Richard Swinburne, REVELATION: FROM METAPHOR TO ANALOGY

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That serious worries of this sort can be raised about Swinburne’s theory of the atonement is in a certain sense the best indicator of the excellence of this book. When Anselm wrote his treatise on the atonement, he thought that nothing which Christian tradition had bequeathed him about the atonement was worth discussing at any length, and perhaps he was right. His own theory of the atonement, which has a family resemblance to Swinburne’s, is not nearly so well worked out, or so worthy of critical examination, as Swinburne’s is. By trying to produce a detailed and philosophically coherent account of the atonement which is true to biblical texts and Christian tradition, on the one hand, and our moral intuitions, on the other, Swinburne has done us all a great service. Philosophers and theologians interested in the atonement must grapple with the issues raised by Swinburne’s account.4

NOTES

1. Braving the trends of the age in this as in other respects, Swinburne has decided to retain the use of ‘man’ for the species and ‘he’ as the non-gender-specific pronoun. Bravery is in general admirable and appealing, but misplaced, I think, in this case.

2. See, for example, Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1985). In summing up, Hallie says, “Trocme and This [the two pastors who led the work of rescuing Jews in Le Chambon] believed that if they failed to protect those [Jewish refugees] in Le Chambon, they, the ministers, would share the guilt of the evil ones who actually perpetrated the harldoing” (p. 283).

3. In correspondence, Swinburne has agreed with this point but said that “God provides [penance] for us in order that we may be able to bring it.” It is true that if God provides human beings with a costly present they otherwise would not have been able to provide themselves, then they may have some obligation to use it and God may have some right to require that they do so. On this position, then, Christ’s atonement is not a response to some preexisting moral need on the part of human beings but rather creates a moral obligation which was not there before. This conclusion, which strikes me as infelicitous, only sharpens the worry raised in the next paragraph.

4. I am grateful to Norman Kretzmann and Richard Swinburne for helpful questions and comments on an earlier draft of this review.


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In this historically rich but theologically controversial book, Richard Swinburne discusses the grounds for believing that some book or creed or act conveys revealed truth in propositional form, devoting well over half the book to a discussion of the Christian revelation.

Part I is a primer in philosophy of language designed as a prolegomenon
to his later discussion on how to understand what the message of the purported revelation is. Part II considers the tests by which one can recognize something as revealed truth.

Part III applies the results of Parts I and II to the Christian revelation in order to see what factors are relevant in assessing its truth and in understanding its message. Swinburne limits his discussion to the teachings of Jesus through word and deed. Although Swinburne makes many significant points on interpretation, for reasons of space, I shall limit my discussion to a position that is crucial to Part III. Swinburne believes that since the Bible is historically unreliable according to secular standards, we need a Church to identify, preserve, and correctly interpret the original revelation. The main purpose in writing Part III seems to be to justify the Church's interpretive beliefs and practices. As I see it, the discussion in Chapter 7 is the Achilles heel of Part III, for Swinburne has wholeheartedly bought into the results of higher criticism. Thus from the standpoint of historical investigation, we can reach only "a somewhat vague conclusion as to the general tenor of Christ's message" (p. 106). However, we have a little more evidence of some of Jesus' deeds as opposed to his words. There is a group of acts that indicate that Jesus intended to found a Church, and that he intended this Church to be the promulgator and interpreter of his message. The Resurrection is God's vindication of Jesus's teaching, including his teaching that his Church would be the vehicle for the promulgation and interpretation of his teaching. If God did vindicate the teaching of Jesus, then he thereby guaranteed that the Church's interpretation would be basically correct. It follows from this that we know a lot more about the teaching of Jesus than historical inquiry could reveal. Jesus taught what the Church said he taught. The New Testament is a basically reliable account of what Jesus said and did because the Church said it was (pp. 107-13).

To see how crucial these matters are, one need look only at the conclusions drawn in subsequent chapters. Swinburne proposes two tests for identifying the Church. The test of doctrine is the test of who has the correct interpretation of the original revelation. Although there are internal criteria for determining the best interpretation, these are not sufficient. We need an external criterion for correct interpretation, i.e., that the interpretation was developed in a Church which is the closest continuer of the Church of the apostles. This is the test of continuity. The reason that the internal criteria are not sufficient is that if they were, then the true Church would be identified by the correctness of interpretation. But, Swinburne argues, it is the true Church that is the guarantor of the correct interpretation. If someone wants to know the correct interpretation, he should look to the ecclesiastical body which is the same church as the apostolic Church (pp. 122-29). (The test of continuity is the more important test since it seems that one determines true doctrine by true organization.)
The consequence of all this, although not an explicit conclusion drawn by Swinburne, is that no individual is in a position to show the Church that its interpretation is wrong. This could only happen where correctness of interpretation is determined by the usual textual criteria of interpretation; linguistic, contextual etc. Thus the interpretive beliefs and practices of the Church are correct and authoritative.

