

# On Richard Swinburne and the Failings of Christian Theistic Evidentialism

## Raphael Lataster

### Contra Theism

Earlier this year I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to present a paper at the University of Oxford, having been invited by the Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies. Although this is not one of the more prestigious Religious Studies conferences, the allure of presenting in the historic Old Library of the University Church of St Mary, the chance to receive helpful and non-helpful criticisms before submitting my thesis, and the support of my faculty made the decision to attend very easy.<sup>1</sup> The papers were surprisingly of a very high quality, with the topics ranging from the always-contentious definition of religion, to the need for ‘liberal’ forms of traditional religions, to those Mormons who buck the trend regarding the commonly perceived inverse relationship between formal education and ‘religiosity’.<sup>2</sup> We of the former European colonies did not fail to surprise and entertain, with one highlight coming from a spirited and elderly Latin American scholar disputing with the host, Canon Brian Mountford MBE, about the time she had left. The diverse attendees and presenters were generally very respectful and supportive of each other. Most were also very sociable, eager to indulge in the occasional celebratory snifter and/or to go on adventures around the University and its surrounds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge and thank the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences for subsidising this trip via the Postgraduate Research Support Scheme.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the relation between religion and education, see Phil Zuckerman, ‘Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions’, *Sociology Compass*, vol. 3, no. 6 (2009), pp. 949-971.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Figure 1. My much more photogenic colleague presented an interesting and persuasive paper on the agency of Muslim women in sport. See Keelin Pringnitz, ‘Athletic Hijabs Are Not a Form of Accomodation: An Application of “Deep Equality”’ (paper presented at the Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies, Oxford, 3rd August 2016).

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I was surprised to find that even my own potentially controversial ideas were endorsed by the attendees, even those unashamedly Christian scholars, which was very encouraging.



Figure 1 – Punting: the most Oxonian activity one can engage in.

My paper was predictably on the improbability of theism and Christian theism.<sup>4</sup> This, like my almost completed doctoral dissertation (and associated articles),<sup>5</sup> argues that the case for theism – and also Christian theism – presented by philosophers such as William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) is a failure. While my work focuses on Craig’s case, my sometime mentor and collaborator Herman Philipse of

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<sup>4</sup> See Raphael Lataster, ‘The (Overwhelming) Improbability of Classical Theism’ (paper presented at the Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies, Oxford, 1st August 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Such as Raphael Lataster and Herman Philipse, ‘The Problem of Polytheisms: A Serious Challenge to Theism’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, DOI: 10.1007/s11153-015-9554-x (2015) and Raphael Lataster, ‘Pantheistic God-Concepts: Ancient, Contemporary, Popular, and Plausible Alternatives to Classical Theism’, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2015), pp. 65-82.

Utrecht University has published, *God in the Age of Science?*, a thorough critique of Swinburne's case for God's existence and Jesus' resurrection.<sup>6</sup> In the first part of my paper, several reasons were given for why the traditional arguments for theism are unpersuasive to many secular scholars (and also to many theistic scholars).

For example, the cosmological argument from contingency generally assumes that the world is contingent, and that God is necessary. The Kalam Cosmological argument works on the unproven premise that the universe had an absolute beginning. Fine-tuning arguments are multiply problematic, with proponents seemingly unable to recognise that their preferred hypothesis (intelligent design) is at least as speculative as alternatives (such as necessity). Moral arguments tend to simply assume that an objective standard of morality exists, and that it could only have been God-given, while ontological arguments play on ambiguity, typically on what 'possible' means and what constitutes a 'perfect' or 'maximally great' being. Arguments from personal experience are subject to the problem of metaphysical excess. Why believe the highly improbable claims of one believer, while rejecting the highly improbable claims of many others? (I further argued for the improbability of miracles, undermined the case for Jesus' resurrection, and also explained how mainstream critical scholarship is slowly coming to accept that questioning Jesus' historical existence is at least somewhat reasonable.)

Not only are such arguments unpersuasive to non-believers (and even to some believers), but granted that they do establish supernaturalism, they do not necessarily lead to classical theism. Arriving at 'bare' supernaturalism is usually not satisfying to religious believers. I argued that these could lead to various polytheisms and alternative monotheisms, and more plausibly lead to deisms, quasi-deisms, and pantheisms, which are – unlike theism – untouched by compelling arguments against God's existence such as the argument from evil and the argument from divine hiddenness. My unorthodox approach in almost eschewing discussions about naturalism in my work contra theism is yet to be properly countered by theistic philosophers. Enter Richard Swinburne.

