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Book Review: “Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy” and “The Resurrection of God Incarnate”

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Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy, 2nd ed.

Swinburne Richard, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, 373 pp., \$50.00

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The Resurrection of God Incarnate

Swinburne Richard, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, 232 pp., \$40.00

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1. Introduction

Richard Swinburne is a prolific author and Christian apologist who, throughout a long teaching career and into retirement, has written books (some very technical) covering topics in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and especially the philosophy of religion. He sometimes attempts to add clarity and rigor to his arguments by providing estimates for probabilities in Bayes's theorem to engender posterior probability estimates for the hypothesis being defended in the book. We will consider central arguments in two of Swinburne's key works, the first editions of which were introduced over a span of twelve years: *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (1991) and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003).

After summarizing his central arguments in sections 2 and 3, I will focus on three weaknesses that are clearly exhibited in these books. We will see that, partly because of these weaknesses, Swinburne's estimates for the probabilities in Bayes's theorem are unreliable. Furthermore, I will show that Swinburne's hypothesis in his argument for the resurrection of God incarnate does not allow for a reasonable assessment of the resurrection hypothesis itself. While a working knowledge of Bayes's theorem is helpful, especially in section 7, it will be referred to sparingly throughout most of this review. I will introduce Bayes's theorem presently, and I will attempt to clarify its use via an example. The main weaknesses in Swinburne's arguments are addressed in sections 4–6 and can be appreciated without an understanding of Bayes's theorem.

In his book *The Existence of God* (hereafter *EG*), Swinburne produces a set of arguments that he believes makes a good probabilistic case for the existence of God—and not merely any god.¹ His God hypothesis relies on simplicity, as he understands it. It is simpler to posit that God's power and knowledge will be exhausted than it is to constrain one or both of these attributes arbitrarily (*EG*, 97). Since (he maintains) moral judgments have truth values and God would have no temptations to perform an immoral act, an omniscient being will know the moral facts and abide by them. So God is also morally perfect (*EG*, 105). While I will not discuss the merits of Swinburne's arguments in *EG* in this review, I will, for the sake of argument, accept his conclusion that the existence of a god of Swinburne's description is greater than fifty percent. Given Swinburne's clear and thorough discussion of Bayes's theorem in *EG*, I will also use *EG* as the resource for the following elucidation of the theorem.

In order to express his case with something like scientific precision, while also acknowledging that our subjective assessment of argument cogency precludes us from placing

¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

numerical values for the probabilities with exactitude, Swinburne frequently uses a version of Bayes's theorem. With P as *probability of*, h the hypothesis under consideration, e as *evidence*, k as *relevant background knowledge*, \sim as *not* and $|$ as *given*, we can enter our numerical estimates for the probabilities and run our calculation using Swinburne's choice for expressing Bayes's theorem:

$$P(h|e\&k) = \frac{P(e|h\&k)P(h|k)}{P(e|h\&k)P(h|k) + P(e|\sim h\&k)P(\sim h|k)}$$

(EG, 339).

$P(h|e\&k)$ means the *probability* that h is true *given* the *evidence* and *background knowledge*. The numerator on the right side of the equation contains the product of what Swinburne refers to as the *predictive power* (EG, 56) of h (the *likelihood* that e will occur given $h\&k$) and the probability of h being true given our background knowledge alone—that is, without taking into account the specific evidence included in e . $P(h|k)$ is the *prior probability* of h , the probability of h being true when we do not take e into account. k houses our background knowledge/beliefs relevant to h . The denominator contains the product in the numerator plus the product of the likelihood of e existing if h is false and the likelihood of h being false on background knowledge alone. Under ideal circumstances, this will provide one with the answer to $P(h|e\&k)$, the *posterior probability*.

The basic idea behind Bayes's theorem, especially as it is used by Swinburne and some other philosophers, is to try to isolate and estimate specific probabilities in an attempt to gain more clarity and precision when assessing hypotheses. Let us imagine that while writing this morning I hear in a room in my house a noise that sounds like something fell on the floor. I am, so far as I know, the only human in the house. I can assure you that I will not seriously entertain the hypothesis that a poltergeist is in my house. At least not at first. There is, however, some evidence that would be explained by the poltergeist hypothesis: the noise in the room. Thus, $P(e|h\&k)$ will have some positive value. Why, then, would I be much more inclined to think about calling the police rather than a priest? The poltergeist hypothesis does not cohere with my prior knowledge—or what I think is knowledge, my prior background beliefs. In my experience and as a result of thinking about metaphysical possibilities as part of my job, I think it is highly unlikely that poltergeists exist. My estimate for the prior probability of the poltergeist hypothesis (i.e., what I believed about the existence of poltergeists *prior* to hearing the noise) will be very low. This allows me to gain a better sense of the probability of the poltergeist hypothesis. I take the direct evidence and consider it in the context of my (hopefully justified) background beliefs. I now possess a better estimate for the probability of the poltergeist hypothesis than I would have if I only considered the direct evidence.