Another consequence of Swinburne’s discussion is that the Scriptures must be interpreted in light of the tradition of interpretation in the Church (p. 139). This tradition of interpretation includes the creeds.

A further consequence is that the authority of the Scriptures derives from the Church’s recognition of their inspired nature. Thus, the authority of the Scriptures depends upon the authority of the Church. Since that is the case, their interpretation must be compatible with central Christian doctrine as formulated by the Church (pp. 192-93).

The final consequence is that we will have to accept some metaphorical interpretation of the Bible that might otherwise be unacceptable. What constitutes metaphorical interpretation for Swinburne is not clear, but it certainly includes allegory, typology, and symbolism. In patristic times and in the Middle Ages it was held that every passage of Scripture had at least one metaphorical interpretation (p. 188). Everyone knows that ludicrous interpretations were often given to passages, and no doubt this problem was exacerbated by the belief that they had to find some metaphorical interpretation for every passage. But Swinburne says that we need only give this view “some weight” because “of its early and sustained place in the teaching of the Church...” (p. 188). But if this view had an early and sustained acceptance, then why isn’t it a part of the tradition of interpretation that we all must accept?

In making a further evaluation, let us begin with the historical reliability of the Bible. My remarks must necessarily be limited and suggestive since this is quite a large topic. We can start with Swinburne’s own principle of testimony.¹ Other things being equal, what other people tell us they perceived probably happened. There must be positive grounds for supposing that what they report is not the case.² The higher critics, and Swinburne, say that there are positive grounds for not believing what the New Testament writers report. They say that such things as poor memory, poor sources, doctrinal bias, and the desire to meet the religious needs of their readers all combine to render the Bible historically unreliable. The question is whether they have met the burden of proof. It seems probable that Jesus, as any good teacher, repeated himself several times. Furthermore, memorization was a very important principle of religious education in the 1st century. In addition, surely the disciples considered the words and deeds of their Lord as worthy of memorizing.³ These factors weigh heavily against a poor memory accusation. The latter consideration weighs heavily against the accusation that the disciples subtly changed the message or even added new material because of doctrinal bias
or the need to meet the concerns of their readers. Wouldn’t they have con-
sidered the words and deeds of their Lord so sacred that they wouldn’t dare
do such a thing? (This factor may account for the fact that parallel accounts
of Jesus’s words have fewer deviations than parallel accounts of Jesus’s
deeds. This fact cuts against Swinburne’s contention that we have more
historical access to Jesus’s deeds than words.) Further, to “create” material
would be to put this material on the same level with Jesus’s own authentic
teaching. Would they have made themselves as great as Christ?

No doubt the needs of the Christian community had an influence on pre-
serving the gospel materials, but this does not mean that the materials were
changed to meet those needs. Furthermore, the needs and interests of the
community were no doubt shaped by the gospel materials.

The early church thought that historical reliability was important, and
moreover, they thought they had it. In I Corinthians 15: 3-19, Paul implies
that historical reliability is based upon a reliable transmission of the gospel
material from the eyewitnesses. There is no indication that he thinks the
tradition is reliable because the Church says so. Also Swinburne points out
that “Christian writers of the first two centuries were concerned to show that
the teaching which they had received from the apostles really did come from
those who had heard and seen the Lord…” (p. 102). This sounds like an
application of the principle of testimony. If the Bible is historically reliable
according to historical standards, then it becomes possible for individuals
using internal criteria alone to interpret the original revelation.

Let us suppose that the above considerations, as well as others, are not
telling, and that the Gospel accounts do not reliably preserve the words and
deeds of Jesus according to secular standards of historical inquiry. But, Swin-
burne says, they are reliable because the Church said so. But if the Gospels
are historically unreliable according to such standards, how does the Church’s
say so make them reliable? Can the Church make a silk purse out of a sow’s
ear? If there were poor memories, doctrinal bias, and changing of the material
to meet the community’s needs, then the Church’s declaration changes none
of that. It is more likely that the Church’s recognition of the inspired nature
of the Gospels arose partly out of a recognition of their historical reliabil-
ity—partly based upon the principle of testimony—rather than their historical
reliability arising out of the Church’s recognition of their inspired nature.
Either the Church or the higher critics are right but not both.