The genteel British philosopher of religion lives minutes away from the University Church, and while a proposed debate was unfeasible

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<sup>6</sup> Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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due to the lack of a sizeable audience during England's summer vacation period, he kindly agreed to an interview in his impressive home office about how he would approach critiques against his and similar arguments by the likes of Professor Philipse and myself. After exchanging pleasantries, and my presenting of Swinburne with the very Australian gift of a packet of Tim Tams, we began.<sup>7</sup> What follows is the bulk of our discussion, and my commentary.<sup>8</sup>

### **Interviewing Swinburne**



Figure 2 – Still friends. Raphael (left), the Tim Tams (on the cabinet), and Richard (right).

On being asked about the general lack of supernaturalistic alternatives considered in his probabilistic case for theism, Professor Swinburne answered:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Tams are the Australian, and thus superior, version of the British Penguin biscuits. See Figure 2.

<sup>8</sup> Please note that some parts of the recording are unintelligible. These, and redundancies, are replaced by ellipses, and sometimes with paraphrases. Every effort has been made to preserve interpretative charity, however, and Swinburne has given his blessing to how I have portrayed his comments.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most relevant books concerning Swinburne's case is Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). In Chapter 14, he briefly mentions polytheism.

No scientific hypothesis when put forward considers all alternatives, and the argument for them is usually limited to two sorts of consideration. One is what other hypotheses are around and the other is, though it takes a lot of time to persuade scientists this is what they do, they ignore any of the infinite number of hypotheses which would yield this result on the grounds that they are too ad hoc, or as I would say, simple. Now, coming back to your alternatives, I would argue that all of them are in fact either less simple or have consequences which theism doesn't, but in general my point is the first one. Well, it depends what my criterion for simplicity is. A simple hypothesis in my view, and of course I've... extrapolated these criteria from considering hypotheses that detectives put forward, that historians put forward, and of course that scientists put forward.

A hypothesis is simple insofar as it postulates few entities, few kinds of entities, few properties, few kinds of properties, mathematically simple relations between them, and I can define mathematically simple. Mathematically simple relations between them include simple numbers, simple functions... Okay, so I think they all fail under those criteria. I just take one or two, you mentioned polytheism, well polytheism postulates many gods, theism postulates one... So you'd have to show, since that is pretty obvious, polytheism postulates many and theism postulates one, you would have to show that the gods postulated by polytheism were vastly simpler than that postulated by theism, and I think the reverse is the case.

Why do I think that? Well, theism postulates not merely one god, but a god who is omnipotent, that's just one property, and in the way I think now, it's not quite the way I thought in some previous things, I think everything follows from, all the properties of god follow from the postulation of an essentially everlasting, omnipotent being. We could go through the steps here if you like, but you will find that in various things, including... [Points to the end of chapter 9 in the second edition of his *Coherence of Theism*].<sup>10</sup> So, if that is right, polytheism can't do better than that. Pantheism, well this is, postulating an infinite number of gods!

Swinburne's description of pantheism intrigued me, so I asked him if the monism of pantheism means that pantheism is simpler than the models – like theism – that require (the completely evidentially unjustified) substance dualism.

Well, its postulating vast numbers of entities, as any physical hypothesis, the universe consists of vast number of entities because you can cut it up in different ways, and its got this planet and that planet and the other planet, now, your pantheism is the extreme form of that. Not merely am I a conscious being, but my finger is a conscious being, and the atoms that make up my finger is a conscious being. And there are all these conscious beings around, which if I understand the pantheists correctly, their consciousness as

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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it were is a brute fact, it's not dependent on any other entity which keeps them conscious, that's the ultimate. Therefore, this is vastly complicated. It's rather similar... to the hypothesis that, well, the universe is self-explaining. Or rather, doesn't need any further explanation. So what you've got there is, the ultimate is, all these chunks of matter and energy, and their properties, and there are infinite or possibly very large finite number of such chunks, though inevitably, they all behave in the same way, so inevitably it's going to be more complicated than theism.

While there may be forms of pantheism that cohere with Swinburne's description, many more typical models do not.<sup>11</sup> Pantheism is often seen as entailing a single, universal, consciousness, so that Swinburne's description seems uncharacteristic. We would ideally have discussed this in more detail. Nevertheless, this lack of awareness about the variety of supernaturalistic alternatives and the mischaracterisation of them is quite prominent in the *Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the most pressing issue, Swinburne dismisses the supernaturalistic alternatives to theism due to considerations about specific notions of simplicity. However, as argued in much of my work, the theist needs to demonstrate that that this sort of simplicity does indeed affect the respective probabilities, beyond its being pragmatically preferable. Furthermore, it is often overlooked that many of these alternatives are actually simpler than theism by the theist's own reckoning. I explained that it is also very important to describe the differences in simplicity, and the probability distribution, since the sheer number of alternatives could in principle overwhelm theism's potentially slight increase in probability (to say nothing of other factors and evidences that affect the calculation).<sup>13</sup> After denying that latter suggestion, Swinburne expounded:

Well, why is simplicity evidence of truth? The answer is, this is just a fundamental epistemic principle, which can't be derived from anything else more fundamental. You can see it at work in everything that scientists,

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<sup>11</sup> Swinburne seems to have a distributive view rather than a collective view of pantheism.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Göcke conceived of a slightly altered form of classical theism, labelled it 'pantheism', and then effectively assumed that it was less desirable than classical theism. I explained that his work was logically fallacious and irrelevant, since it did not accurately portray what Indian mystics, Western panentheistic philosophers, and indeed the etymology of the term, describe. See Benedikt Paul Göcke, 'Panentheism and Classical Theism', *Sophia*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2013), pp. 61-75; and Raphael Lataster, 'The Attractiveness of Panentheism—a Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke', *Sophia*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2014), pp. 389-395. There were further replies, which added little, if anything, to the discussion.

<sup>13</sup> This is properly argued in Lataster and Philipse, 'The Problem of Polytheisms'.

historians, detectives do, and if you didn't think that then you would have no reason for supposing that if you walk out the window you'll fall down rather than float upwards.

I interjected that people *prefer* simpler theories.

Well, yeah, but why do they prefer it? They prefer it because it's probably true. At least they think so. And you can see that by, well, these days it's easy enough as it were to produce a rather more complicated hypothesis, which is compatible with the data. I'm sure a computer program could do that pretty easily. So it can't just be a matter of convenience that they do that. And if they did think it was merely a matter of convenience, then they would, then you must bear in mind that as it were for any finite collection of data there will be some hypothesis, which makes any prediction you like about the future. And therefore, they would think there's nothing wrong in supposing that when you walk out the window you will fly in the air. But there is something wrong with this, and what I'm trying to do is distil the principle, which has that consequence. It is an a priori principle, its not an a posteriori principle, it's an a priori principle which is crucial for all science. Scientists don't like being told they have a priori principles, "we are an empirical discipline", etc., etc. It's just not true. You can get them to see that usually after about an hour's bullying.

Unconvinced that this response justifies the theist's belief that simplicity and probability are correlated, and that this also justifies the complete disregard for alternatives to theism, I raise the issue of substance dualism. Scientists are yet to discover that minds can exist independent of a body, or something physical, which is partly why I find monistic models to be preferable. I asked Swinburne about this, and if he specifically had any comments about Philipse's declaration that the former's notion of an unembodied mind is 'incoherent'.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed. What sort of 'can' is it that can exist? [Swinburne refers to whether people 'can' exist without the body.] I go along with Descartes... Well, the issue is, what makes me, me? What future state of affairs would consist in me being me. And the 'can' in question is therefore *logical* possibility. That is to say, or at stage one, is it logically possible that I survive without my body? Is there any contradiction in this? [We agreed that there is no logical contradiction.] Okay, is there any contradiction in supposing that I survive without any capacity for thought or feeling or anything like that? [We again agreed that there is no logical contradiction.] Well, suppose I die and I'm on the slab and everybody says, "Well his blood is circulating and so on, but he's obviously lost the capacity for thought and feeling and so on, shall we turn the machine off?" And assuming that people think this is not just a temporary loss but a permanent loss, the obvious answer is, "Yes he doesn't

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*, pp. 109-113.

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exist anymore.” So I think that it’s not logically impossible when you start reflecting on that, our very conception of ourselves is as a being capable of thought...

Okay, so reflection gives us the conception that for our existence, if we are to exist, then we must be able to go on thinking, and there’s no contradiction in supposing that that could happen if we don’t have a body. Okay, now is it logically possible that while I am thinking my body ceases to function and I cease to have any control over it, but I go on thinking? This is a slightly different question from the one I asked before. Before I asked is it possible there could be such a being. Now I’m asking, for yourself, is it logically possible, that you could as it were go on thinking... [I stated that I would likely concede that all of his scenarios are logically possible.] Alright, but in that case, is it logically possible that anything can exist if you suddenly destroy all its parts? Could this desk continue to exist if I destroy the top and the desk drawers and everything else? [We eventually agreed that, if *all* of it destroyed, it would cease to exist.]