There are also rival hypotheses to take into account. Perhaps a cat is in the room, or a mouse. Perhaps an air current has caught something that was not balanced well at the moment, and it has fallen on the floor. Maybe it is an intruder of the human sort. Now I no longer only have my background knowledge reducing the probability of the poltergeist hypothesis; I have other rival hypotheses that could explain the evidence. At the moment, I am not too concerned about a poltergeist given my (I think) well-justified background beliefs and the existence of plausible alternative hypotheses.

Imagine that I am not deeply skeptical about the existence of things that go bump in the night (or day), that I am very open to paranormal phenomena. In this case, I may have a significantly different value for my prior probability. My background beliefs will be more amenable to the poltergeist hypothesis. This is an instance in which the use of Bayes's theorem becomes problematic. In cases in which we do not have good, uniform numbers for our probability estimates—and cases such as these abound in philosophical speculation—two well-intentioned users can reach significantly different probability estimates for the same hypothesis. And given a person's receptiveness to the poltergeist hypothesis, perhaps he or she will not be so inclined to propose alternative hypotheses to further contextualize the evidence.

2. Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy

In his book *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (hereafter *R*),² Swinburne makes the case for both the probability of there being a revelation if there is a God and that Christianity has the specific marks of a revelation from God. There is, he believes, a lower hurdle to jump for revealed theology if there is already evidence from natural theology that there is a God (*R*, 79–80), and he believes that he has shown in *EG* that it is more likely than not that God exists—and is all powerful, all knowing, and all good.

In Swinburne's view we need a revelation (i) to further our knowledge of God's nature (*R*, 80), (ii) including knowledge about the incarnation of God and the atonement (*R*, 81), (iii) to provide encouragement for us to lead good and godly lives (*R*, 84–85), and most importantly (iv) to gain moral clarity on some matters when philosophical reason falls short (*R*, 85). But the revelation must not be too evident. It should be the case that, until it is pursued by someone embarking on the Christian path, the evidence will only be strong enough to make it probable that Christianity is *a* and *the* revelation from God. It is in a person's further wholehearted pursuit that the revelation will become more probable, like a treasure hid in the field (*R*, 97, 125, 343).

There are four tests for candidates for a revelation from God, says Swinburne. There

² Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

must be (i) original content (*R*, 107) that does “not contain moral claims incompatible with any clear intuitions we have about what are the necessary truths of morality” (*R*, 110), the revelation must be (ii) backed by an authenticating miracle (*R*, 107) (and only Christianity satisfied this condition, according to Swinburne [*R*, 126]), there must be (iii) a clear church that was faithful to the original revelation and developed its content plausibly, and it must be (iv) the kind of revelation one might expect God to give to humans (*R*, 108).

The Bible is an important, even central, part of the supposed Christian revelation. There is a difference between the strong view and the moderate view of interpreting the Bible. According to the strong view, God ensured that every sentence in the Bible forms part of a unit that is true; the moderate view allows for minor errors due to the leeway given to the authors—so only *almost* all sentences form parts of a unit that is true (*R*, 239–40). (Swinburne accepts the strong view.) Pre-Christian Israel had a limited understanding of the progressively revealed revelation, so the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the New Testament (*R*, 240). To understand a passage straight means that it is applicable to all; to understand it historically means that it applies only to those within that cultural and historical context (*R*, 262). Whenever a passage cannot be interpreted straight or historically and be edifying—and there are some egregious examples of such passages (e.g., the slaughter of everything that has breath in Deuteronomy 7:1–2, slaughter plus enslaving others in 20:10–18, and dashing the little ones from Babylon against the rocks as revenge in Psalm 137:9)—it is to be interpreted metaphorically. This is the case even when the metaphorical interpretation must be “forced” on the passage(s) (*R*, 265).

Some examples of the reputed moral clarity provided by the Christian revelation follow. First, homosexuality, a sin and a disability, is wrong (*R*, 303–6). We would not “know” this without a revelation. Second, the husband as the head of the marriage is to settle disputes when agreement cannot be reached (*R*, 307). We would not “know” this without a revelation. Third, slavery is likely to be frowned upon by God, but historically it is not too problematic. Some (e.g., John Chrysostom) believed that a good reason for having one or two slaves is that the owner can show kindness to them (*R*, 326–27). In a more general sense, we learn from the Christian revelation that what we might normally consider as supererogatory (e.g., loving one’s neighbor as oneself) is morally obligatory (*R*, 292). We would not know that we should behave like this without a revelation.