Is Swinburne’s argument plausible that God guaranteed the basic correct-
ness of the Church’s interpretations? We can agree that the Resurrection was
God’s authentication of Jesus’s teachings in word and deed. We can agree
that certain deeds showed that Jesus intended to found a Church, and that the
Church would be the vehicle for spreading his teaching. Does it follow that
God guaranteed that the Church’s interpretation of that teaching would be
basically correct and the Church practically infallible? It seems reasonable
to assume that there would be no point in giving a revelation that most people would misconstrue.

Must then the Church's interpretations be accepted, and no major part of past doctrine rejected? There are three considerations. First of all, it depends upon how one thinks of the Church. Swinburne thinks of the Church as the visible Church, an organization. The alternative is to think of the Church as the invisible Church, the company of the redeemed. Swinburne does not argue for his view, and it is not clear which way Jesus is thinking of the Church when he entrusts his teaching to it. However, there is one consideration in favor of the invisible Church, at least with respect to the interpretation of the original revelation. Christians have held that the person who has the best understanding of the Scriptures is the person who is pure in heart and who has the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The company of the redeemed fits this description better than the visible Church. The visible Church will include the unredeemed, and this raises the possibility that an ecclesiastical body could be mistaken. Thus the invisible Church is more likely to be correct and thus practically infallible.

The second consideration comes from Acts 17: 10-11. When Paul preached the gospel to the Bereans, they were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. They didn't just take his word for it. This suggests that each individual is to search the Scriptures for himself and not just take the word of human authority. But Swinburne's argument suggests that individuals are supposed to take the Church's word as to proper interpretation.

The last consideration involves the construal of Swinburne's claim that the Church's interpretation will be basically correct. This could mean that the Church will be basically correct on every point of doctrine, on every major point of doctrine, on most points of doctrine, or on most major points of doctrine. Swinburne does not tell us which way he is thinking of his claim. However, the Church could be practically infallible with respect to individual Christians only on the first construal of his claim. On the other construals, individual Christians in certain instances are still able to correct the Church. But the first construal could be true only if the Church had substantial agreement on every point of doctrine. Obviously, this is not the case.

I realize that much, if not all, of what I have said is controversial, but this just illustrates the initial point that this book is theologically controversial. A lot more argumentation by Swinburne is needed.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 271.
BOOK REVIEWS

4. Ibid., p. 225.
5. Ibid.


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This collection explores a number of new directions in religious ethics. It comes at a time when new directions seem necessary to navigate this well-trodden field, for there is in politics, in religion and in the academy a new and heightened awareness of the pluralism to which the volume's subtitle refers. Moreover, as the book's preface and cover text suggest, pluralism now meets with a different attitude than once it did. Pluralism, editor Joseph Runzo writes, once seemed a "regrettable set of wounds to be sutured" (p. xii). Now "[p]eople living in a pluralistic age [...] consider it both natural and enriching for humankind."

There are, of course, a plurality of pluralisms and exploring the new directions all demand would be an enormous task. The preface suggests that *Ethics, Religion and the Good Society* will treat of just two: pluralism "within a specific religious tradition, like Christianity" (p. xii) and "the collective pluralism of the great world religious traditions" (p. xii). In fact these remarks significantly understate the scope of this ambitious anthology.

The book contains twelve essays, plus brief comments on five of them. In the first, Brian Hebblethwaite defends a plurality of models of the good Christian life. In the second, Robert Adams offers a metaphysics of goodness that purports to explain the plurality of intrinsic goods. Two essays on Christianity and social philosophy take as their starting point the pluralism of contemporary liberal democracies. John Langan's essay does not address any form of pluralism, but contributes to the pluralistic character of the volume by providing a Catholic voice. There is a section on religious pluralism world-wide, with contributions by Buddhist and Islamic scholars. The book's closing essay suggests that there are a plurality of moral "voices," since it alleges the distinctiveness of female moral experience. The essays together exhibit a plurality of methods, ranging from Adams's philosophical argument to McClendon's biographical approach. Runzo's own essay considers a pu-