Okay, now, you have admitted that I could go on existing even if I don’t have a body, you’ve admitted that I could go on existing if I’m thinking and I suddenly lose my body, I could still go on existing, but I couldn’t go on existing if every part of me ceased to exist, so I must currently have another part. A non-bodily part... soul... So that shows that our present conception of ourselves, this is Descartes, and Descartes tidied up a bit I admit but Descartes all the same, our conception of ourselves is a conception of us having two parts, body and soul. Now that’s why I asked to start with, “What sort of ‘can’ is this about?”... Of course that doesn’t prove that this is *naturally* possible in some stronger sense, but our very conception of ourselves is as soul plus body. Now, let’s see if we can do a bit better than that.

Thought experiments for, you maybe met some of these. In the future, some mad scientist may get hold of me, and he may remove my brain from there, and he may cut it into two, and he might put one half in one clone of me and the other half in another clone of me, and connect up all the nerves, and then we would have two clones of me, each of whom, since they’ve got half my brain, might well claim to be me. But they couldn’t both be me, because if something’s me then it would feel what I feel, and if I stick a needle into that one, this one won’t feel anything... So they’re not the same person as each other. But they make all the same claims to be each other. And this is not mere thought experiment. This sort of thing is within the bounds... [I interject, asking, “What happens to you, do you cease to exist?”] There are just three possibilities in this situation, either this one’s me and that one isn’t, or that one is and that one isn’t, or I don’t exist. The whole thing might just be traumatic. Okay, well, my point is we don’t know which is the answer and no conceivable scientific discovery could show which is the answer.

And what that shows is that being me doesn’t consist in having some particular part of me, because it’s compatible with being me that one only has that half and it’s compatible with being me that one that half, yet there



must be a truth and the truth would not be known even if you knew what had happened to every part of my body. [I ask, "Right, so we don't know either way?"] No. ... You can prove the thought experiment a bit by showing that no part of me is necessary, because suppose I have a brain disease, cancer on the brain, so a part of my brain has to be removed but it's replaced by a bit from my [unintelligible] and suppose this happens ten times, and then we've got something that consists of none of it but might well be me in virtue of the continuity that is being preserved. ... What I'm pointing out is that it's logically possible, but rather stronger than that... We exist as long as our souls exist and it's not necessary for our souls to exist that we should have any particular part. Now we can conceive, and you admitted earlier, of a being without a body, and that remark of Philipse I suspect was from, "We can't talk of God because our very notion of a person is a notion of an embodied person." And I suggest that isn't so for the reasons I've given you.

Again, in accordance with what is typically encountered in the field, Swinburne has defended only the possibility of his crucial premise, not its probability.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that many of Swinburne's ideas are contradicted by the available evidence. For example, cases like that of Phineas Gage reveal that manipulations of the brain alter the 'mind' and/or 'person'.<sup>16</sup> Proceeding, and again referring to a crucial (to some) but evidentially unjustified theistic doctrine, I asked for Swinburne's thoughts on *creatio ex nihilo*. He said, "If *creatio ex nihilo* is a temporal claim, that is to say once upon a time there was nothing and then God brings the universe into being, well it might be true, it might be false, it doesn't really matter from my point of view", and he went on to indicate that he is more interested in God as a sustaining cause.<sup>17</sup>

Another major criticism from Philipse about Swinburne's case is that if/since God's intentions are inscrutable, a probabilistic case for God is impossible, presumably because the hypothesis is incomplete and lacks all explanatory power.<sup>18</sup> There does seem to be an air of unfalsifiability also,

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<sup>15</sup> Philipse presents a many-layered argument against Swinburne's notion, some of which is in Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*, pp. 97-103. I take it that Philipse is not saying that the notion of an unembodied mind is logically impossible; he only means that it is something without precedent. In other words, as I often claim, while the option cannot be ruled out, it must be assigned a very low prior probability.

<sup>16</sup> See Hanna Damasio et al., 'The Return of Phineas Gage: Clues About the Brain from The Skull of a Famous Patient', *Science*, vol. 264, no. 5162 (1994), pp. 1102-1105.

<sup>17</sup> We could consider whether this would be 'simple'.

<sup>18</sup> Philipse's criticism is more complex, since he also refutes Swinburne's moral access claim, which is what helps Swinburne determine God's intentions. See Chapter 9 of Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*

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since any state of the evidence can support theism, based on the theist appealing to any possibility about God's intentions and/or appealing to ignorance/mysteriousness (as we see with many theodicies). Swinburne responds, "I don't think God's intentions are inscrutable." He continues:

I get from omnipotence to perfect goodness. So if something is manifestly bad then that counts against, all I need to, one doesn't have to need conclusive falsifiability or whatever, but so long as some sorts of things are to be expected if there's a god, are probable if there's a god, and so forth, things aren't probable, and certain sort of things that aren't probable count against. So it becomes me to show that the universe is basically a good thing, and I have argued that.