Swinburne uses Bayes’s theorem to argue that, given the historical evidence we have about Jesus’s life and the evidence we have that an authenticating “super-miracle” (i.e., the resurrection) occurred, and given that this is just the sort of authentication we would expect from a revelation from God, “the probability on both the evidence of natural theology and the historical evidence about Jesus and his Church, that there has been or will

ever be a revelation” is $125/128$ or 0.9766 (*R*, 352). And since Jesus is the only prophet to clearly meet Swinburne’s criteria, the Christian revelation is almost certainly the revelation from God. Apparently the treasure is hiding in plain sight.

Instrumental to Swinburne’s case in *R* is to consider recalcitrant data as potential deductions in $P(e|h&k)$ rather than to consider problematic data of any kind in $P(h|k)$. (In this section h is the revelation hypothesis.) In *R*, k consists only in Swinburne’s result in *EG*, that it is at least as likely as not that Swinburne’s hypothesis about God is true.

3. *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*

In his book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (hereafter *RGI*),³ Swinburne makes a case for the historical veracity of Jesus’s *physical* resurrection, wherein Jesus’s body was glorified and reanimated on a Sunday morning and exited the tomb. Swinburne refers to this as a *super-miracle*, just the sort of thing one would expect if Jesus were God incarnate and lived among us.

He develops his argument in two stages. First, he assesses what he calls the *prior* historical evidence, which includes the evidence regarding the resurrection before the death of Jesus. Second, he assesses what he calls the *posterior* historical evidence, which includes evidence regarding the resurrection after the death of Jesus. He relies on what he refers to as the Principle of Testimony: In the absence of counterevidence, “we should believe what others tell us that they have done or perceived” (*RGI*, 12–13). Swinburne understands the New Testament authors and witnesses as providing us, for the most part, with testimony.

In *EG* Swinburne concludes that the existence of God is more likely than not. He will use his understanding of God and the probability of God’s existence as indirectly confirming background evidence, the data populating k , and he will ultimately conclude that, once we add the detailed prior and posterior evidence, “the total evidence makes it probable that there is indeed a God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and rose from the dead” (*RGI*, 5).

Why would God become incarnate and dwell among us? Swinburne offers three reasons: “to provide a measure of reconciliation with God for a broken relationship, to identify with our suffering, and to show and teach us how to live and to encourage us to do so” (*RGI*, 37). He states that he does not want to exaggerate his case, but he nonetheless comes up with an estimate of at least fifty percent that if there is a God of the type briefly defined above, this God will become incarnate as a human being at some point to iden-

³ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

tify with our suffering and for at least one of the other reasons provided (*RGI*, 50).

But this incarnation, according to Swinburne, will likely be a divided one, an incarnation consistent with what is known as the Chalcedonian definition. According to the Chalcedonian interpretation of the incarnation, Jesus had two natures, one wholly divine and the other wholly human—but these two natures (mysteriously) united into one person, Jesus. Given this understanding of the incarnation, biblical content that appears to show Jesus unaware of certain things God would know can be explained (away) as content that it was unnecessary for Jesus to know given his particular mission and purpose. Jesus “could act and react in his human life with partial ignorance of, and so with only partial access to, his divine powers” (*RGI*, 51–52).

What would we expect an incarnate God of Swinburne’s conception to be like? What are the prior requirements for being God incarnate? Swinburne’s list consists of five marks: “His life must be, as far as we can judge, a perfect human life in which he provides healing; he must teach deep moral and theological truths (ones, in so far as we can judge, plausibly true); he must himself believe that he is God Incarnate; he must teach that his life provides an atonement for our sins; and he must found a church which continues his teaching and work. Let us call a prophet who does all this one who satisfies the prior requirements for being God Incarnate” (*RGI*, 59). Swinburne adds, “The prophet’s life needs to be signed by a super-miracle” (*RGI*, 62). The super-miracle is the resurrection.

The posterior evidence includes, of course, appearances of the risen Jesus. With the exception of the Gospel of Mark, the gospels include post-resurrection appearances of a risen Jesus. It is true that Jesus’s resurrected body can do fantastic things like appear or disappear suddenly and walk through walls, but he also eats and drinks and bears physical wounds from the crucifixion. In 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, Paul provides what appears to be a creedal statement regarding the sequence of appearances. (The nature of these appearances is not, however, distinguished from Paul’s vision. And what Paul experienced was evidently not a risen Jesus who looked like the Jesus who supposedly had a meal with his disciples after the resurrection.) Swinburne attempts to address the rather messy “testimony” regarding the appearances: the fact that not a single appearance is provided in the most ancient manuscripts of Mark and the fact that there are location conflicts in the other gospels related to the appearances (*RGI*, 76–77, 82). I will allow the reader of Swinburne to decide whether his attempt to harmonize the conflicts is plausible or amusing (*RGI*, 156, 158).

Another item of posterior evidence is the early tradition of Sunday as the day to celebrate the Eucharist, the common Christian meal. Choosing Sunday is something we might anticipate if there was something very early that marked this day as an important day,

something like the resurrection of Jesus (*RGI*, 165).

