate brute fact. But neither of these possibilities takes us beyond the physical universe to a God.

I conclude that Swinburne's concept of God is full of serious problems, and his basic argument for God's existence no more probative than all the other 'theistic proofs.'

CHRISTIANITY

For Swinburne, Christianity, like other religions, is a set of beliefs, a creed, together with a life style.¹⁹ By a creed, in this context, he does not mean

¹⁹ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 161.

a formula – such, for example, as the Nicene creed – but a coherent body of beliefs.

In an important chapter of *Faith and Reason* (the second edition) Swinburne compares the creeds of different religions and concludes that the Christian creed is the most likely to be true. Comparing Christianity with the other ‘Abrahamic’ faiths of Judaism and Islam, he points out that the main difference between their understandings of God is the affirmation or denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. He then considers the probability of this. He claims that there is an *a priori* probability that a God would be ‘tripersonalized’:

I believe that there are good a priori arguments in favour of the doctrine of the Trinity. But they were not available until that doctrine had become discussable by being part of the Christian Creed – they were, to my mind, first put forward in a satisfactory way by Richard of St Victor in the twelfth century. But they are arguments of some subtlety, and all Christians before Richard and almost all Christians after Richard needed revelation...to assure them of the truth of the doctrine.²⁰

He refers in a footnote to his discussion of the a priori argument in his *The Christian God*. But I cannot in this article pursue his thought through other parts of his oeuvre. So at this point I simply note that he claims that there are good a priori arguments for the trinitarian nature of God although he does not present them here.

Swinburne then proceeds to the claimed revelation in Christ. What, he asks, is the a priori probability that a good and loving God would become incarnate on earth? It has often been argued (by many writers, including myself²¹) that the properties of humanity and deity are such that they cannot be combined at one time in a single individual: no one person can be, at the same time, omnipotent but not omnipotent, omniscient but not omniscient, omnipresent but not omnipresent, infinitely good but not infinitely good, creator of the universe but not creator of the universe. But, as Swinburne says, ‘If Christianity is to be taken seriously, it has to be shown first that it is logically possible that God should

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

²¹ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

become incarnate,' referring in a footnote again to his *The Christian God*, and continues 'Let us suppose that that is shown'²².

He does however list 'three reasons why, in virtue of his perfect goodness, God could be expected to become Incarnate:

to make available atonement for our sins; to identify with our sufferings; and to reveal truths to us. How likely is it that God would become Incarnate for these reasons? A good God would certainly want to forgive the sins of His creatures, but He would also want them to take these sins seriously by asking God to accept a serious act of reparation for those sins. Yet every human has sinned and owes so much of his life to God anyway in gratitude for God creating him, and is inclined not to fulfil even minimum obligations. So none of us is well situated to make a proper reparation to God for our sins, let alone the sins of others. A good God might well be expected to help us by Himself making the atonement available . . . through coming to Earth and living a perfect human life. . . . We may reasonably think that, given the extent to which God (if there is a God) makes humans suffers, albeit for good reasons, the point has come where it is not merely good but obligatory that He should share that suffering. If that is so, then (since a perfectly good God will always fulfil his obligations), it follows that it is not merely probable but inevitable that God should become Incarnate for this reason. . . .²³

All this seems to me extremely dubious. If a good God wants to forgive our sins, why should he require 'a serious act of reparation for those sins'? If he wants to forgive us, let him do so. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Heavenly Father . . . Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have wronged us'. No act of reparation is expected, no atoning sacrifice required. To forgive those who have wronged us is itself a life-changing, a redeeming, act. So I find no force in Swinburne's first reason for God to become incarnate.

The second reason, to share our human suffering, is more plausible. Certainly Jesus suffered in many ways, and particularly in his excruciatingly painful death on the cross. But how does this benefit us? Swinburne would say that it shows us that, although suffering is inevitable in the world as God has created it, God sympathises with us and shows this by visibly sharing our human suffering. And we know this because we know that Jesus, who was crucified, was God incarnate. But who are the 'we'

²² Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 235.

²³ *Ibid.*, 235-6.

who know this? Seriously believing Christians who are comforted by the thought of God's suffering in Jesus constitute a very small minority of mankind. (By no means all the millions of inhabitants of officially Christian countries can count as seriously believing Christians). But this is the sort of concrete consideration that Swinburne does not notice, dealing as he does in pure theory and logic. So if God really wishes to share our human suffering, it is not nearly enough for him to become incarnate in only one individual, Jesus, at one time. If incarnation is his chosen method, he would need to become incarnate in a vast number of individuals in every part of the world. But Christianity does not teach this, but on the contrary would regard it as a heresy.

Swinburne's third reason for the Incarnation is to reveal truths to us. He does not say 'to reveal new truths', presumably because he knows that Jesus did not reveal any new truths: his teaching about God and his moral teaching, were already present in Judaism, and the Golden Rule, to do to others as you would have them do to you, is taught in all the major religions. So there was no need to become incarnate to teach what was already known within the people within whom he became incarnate, or to give moral teaching that had already been given in the religions that began before Christianity. So this is at best a very weak reason for divine incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth.