While here not properly addressing our charge, Swinburne also seems to have offered up a lite version of a theodicy. The fact that theistic philosophers have grappled for centuries with the problem of evil or gratuitous suffering arguably ought to lead to the conclusion that either there is no god, or it is a very different god (that is, not the God of theism) that exists. Forging ahead, Christian philosophers of the analytic tradition believe that the current state of the evidence supports theism and Christian theism. There is a risk that, if the state of the evidence changes, the Christian philosopher will find that the evidence now disconfirms her views. I asked Swinburne that if this were to occur, if he would de-convert, or remain a Christian due to faith or cultural reasons, and if he would stop arguing that theism/Christianity were probably true. His response:

Well I think we've really got all, the most general sorts of evidence are most unlikely to change, so the sort of evidence I rely on, you people could deny there is a universe, it's governed by, etc., so I don't see that very likely to happen. But the only controversy is what that supports. ... The controversy between theism and atheism and what is good evidence for. The idea of some big new piece of evidence turning up seems to me a bit implausible. But if it were to turn up, and if it were to have very strong force against theism, then I hope I would take account of it. Coming down to what 'take account of it' means, it depends on one's understanding of faith and one of your questions was of that nature.

On my account of faith, to have faith in God is to act on the assumption that he's there and will look after me and so on. Now that's a reasonable thing to act on an assumption even if the assumption isn't probably true. It depends on what the assumption is and... [I interject that my field is Religious Studies, so need no convincing of the validity of religious practice apart from evidentiary concerns.] I think you do need evidence, but what I say is, it is sometimes sensible to rely on an assumption even if the assumption isn't on balance probable. What I don't think is sensible to do is to rely on an assumption which is almost certainly false. That would just be silly. But innumerable examples, mundane examples, will suggest that it's sometimes sensible to rely on an assumption that isn't

probably true, if it's only by relying on that assumption that you can get something that you badly want. Trivial, if the only thing you want in life is a million dollars, and you've only got one dollar, and the only way you can get a million dollars is by buying a lottery ticket, then you should buy a lottery ticket.

But in the case of God, well God isn't the only good thing in the world, there are many lesser goods, and we should take that into account, but so I think we do require a reasonable amount of evidence but that doesn't mean to say that we need it to be more probable than not. If we want the goal of religion, which is to live the best life on this earth, and after this earth, that is possible. If we think that the best way to most probably get that is the Christian religion, if we also thought that the same goal was offered by Islam, then whether we follow Christianity or Islam must depend on the balance of probabilities as to which is more probable than the other one. [I ask if he thinks that Christianity is more probably true than Islam.] Yes.

While appreciative that he would be willing to change his mind given new and contradictory evidence, I wonder about the consistency of an approach that appeals to pragmatic concerns (I – and others – have earlier argued that various pantheisms trump the exclusivist theism with its inherent 'othering' on this point),<sup>19</sup> and that also builds on premises that are probabilistically problematic (such as the notion of the afterlife). Nevertheless, I proceeded to ask about the theists' presumptions concerning God's eternality, maximal greatness, uncaused nature, and so forth. Could these not also apply to the universe or multiverse?

Well of course I think the argument for God is, in my view, the argument for the simplest explanation of the universe, etc., etc. And I think the simplest explanation is in terms of an essentially everlasting, omnipotent being. Followed from that, that he's by definition everlasting, it also follows in my view that the other typical theistic properties also follow. And of course there's nothing strange about this. Scientists postulate a theory as the simplest theory of their data; other things follow from their hypothesis, for which they have no other evidence than their present data. A multiverse is a good example of that. Your only grounds for believing in a multiverse is that a certain theory provides the best explanation of things that we can observe, that theory has consequences that there will be other universes.

Unfortunately, there is seemingly little that theistic and non-theistic philosophers can agree on regarding what constitutes simpler – or rather, more inherently probable – theories and what explanations are preferable.

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<sup>19</sup> Historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that if humankind did not switch from monotheistic faiths towards pantheistic ones, the human race, and possibly the planet, would likely be doomed. See Arnold Toynbee, 'The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis', *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1-4 (1972), pp. 141-146.

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Keen to move on, I asked Swinburne for his opinion about the weak points in the case for theism and Christianity, and the best evidences against.

Regards theism, of course the apparent strongest objection is the problem of evil, inevitably. I mean I think I have a theodicy that will deal with that but it needs to be shown, not everyone's convinced by it. But inevitably, that is gonna be the case. I think there is a satisfactory theodicy to deal with that because I think the evils or allowing the evils of the world is a necessary condition of certain greater goods that wouldn't exist without it. But that needs to be argued. Christian theism though, and some of your questions were concerned with that, is a much more fuller doctrine. Christian theism has various extra bits than theism, considerable number of extra bits. It depends on what you think is essential to Christian theism.