In an attempt to address and assess rival hypotheses to the hypothesis that Jesus rose physically from the dead, Swinburne tackles what he (apparently) considers to be the possible alternatives: misidentified tomb and theft. He concludes that it is unlikely that the women would have been mistaken about where Jesus's tomb was, so it is probably not the case that Jesus's tomb was thought to be empty because later visitations were to the wrong tomb (*RGI*, 176). Regarding theft, Swinburne accepts the story about the Roman guard being placed at the tomb as historically plausible, an account found in the Gospel of Matthew and not attested elsewhere. Given the placement of the guard, theft is especially unlikely (*RGI*, 178).

Recall that the background evidence Swinburne includes in his calculation of the odds of the resurrection of God incarnate is the greater than fifty percent likelihood that there is a God as Swinburne understands It. This background evidence (if true) shows that it is likely that a God exists who could perform miracles and might have a good reason to become incarnate as a human being—i.e., to identify with our suffering, and so on. The prior evidence is assessed vis-à-vis a match with the list of “marks” of God incarnate, and clearly no other prophet in any religion has satisfied the criteria as well as Jesus. And when we add the posterior evidence of the appearances and the selection of Sunday as a day of worship, we have a very powerful case indeed! Swinburne's calculation using Bayes's theorem reaches the posterior probability of $100/103$ that Jesus was God incarnate and rose physically from the dead (*RGI*, 213). According to Swinburne, if one wants to avoid this conclusion, “an objector will have to give very different values to some of the probabilities by means of which we have reached this result” (*RGI*, 214). Again, the Christian treasure is hiding in plain sight. Or is it?

4. Misuse of Prediction

We will begin our critical assessment by noting a peculiarity in both *R* and *RGI*: Swinburne does not appear to understand the nature of a prediction. As we have seen, Swinburne refers to $P(e|h&k)$ as the *predictive power* of a hypothesis. In its rigorous sense in the sciences, a prediction is something that must be true if the hypothesis is true. The relationship can be formulated as a conditional: If *h* (hypothesis), then *p* (prediction). Modus tollens can thus have its say: if *p* turns out to be false, then (barring one or more plausible auxiliary hypotheses) *h* is false. If one is going to use a term like *predictive power* in a scientific or quasiscientific context, this should be our understanding.

Let us consider his list from *RGI* regarding the five marks (plus one) of an incarnate God. This time we will number each one for ease of discussion: (i) His life must be, as far as we can judge, a perfect human life in which he provides healing; (ii) he must teach deep

moral and theological truths; (iii) he must himself believe that he is God Incarnate; (iv) he must teach that his life provides an atonement for our sins; and (v) he must found a church which continues his teaching and work; (plus one): the prophet's life must be signed by a super-miracle. Perhaps because these things seem reasonable to expect from Swinburne's point of view, they are christened *predictions*. However, they are not predictions, in spite of his repeated use of *must*.

The hypothesis is that God incarnates. Must it be the case that God incarnate would heal people? Of course not. It would not be necessary for God incarnate to perform any miracle at all. Perhaps God wants deep moral and theological truths to be received without the added frill of miracles. Regarding deep truths, if God incarnated simply to die as a sacrifice, then there would be no need to teach deep truths; there is one simple one, the wisdom of the cross. And why must God incarnate necessarily know that it is God incarnate? Perhaps to identify with our suffering God incarnate did not allow Itself to have the knowledge of ultimate identity. Must God incarnate teach that God's life provides atonement for sins? Of course not, but maybe It would if this is why (or a reason why) God incarnated. But absent the doctrines of traditional Christianity, there is insufficient reason to think that a sacrifice of God is required to restore our relationship with God. Must God incarnate found a church? We do not know. Other options are available if there were a need to provide information in a lasting form. Rather than allow a group of men to determine doctrine after God incarnate departs, perhaps making sure that one has someone like Plato around to record a few especially profound conversations would have been a better option. This approach is compatible with having churches—or something like them, due to the lack of ready access to books and illiteracy; but the churches need not take on the role of establishing doctrine, making claims of heresy, and so on. Finally, it is not the case that God incarnate must be the object of—or performer of—a super-miracle. This does appear to be a reasonable option, but it is not the only reasonable option. Once again, perhaps the words and deeds are to stand on their own, without frills.

Recall that (iv), (v), and the super-miracle are also stated in *R* as predictions of the revelation hypothesis. Additional reputed predictions of the revelation hypothesis include providing encouragement and moral clarity. While it would not be surprising for God to reveal Itself and to do so for Swinburne's given reasons and in Swinburne's given ways, not one of his "predictions" actually *must* be the case if God incarnates. Again, Swinburne is using *prediction* as a designator for his theological and philosophical prejudices.