In arguing that the Christian creed is very likely to be true (and more likely than all other creeds) Swinburne now appeals to the biblical evidence. Here he is at his weakest. He treats the New Testament evidence selectively, ignoring everything that tells against his desired conclusion. Speaking of Jesus, he says:

There is evidence to be expected if he founded a Church and taught that his life and death provided atonement for our sins – for example his saying that his life was a 'ransom for many'. There is some evidence of a kind to be expected if He believed himself to be God, and some evidence of a kind to be expected if the teaching of the later Church about this and other matters was a continuation of the teaching of Jesus.²⁴

There is *some* evidence of all this; but it is heavily outweighed, in the opinion of very many New Testament scholars, by the counter evidence.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

The evidence that Jesus founded a Church is in the passage in Matthew's gospel in which he says to Peter, 'you are Peter (*petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church' (Matt. 16: 16). But there are two reasons to doubt the authenticity of this verse. One is that Jesus expected the end of the present Age, when God would intervene to establish his kingdom on earth, to happen quite soon: 'there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power (Mark 9: 3); 'There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom' (Matt. 16: 28); 'this generation will not pass away till all these things take place' (Matt. 24: 34); 'there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God' (Matt. 16: 28); and we see from Paul's earlier to his later letters how central this expectation was for the early church, but gradually faded as time passed and the end failed to come. But if the End was to come soon there was no point in Jesus establishing a continuing organization, such as he seems to speak about in the first quote. The second reason is that this quote contains a pun in Greek – *petros* and *petra* – and Jesus did not speak Greek but Aramaic. And so it seems more likely that the part of the church headed by Peter created this saying to validate his leadership.

There is evidence in the saying Swinburne quotes that Jesus intended his death as a ransom (*lutron*) for many. Ransom was a poignant idea in the ancient world. Great numbers of people were slaves because their nation had been conquered, its inhabitants becoming slaves. And to be ransomed was a supreme good. So ransoming was a powerful metaphor for deliverance – in the case of Jesus' teaching, deliverance from the power of demons, of sin and of death. But taking the metaphor literally the church asked to whom was the ransom paid? Origen gave the accepted reply: it could not be to God, so it was to the devil; Jesus' death was part of a deal with the devil to free humanity. (We see this again in C.S. Lewis' Narnia story). So there is good reason to doubt whether this saying should be taken literally.

Jesus probably shared the widespread Jewish belief that the death of a martyr somehow benefited Israel and assumed that this would be true of his own death, which was brought about because of the Romans rulers' fear of a would-be messiah leading an uprising against them.

It should also be noted that the early church did not give the idea of atonement the place that it came to have much later. Thus the Apostles' creed (although the apostles had nothing to do with it, for it originated as the Old Roman Creed in the fourth century) affirms God almighty, and Christ Jesus, his only son, and the remission of sins – not specified further – and the Holy Ghost. The Nicene Creed, also fourth century, likewise affirms God, the Father all-sovereign, and Jesus Christ, Son of God, of one substance with the Father, and the remission of sins by baptism – but with no mention of Jesus' death as an atonement.

Did Jesus believe himself to be God? It is only in the very late gospel of John, written towards the end of the first century, that Jesus is depicted as consciously divine. In the earlier synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) he is a charismatic healer and preacher, a prophet in the Old Testament tradition. Further, the term 'son of God' did not have the meaning that it has come to have in Christian theology. It did not connote divinity. The ancient Hebrew kings were enthroned as 'son of God' – we have the enthronement formula in Psalm 2: 7: 'He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you"'. Indeed any outstandingly pious Jew could be called a son of God. So Jesus may well have been called a son of God in this metaphorical sense. But as Christian doctrine developed, the metaphorical son of God was transformed into the metaphysical God the Son, second Person of a divine Trinity. But the historical Jesus is reported to have taught, 'love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High' (Luke 6:36) – obviously in a metaphorical sense of 'sons'. Again, Jesus is reported to have said, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10: 18).

The evidence that Jesus did not teach that he was God is also evidence against the idea that the later teaching of the church about Jesus' divinity was a continuation of his own teaching. On the contrary, his teaching about God's love for us, and our call to love one another, were not central in most of the developing doctrines of the church, which were in second-order philosophical and theological language rather than first-order religious language.

Finally, returning to what I see as Swinburne's excessively intellectual and propositional approach, it should be noted that creeds, in his sense of belief systems, play a much smaller part in the religious life

than he seems to assume. For most practicing Jews the rituals are all-important, and propositional beliefs very much in the background. For most Buddhists, whilst there is a core of beliefs, their religion is much more a practice and an experience than a set of beliefs. The same is true of the various streams of Indian religion collectively labelled Hinduism. And for very many practicing Christians it is the rituals that are important. Indeed for some, the Quakers, beliefs are of little importance compared with the response in life to God's love: as their Advices and Queries says, 'Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way'.

Swinburne could of course reply to all this that he is doing philosophy of religion, which is necessarily a second order discipline. But in my opinion it should be a second-order discussion of religion itself in all its dimensions, not merely of belief systems, important though these also are.