But if you take the Nicene Creed, then yes, clearly if you found one fault there then that would mean that traditional Christian theism was very improbable. ... It starts from, "probably there's a God", now I reflect on what the claim "there is a God" would mean given a world of sin and suffering. We're aware people do what is wrong and suffer; how would a god react to this? Well, I think that if he allows suffering or evil to occur for a good cause, nevertheless there comes a time where he has an obligation to share it, and that means become incarnate. There are more human examples of that which I've used. Here's one: suppose there's a war, there's conscription, the government forces people between the age of eighteen and thirty to fight in the army. It's a just war but the government is prepared to give exemption to people, if their parents make a special case. Suppose I have a son, he's called up, or the government attempted to call it up, he asked me to make a special case, I refuse, because this is a just war. Suppose also that people over the age of thirty are allowed to volunteer to fight in the army... If I have no other reason and I force him to fight, I ought to fight, too.

Well, by analogy, God, who sees human suffering, has an obligation to share it. So we would expect an incarnation for that reason. We would also expect an incarnation because humans have to offer an atonement... [Refers to his *Was Jesus God?*]<sup>20</sup> But he needs to provide an atonement for humans then. And so he also needs to reveal certain truths to people, which they haven't been able to find out for themselves. So I a priori, before ever we come to historical evidence, I think there is reason to suppose that God will become incarnate. But my argument suggests he'd become incarnate in a certain way. He would become incarnate, living a life of suffering or containing a significant amount of suffering... He would also need, of course, to claim to be God, because otherwise we wouldn't benefit by this. He would need to claim that his life was an atonement for sin. ... He would need to reveal certain truths. So you have a priori, in advance, reason to expect that a prophet will turn up who satisfies these demands.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

If you look around all the major religions, none of their founders satisfy all these demands. Muhammad doesn't claim to be god, the Buddha doesn't, etc., etc. [I asked if Jesus had to arrive via the Jewish tradition.] I don't see it's necessary that it would be in the Jewish tradition but I don't think any civilisation outside that could have understood some of these concepts. Firstly, no other civilisation was monotheistic. I know people claim Akhenaton but Akhenaton was a one off, his people didn't follow him in that respect. The Jewish is the only one. [We briefly discussed Zoroastrianism's questionable monotheism.] There's no evil god in Judaism. And of course Judaism has the deep concepts of sin and atonement and so on, ready to use as a natural vehicle for this.

Alright, well then we must look around at the historical evidence and see if there is a prophet who satisfies these, and of course there is one. Not merely that, but if that prophet is to show people that he's God, it's clearly desirable that he should as it were produce God's signature, as I call it, on his work. A signature is an act that only one person can do. And Deuteronomy implies that if a prophet comes, to be a genuine prophet he must of course teach that there's only one god and so on and so forth. But if what he prophesies doesn't come to pass, then he's not a true prophet, implying that if what he prophesies does come to pass, then that shows he is. Well one thing Jesus quite obviously taught was the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. And Christianity claims of course that *he* actually produced the first example of this, by himself rising from the dead. So in light of that of course we've got to look at the evidence for the resurrection, and I think it's quite good. Certainly not good enough without an a priori backing that we're expecting that. But with an a priori backing expecting that, I think it's quite good. I guess that's why I support that.

As is usual in the discipline, the evidential argument from evil is considered to be the strongest argument against theism.<sup>21</sup> Swinburne's answer presupposed much, and the notion about God's obligation seems to infringe upon God's (and perhaps our) free will. As for the arguments concerning God's incarnation, I surmise that this is retrospective; Swinburne thinks that the god of theism would eventually become incarnate, through a figure very much like Jesus, just because he already believes that God did become incarnate through Jesus. I also wonder, if Swinburne is correct about the theistic god being likely to become incarnate, about earlier philosophers figuring this out and – perhaps even with the best of intentions – becoming 'false prophets'. Jesus may have been one such figure, and perhaps the god of theism did not reveal herself

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<sup>21</sup> Particularly influential has been Rowe's formulation, famously advanced in William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1979), pp. 335-341.

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through the Jewish tradition after all. Particularly telling is Swinburne's latter comment, which essentially served as an admission that the (crucial) historical evidence concerning supernatural claims made about Jesus is 'not good enough' to stand on its own. This further exposes the (likely) logical flaw in supposing that God would become incarnate because there is historical evidence that suggested that this happened. We continued to talk about the role of evidence, when faith is usually so important to religious adherence.