Other things equal, predictive success is more compelling as evidence than are mere speculative and culturally induced anticipations. When a prediction is successful, an attempt to injure the hypothesis (perhaps beyond remedy) has been avoided. This virtue is in addition to any corroborating virtue a successful prediction will also possess. It is im-

pressive when the clear predictions of a hypothesis, especially when they are many and significant, turn out to be true. Swinburne is quite impressed with the fact that only Jesus satisfies all of the marks of being God incarnate. And if the marks truly are predictions, we could understand the enthusiasm. However, there is not a prediction among them. In *RGI* Swinburne looks back at what Jesus did (as interpreted by traditional Christianity), and he christens some of what he did (or was reputed to have done) as predictions of the hypothesis God incarnates. We simply do not know what God incarnate would do. We do not know whether God would choose to incarnate as a human being. We are in no position to make predictions.

5. Inadequate Incorporation of Recalcitrant Data

Swinburne's assessment of recalcitrant data is sometimes questionable. Does he accurately assess the strength of the recalcitrant data? Furthermore, he tends to focus more on confirming evidence, in both his predictive-power estimates as well as his prior probabilities, than he does on problematic evidence. In this section we will focus on three categories of recalcitrant data for both the revelation hypothesis and the resurrection hypothesis: morally troubling scriptural content, Jesus's exorcistic ministry, and failed prophecies.

Regarding the supposed revelation, we find morally troubling content at times in the Old Testament. As referenced in section 2, three of these morally troubling passages are Deuteronomy 7:1–2, 20:10–18, and Psalms 137:9:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy (Deuteronomy 7:1–2).

Later in Deuteronomy we learn that those residing in cities outside of Canaan can be taken as slaves—and the men slaughtered if they resist:

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in

the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not the towns of the nations here. But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 20:10–18).

Such commands and permissions do not appear to be consistent with many of our considered judgments about what is right and just. The slaughter of children, infants, and even sheep—lest the sheep mislead them?—is morally troubling to most of us. Slavery is also something that we have come to recognize as being morally abhorrent. And yet it is clearly permitted by God. Perhaps we must acknowledge that, given the time and circumstances under which the people of Israel were fighting for existence and autonomy, behavior like this was generally accepted and expected. It is nonetheless morally troubling. One should expect more from the Judge of all the earth.

Psalm 137 celebrates revenge upon Babylon, by dashing their little children against a rock: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Psalm 137:8–9). Once again, Swinburne will agree with those who force a metaphorical interpretation on this passage:

What the modern world has forgotten is that the Church, which followed Irenaeus and subsequent Church Fathers in proclaiming the Old Testament to be Scripture, also followed the way which he initiated in interpreting in metaphorical senses any passages of that Testament which were not edifying if taken in straight or historical senses. As noted above, Irenaeus himself tends to assume that all such passages are to be understood in straight or historical ways, even if they had also a more important metaphorical meaning. But his successors took the logical step of maintaining that these passages had only a metaphorical meaning (or more than one metaphorical meaning). This metaphorical meaning is a meaning forced on the passage, not by considerations of the need to make sense of that passage of the biblical book taken on its own, but by the need to make sense of it as part of a Christian Scripture. (*R*, 265)

Those of us who do not understand how it is a “logical step” to “force” a metaphorical meaning on a passage clearly not intended as metaphor may be excused when we inter-

pret the passages differently. Swinburne will force a metaphorical interpretation on the passages, but he will also argue that, since God gives and preserves the gift of life, God may take it at will or command someone else to take it (*R*, 271). Swinburne cannot lose. But we are not him. The monstrous nature of the commands and permissions should register as recalcitrant data for the revelation hypothesis. Since Jesus's work is supposedly a further unfolding of God's revelation, it is also recalcitrant data for the resurrection hypothesis, physical or otherwise. This is data we might choose to consider within *k* when assessing $P(h|k)$ for the resurrection hypothesis. Some Christian apologists have claimed that it is an unwarranted commitment to (or faith in) metaphysical naturalism that stands in the way of seeing the true value of the evidence for many Christian claims, especially the physical resurrection of Jesus. But this certainly need not be the case. One may posit the likelihood of the existence of a supernatural being capable of performing a resurrection and still conclude that Jesus was neither *a* nor *the* subject of a resurrection.

How are we to understand these morally troubling passages? One way, I think the more honest and plausible way, is to admit what appears to many of us to be obvious. The Bible, taken as a whole, is not an unfolding revelation. It is a compilation of somewhat related writings containing some of the ways in which God and God's works were understood at particular times and places and through various regional influences historians can often identify. The best explanation for the content in the Christian Bible is an anthropogenic one. And this is true not only for moral values, but for the supposed revelation in general. The world was not created as it says in Genesis, in either version of creation. There was no worldwide flood a few thousand years ago. There is nothing in the reputed revelation that stands out as a type of interesting and accurate view about nature, including human nature (e.g., the nature of stars, biology [and in particular evolution], the reason why there are different languages, and so on) that one might anticipate from a revelation. There is a clear evolution from monolatry to monotheism in the Old Testament, something one would anticipate from an anthropogenic evolution rather than from a revelation.

There is something missing from Swinburne's list of "marks" that we might expect to find there. Given the prevalence of Jesus's role as an exorcist in the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke), one wonders why he did not include casting out demons in his list of marks. Jesus cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). That is a lot of demons. Jesus was not the only wonder-worker in the region performing exorcisms,⁴ but he was clearly one of them. Unlike his healing ministry absent demonic possession, Jesus used verbal commands to accompany the casting out of de-

⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), 171–72.

mons.⁵ According to Geza Vermes, “one of the chief aspects of Jesus’ function as a healer in the Synoptics, namely, the casting out of demons who were blamed for every kind of illness, is completely missing from John. For such a practice smacked of popular religion, if not of magic, and as such was considered unworthy of the Johannine Jesus.”⁶ Might embarrassment also explain why Swinburne does not include one of the most prominent activities of Jesus’s ministry in the Synoptics among his marks of God incarnate?

Recall my use of the poltergeist hypothesis in section 1. I relied upon my background knowledge (or, rather, a belief that I consider justified) regarding poltergeists: It is highly unlikely that poltergeists exist. My strong disbelief in poltergeists is contained in my prior probability, and it reduces the posterior probability of the poltergeist hypothesis considerably. I think that many of us will estimate the hypothesis that demons exist and sometimes possess people to be about as likely as the existence of poltergeists. We are as skeptical about things that go bump in the body as we are about things that go bump in the night! For us it is meet to include our doubts about demonic possession in our prior probabilities relating to the revelation hypothesis and by extension the resurrection hypothesis. There is a very small chance that demons exist and possess humans—or swine. We could reasonably anticipate (but not predict) that God incarnate (or a close associate) would know this. Hence, we could reasonably anticipate that God incarnate (or a close associate) would not engage in exorcistic practices.

Let us now turn our attention to failed prophecies. The situation in this regard is so desperately bad that it alone might be understood to refute the revelation hypothesis. One of the most blatant examples is Jesus’s prophecy in Mark 13. If this chapter accurately represents Jesus’s words, he prophesied that the Son of Man will come in power and glory in the clouds, and that the angels will gather the elect from the earth and heavens, and that this will happen before the generation then living passes away. This, of course, did not occur. Swinburne, ever resourceful, attempts to soften the blow regarding prophecies that fail to occur:

The tradition of reinterpretation of biblical prophecy in the light of history is itself a biblical tradition. Daniel 9 reinterprets Jeremiah’s talk of ‘seventy years’ (Jer. 2:12) as seventy ‘weeks of years’; 2 Esdras 12:11–2 reinterprets Daniel 7:17. Those in the tradition would not have been unduly disconcerted to discover that in its original context the Book of Daniel prophesied an ‘end’ in the second century BC, or that the Book of Revelation prophesied an ‘end’ in the second

⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

century A.D. They would have reflected that the meaning of the prophecies was something other than the original understanding of them; and that time would show what the meaning was. Perhaps too, the literal ‘failure’ of the prophecy makes clear that all prophecy is warning, not prediction; and maybe that warning was heeded by someone (*R*, 275–76).

This is, in my view, an implausible attempt at harmonization akin to forcing metaphors on egregiously immoral passages (whether or not they are understood straight or historically). Some may claim that the quantity or quality of successful prophecies mitigates the problem of seemingly failed prophecies. This tack will not work, for there is not a single success among the prophecies broadly construed that defies naturalistic explanation.

As mentioned previously in this section, there is no reason for the skeptic to rely on metaphysical naturalism as background knowledge for assessing the revelation hypothesis or the resurrection hypothesis. Features internal to the supposed revelation itself will provide ample reason for a low prior probability.

6. Ignoring Plausible Rival Hypotheses

In Swinburne’s version of Bayes’s theorem, he maintains that $P(e|\sim h \& k)$ must include the sum of the probabilities of all of the alternative hypotheses. However, Swinburne does not consider at least two of the alternative hypotheses to the physical resurrection hypothesis in *RGI*. He includes only the possibility of the women misidentifying the tomb in which Jesus was placed and the possibility of theft of Jesus’s body. He rejects the theft hypotheses abruptly, and he does so in part because he accepts the dubious claim, only occurring in Matthew 27:64–66, that Pontius Pilate ordered the tomb to be sealed and guarded (*RGI* 178). Regarding the women misidentifying the tomb, he dismisses the hypothesis abruptly by relying on yet another passage that only appears in Matthew stating that Jewish critics claimed that the disciples stole the body. If the tomb had not been correctly identified, then why would this accusation make any sense?