If the evidence makes it probable then of course I have an obligation to worship, because if the evidence is probable then all my existence and everything in it, all the good things in life, are due to God, and I owe him grateful worship; and if he asks me to do things to do them, within limits.<sup>22</sup> I have an obligation, if the evidence is a bit weaker than that, but nevertheless of some significance, then it becomes rational to live by this because there's a good thing, which I can only achieve in that way. But if there were no evidence at all, or the evidence shows that there isn't such a being, then it's very silly to live in that way because I will not get any benefit from it.

Finding contradiction with his various comments about the pragmatic benefits of religious beliefs, I could not resist the temptation to again ask about pantheism. "So I wonder if the evidence makes theism less probable, and an alternative like pantheism is more probable, would it not be rational to then disavow theism and become a pantheist?" Swinburne countered, "Well, only if pantheism offered equal good state." After I explained that many historical intellectuals have found pantheism to be more inclusive than monotheism and classical theism, to which Swinburne admitted, "If that were to be the case, that that does serve some good, and if it were to be the case, which for reasons I've given it certainly isn't, then your consequence would follow." He then suggested that, in light of the difficulty in differentiating between consciousness and non-consciousness, pantheists believe – with no good reason – that everything is conscious (hinting also that they are all separate entities – which seems to oppose the monism of pantheism), which, given the diversity of pantheistic models, I could not agree with. With our interview coming to a close, I took the opportunity to ask Swinburne if he had any comments about where

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<sup>22</sup> Note that different people will have different limits. Dena Schlosser mutilated her child, after supposedly hearing "voices commanding her to remove the arms of her 11-month-old daughter as a sacrifice" to her god. See Theresa Porter and Helen Gavin, 'Infanticide and Neonaticide: A Review of 40 Years of Research Literature on Incidence and Causes', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2010), pp. 101.

Philipse's critique in *God in the Age of Science* succeeds and fails. His answer:

Oh dear, I haven't read the book from cover to cover. I read drafts of a number of chapters for him when he was writing it, and I gave him my comments then. I'm afraid I haven't taken account. I've read a bit of it, but I haven't read all of it, so I don't know. The only bit I've critiqued in detail is his argument that we can't understand the notion of a deity who hasn't had a body because all our understanding of a person is derived from observing ordinary human persons. [Swinburne again refers to the second edition of his *Coherence of Theism* (which he claims to have been working on for the last three years), where he addresses this point.]

While academics are typically very busy, it is disappointing that Swinburne did not read the entirety of Philipse's critique, during those three years. Based on this and my interactions with other theistic philosophers of religion, it does seem that, while secular philosophers such as Philipse and myself are interested in engaging with the best and most promising arguments for supernaturalism, Christian philosophers are not so interested in tackling the best arguments made by non-believers. Philipse wrote an impressive book on Swinburne's case, published with a very reputable academic press, which the latter has not fully read. Likewise, my dissertation and related articles deal mostly with the case presented by William Lane Craig, who routinely refuses my well-meaning offers for debates or other public discussions on God's existence, though he continues to debate secularists less versed in the Philosophy of Religion.

Still eager to discuss Swinburne's interactions (or lack thereof) with Philipse's work, I asked about their 2012 debate in Amsterdam.<sup>23</sup> Here Swinburne commendably acknowledged that the truth of theism would first need to be established, before Christian claims, such as those made about Jesus' resurrection, could be accepted. He also stated that the theistic hypothesis is incomplete and needs filling out, presumably with Christian theology. Brushing aside concerns about circularity, Swinburne now clarifies, "Well it's incomplete from the point of view of Christianity; that is all. There's more to Christianity than that. Theism by itself doesn't as it were provide much of a guide for life." Agreeing wholeheartedly, we then revisited Swinburne's assumption that Jesus was not one of the many false – and Jewish – prophets. Reminding me about his earlier mentioned a priori

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<sup>23</sup> The Veritas Forum. 'Is There A God?', at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRgHQCmbR7U>. accessed 09/09/2016.

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reasons for thinking that God would become incarnate, Swinburne continued:

One could also expect, among other things, to teach us how to live, as well as himself living a certain sort of life, and of course if he taught us to do things that were obviously wrong, that would count against him being... But in my view, and in the view of many atheists, his general teaching about how one ought to live is the sort of teaching that a perfectly good god would give.