One hypothesis that Swinburne ignores is what I will call the legend hypothesis. The Gospel of Mark is our earliest gospel and our earliest source containing a narrative structure of Jesus’s preaching career. There is good reason to believe that the original ending of Mark is at 16:8. If the authors of Luke and Matthew borrowed the empty-tomb story from Mark, and if it is the case that the author(s) of John indirectly rely on Mark, then we have, at its origin, a thin account indeed. In Mark, three women are going to the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus’s corpse. The author makes it clear that they are unaccompanied by one or more men (Mark 16:2). There is a man at the tomb, dressed in white, who tells them that Jesus is no longer in the tomb and that he will appear in Galilee. The women flee out of fear, and they do not say anything to anyone (Mark 16:8).

The end. Perhaps their silence was necessary to explain why the physical departure of Jesus's reanimated body from a tomb was not an aspect of preaching or doctrine in early Christian communities. It is instead a legend that developed over time. A thorough explication and defense of the legend hypothesis will be found in Richard C. Carrier's "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*.⁷

Another hypothesis that Swinburne does not consider is the temporary-burial hypothesis (sometimes called the reburial hypothesis). According to the historical sources we have addressing burial practices close to the time in which Jesus lived and was executed, Jesus, a blasphemer according to the Jewish Council, would not have been buried in a private or family tomb. Instead, his burial would be an ignoble one in the graveyard for criminals. Given the fact that the Sabbath was drawing nigh and sufficient time to move Jesus's body to the criminals' graveyard was lacking, Jesus's corpse could have been temporarily stored in a tomb or other appropriate location until work could legally resume after the Sabbath. By Sunday morning, the temporary tomb or storage locale would no longer contain Jesus's corpse. Add visions, commitment to a way and man, searching the scriptures, and a lack of clarity about the ultimate resting place of Jesus's corpse, and it would be possible to manufacture a new religion based on the physical resurrection of Jesus. A more thorough explication and defense of this hypothesis can be found in Richard C. Carrier's "The Burial of Jesus in Light of Jewish Law," in *The Empty Tomb*.⁸

The two hypotheses we briefly considered above are not, of course, without their problems. Recalcitrant data is to be taken into account for all five of the hypotheses related to the resurrection that we have discussed in this review: physical resurrection, misidentified tomb, theft, legend, and temporary burial. One is often left with the challenge of assessing rival hypotheses in part by considering the strengths of the corroborations against the recalcitrant data for each rival.

7. Swinburne's Use of Bayes's Theorem in *RGI*

Let us get into the weeds to some extent with Swinburne's use of Bayes's theorem in *RGI*. Recall that Swinburne's conclusion regarding the physical resurrection—specifically that God became incarnate in Jesus and physically rose from the dead—is an astonishing

⁷ Richard C. Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave*, edited by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 105–231.

⁸ Richard C. Carrier, "The Burial of Jesus in Light of Jewish Law," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave*, edited by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 369–92.

¹⁰⁰/₁₀₃. How does he get there? First, rather than assessing the resurrection hypothesis and the evidence relevant to this hypothesis, he attempts to assess a hypothesis combining both the incarnation hypothesis and the resurrection hypothesis:

Let e be the detailed historical evidence, consisting of a conjunction of three pieces of evidence ($e_1 \& e_2 \& e_3$). e_1 is the [prior historical evidence regarding what God Incarnate must do and how Jesus satisfied the list quite well]. e_2 is the detailed historical evidence relating to the Resurrection. . . . e_3 is the evidence... that neither the prior nor the posterior requirements for being God Incarnate were satisfied in any prophet in human history in any way comparably with the way in which they were satisfied in Jesus (R , 210).

e_1 and e_3 will make it highly unlikely that any other prophet besides Jesus will satisfy the complete evidence set e_1 , e_2 , and e_3 . In the remainder of this section, r will stand for the hypothesis that Jesus rose physically from the dead, i will stand for the hypothesis that God became incarnate in Jesus, and c will stand for the combination of r and i . We have seen in section 4 that e_1 is not robust evidence at all, for it consists of prejudices erroneously christened *predictions*. It is not a surprising coincidence that Jesus satisfies all of the “musts” on the list better than other prophets; the list was made with Jesus in mind. Given that e_1 and e_3 obviously select i and thus c , r is along for the ride. Since c will allow no rivals we can muster (for the rivals Swinburne discusses are rivals to r , not c , and e_1 specifically selects i), including r in c as a stowaway hypothesis does not appear to allow for a legitimate assessment of r .

Second, Swinburne fails to include relevant recalcitrant data in his prior probability. For Swinburne, the problem of evil serves as the only factor problematic for c :

To avoid my conclusion, an objector will have to give very different values to some of the probabilities by means of which we have reached this result. He may claim that the evidence of natural theology (for example, because of the phenomenon of natural evil—pain caused by natural processes) makes it very unlikely that there is a God; and/or that if there is a God, he is (despite my arguments) very unlikely to become incarnate. So he will assert a value for [the prior probability $P(h|k)$] well below the value of $\frac{1}{4}$ which I give to it. But if he leaves intact all the other values I have suggested, except in so far as they are functions of [$P(h|k)$], he would have to ascribe a value of slightly less than $\frac{1}{100}$. . . to get the probability of h on ($e \& k$) below $\frac{1}{2}$ (R , 214).

In section 5 we addressed three categories of recalcitrant data for the revelation hypothesis—and by extension c , i , and r : morally troubling scriptural content, Jesus’s exorcistic ministry, and failed prophecies. There is no reason to rely solely or mainly on the

problem of evil for recalcitrant data relevant to our prior probabilities. Swinburne does discuss morally troubling scriptural content, Jesus's exorcistic ministry, and apparently failed prophecies, but he appears to think that his attempts at mollifying the force of these recalcitrant data suffice for exclusion as recalcitrant input into his use of Bayes's theorem, including his prior probability for c . It is my view that, by attempting to dull the force of the three categories of recalcitrant data internal to the supposed revelation itself, Swinburne has made the problems salient and, given the implausibility of his attempts at harmonization, intractable. Problems do not vanish simply because an explanation is proffered, regardless of plausibility.

Third, as well as failing to include the legend hypothesis and the temporary-burial hypothesis as rivals to c , he does not include the two hypotheses he does consider as rivals to c . In his discussion regarding the denominator, he simply asserts $\frac{1}{1000}$ as the probability for some prophet satisfying both the prior and the posterior "requirements" (R, 213). Furthermore, he does not follow his own rule: $P(e|\sim h \& k)$ is to be determined by the sum of the probability estimates of the rival hypotheses. Swinburne merely states the vague hypothesis that someone other than Jesus explains e_1 , e_2 , and e_3 , and he asserts, without any tether to a rationale, that we should settle on $\frac{1}{1000}$ (R, 213). Granted, the rival hypotheses are only rivals to r in the context of receiving support from e_2 , the posterior evidence. But the dubious prior evidence, the evidence for i , so clearly picks out Jesus that there really cannot be a serious rival to c . Again, the stowaway status of r in c allows Swinburne to ignore rivals specific to r in his denominator. This increases the probability of c and by association r without the significant reduction in probability that would occur if r had to contend with its rivals.

Let us consider a case for r alone with e_2 , the posterior evidence, as our direct evidence (hereafter e). Will this allow us to accurately estimate probabilities? I think the answer is clearly no. It is not as if we have accurate information regarding the frequency of physical resurrections among the entire set of charismatic men and women. We also do not know, for example, the frequency in which tombs were misidentified under emotional, harried circumstances. And so on. But assessing r by itself will allow us to more accurately decide what counts as evidence and rival hypotheses.

Regarding the case for r , if we were to posit numbers for probabilities at least as defensible as those put forward by Swinburne, would the posterior probability change that much? What is the probability of a person rising from the dead sans the specific posterior evidence in Jesus's case? Frequency cannot be determined here, for there is no publicly known case of a single resurrection. Nonetheless, to be generous I will give a prior probability of $\frac{1}{1000}$ for r . Given the recalcitrant data we have covered, we can allow for a probability of $\frac{1}{2}$ for the existence of a supernatural being capable of performing

a physical resurrection and nonetheless think that Jesus would not have been a candidate for such a miracle, given the deficiencies internal to the supposed revelation within which Jesus was embedded. I will estimate the probability of e for each rival as $1/100$. I will estimate the probability of e given r as $1/5$, a lot more generous than Swinburne's $1/10$ for c . With $P(e|r&k)=1/5$, $P(r|k)=1/1000$, and $P(e|\sim r&k)=1/25$, the posterior probability of r is about $1/200$, a lot less than Swinburne's $100/103$ for c .

I have no confidence that the posterior probability above is even approximately correct. I believe that r is far less probable than $1/200$. But I am confident that the inordinately generous estimates show that higher posterior probabilities will require something other than disinterested philosophical work.

8. Summary

It is clear that Swinburne's probability estimates (and hence posterior probability conclusions) are highly questionable, and this is largely due to the misunderstanding of cultural biases as predictions, the inadequate incorporation of recalcitrant data, and, in *RGI*, the lack of an appropriate consideration of rival hypotheses. I by no means wish to suggest that Bayes's theorem is useless or necessarily prone to engender hyperbolic probabilistic results. But given subjective judgments regarding inclusion or exclusion in our probability estimates, and our subjective estimates for what we do include, the danger is lurking. Bayes's theorem can be useful in philosophical speculation in that it focuses one's attention on the right sorts of things: the nature and quality of the direct evidence, relevant background knowledge/beliefs, and potential alternative hypotheses. Still, as we have seen, unless one has reliable probabilities to enter into Bayes's theorem (as is sometimes the case in assessing medical hypotheses, for example), using the theorem and generating a posterior probability in numerical form might have the unfortunate consequence of providing unwarranted confidence.

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