Much of his latter claim being particularly doubtful, it seems plausible that Jesus did indeed teach things that were, from a Jewish perspective, ‘wrong’. Jesus’ contradictions with various books of the Tanakh and his conflicts with mainstream Jews of his time are well known.<sup>24</sup> With our conversation winding down, I asked about Swinburne’s decision to study philosophy, and about his move from Anglicanism to Orthodoxy. He said, “Well what attracted me to philosophy is I’m interested in big questions!” and that, “being religious”, while “most philosophers aren’t religious believers”, some of their tools could be used for what he “regarded as the right purposes. And those two things certainly pushed me into philosophy.” As for his move to Orthodoxy, Swinburne laments that the “Church of England has changed a lot”, become too liberal, that they have “reached an ‘anything goes’ stage.” He thinks that the Church had “lost the sense” that it is the “vehicle of revelation”, adding:

The doctrine of the incarnation, a significant number of the clergy in recent years, 10% or something, interpret this as saying, “a man became particularly open to God”, whereas the doctrine is that God became man, not man became God. That is so fundamental that I felt that...

Here I interjected, to ask why he chose Orthodoxy instead of, say, Catholicism. Swinburne intimated that he sought an apostolic church, thinking that these “are the only two remaining alternatives”,<sup>25</sup> and that he does not “think the Pope is infallible”. Finally, I, offering him the opportunity to speak off the record, queried Swinburne on his views

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<sup>24</sup> For example, see the chapter entitled ‘The Anti-Biblical Jesus’, in Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015). Also helpful, though more confessional, is Steve Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). Even many Gospel pericopes portray Jesus’ conflict with mainstream Jews of his day, such as Matthew 23 and John 8.

<sup>25</sup> The Church of the East may have something to say about that. For more on this ancient Christian organisation, see Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).



regarding Brexit, and Oxford's challenges regarding female genital mutilation.<sup>26</sup> He was quite happy to publicly share his views on these matters:



Figure 3 – The home of the world's oldest Anglophone university has a rampant FGM problem.

It's alleged, and probably rightly, that a great deal of this goes on among the immigrant communities from Somalia in particular and so on, and it's also alleged that because everybody for the past ten years, twenty years, has been so sensitive about criticising immigrants... that all the doctors and the police have ignored this and so on. [I quickly asked about why Islam largely seems immune to criticism, compared with Christianity.] Well, that is what has happened [laughs].

On the unexpected Brexit result, Swinburne unashamedly declared, "I voted leave".<sup>27</sup> Without a hint of racism or Islamophobia, and without also

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<sup>26</sup> On the coach ride from London to Oxford, I was shocked to see posters warning against FGM, plastered all over Oxfordshire. See Figure 3. For more information on this serious issue, see Oxford Against Cutting. 'The Facts', at <http://oxfordagainstcutting.org/facts>. Accessed 09/09/2016.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding Brexit and then Trump's recent successful bid for the presidency of the USA, it is purported that the unexpected results (at least if polls were consulted), were caused by silent majorities unwilling to publicly share their less than politically correct views. For

touching on economic concerns, he explained that he thinks that democracy works better “in smaller units”. Unimpressed by the prospect of European parliamentary candidates of whom the British know nothing about, Swinburne asserts that, “people would feel very alienated, as they do at the moment”. He also mentioned the great hostility towards European directives, such as what can be called ‘chocolate’. To Swinburne, democracy “works okay at Athens” and in communities with the same language and similar backgrounds, but “get beyond that and people feel alienated, that’s why I voted that way”.

### **Conclusion**

Swinburne seemed unwilling or unable to properly address one of my biggest challenges to his – and others philosophers’ – defence of theism; that supernaturalistic alternatives to theism are more – or at least just as – probable. His assertions about simplicity assumed too much, often involving misunderstandings about the alternative hypotheses, and, without transparent calculations, are ultimately irrelevant. Until it is decisively demonstrated that (what theists consider to be) the simpler theories are more probable, and are sufficiently more probable than the alternatives, considerations of the former do not truly aid the analysis. Similarly, Swinburne’s attempt to defend the notion of the unembodied mind justified only its logical possibility, not its probability.

While Swinburne’s responses to some of my other questions were interesting, such as his idea that theism entails a Gospel-like scenario, it was unfortunate that none persuaded me to think better of the case for theism and for Christian theism. It was also disheartening to discover that he had not yet properly engaged and addressed Philipse’s comprehensive critique of his life’s work. Nevertheless, I can only be thankful that Swinburne invited me into his sanctuary, and was so generous with his time. Interestingly, we were seemingly able to find some common ground regarding the dangers of naïve approaches to multiculturalism and immigration.

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more on this type of phenomenon, with a focus on the specific form known as the ‘Bradley effect’, see J. Gregory Payne, ‘The Bradley Effect: Mediated Reality of Race and Politics in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2010), pp. 417-435.