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BOOK REVIEWS

The Resurrection of God Incarnate, by Richard Swinburne. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Pp. viii and 224. \$24.95 (paper).

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For the past few decades Richard Swinburne, recently retired as the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford, has produced a massive body of work in which he has articulated a philosophical case for the central claims of Christian theism. In addition to defending the rationality of belief in God, Swinburne has also defended distinctively Christian doctrines, including Trinity, incarnation, atonement, revelation, heaven and hell. These doctrines however, particularly Trinity, incarnation and atonement, depend in a significant sense on another doctrine, namely the resurrection of Jesus.

Here we can draw an important distinction between the order of being and the order of knowing. In the order of being, Trinity, incarnation and atonement precede resurrection. Christians believe God existed from all eternity in the three persons of the Trinity. At a certain point in time, the second person of the Trinity became incarnate and died to atone for the sins of the world, after which he was raised from the dead.

But the order of knowing is just the opposite. Christians know these great truths only in light of the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. It was the resurrection that demonstrated that Jesus was more than a man, that he was in fact the Son of God incarnate. It was the resurrection that showed that his death on the cross was not merely the tragic death of an innocent man, but rather a decisive act of God to atone for the sins of the world. And subsequent reflection on all of this, along with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, led to the formulation of the doctrine of Trinity. Thus, in the order of knowing, the resurrection as a fact of history is a foundation stone in the edifice of Christian belief. It is crucial then to Swinburne's project that he should offer a defense of this vital component of the Christian creed.

Swinburne's primary purpose in this book is to examine the evidence for what he calls "the core physical element of the Resurrection of Jesus understood in the traditional sense—of Jesus being dead for thirty six hours and then coming to life again in his crucified body" (p. 1). He makes



it clear from the outset, however, that his book is very different from typical books written by New Testament scholars on this issue. Indeed, only the last third of the book focuses on what such scholars think is relevant to the issue, namely, what the New Testament tells us about what happened after the death of Christ. Before coming to this material, Swinburne believes other issues must be addressed and other judgments made before we are in a position to assess the reliability of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

Swinburne notes that New Testament scholars sometimes boast that they go about their research without bringing theological claims into the picture. If they actually do this, he sees this as a sign of “deep irrationality” for to proceed in this fashion is essentially to ignore 95 per cent of the relevant evidence. It is this evidence that gives us prior reason to suppose such an event as the resurrection could even occur, and if it could, how likely it would be to do so. But in fact, Swinburne is convinced, no one actually approaches the New Testament evidence neutrally. “What tends to happen is that background theological considerations—whether for or against the resurrection—play an unacknowledged role in determining whether the evidence is strong enough. These considerations need to be put on the table if the evidence is to be weighed properly” (p. 3).

In keeping with this conviction, Swinburne spends the first two thirds of his book laying his cards on the table. And of course, any good card player needs to understand the relevant probabilities before making his crucial moves, and those familiar with Swinburne’s earlier work will not be surprised that probability plays a major role in the discussion.

He begins with a general account of principles for weighing evidence, including a critique of Hume’s famous argument against miracles. He contends that Hume’s biggest mistake was to suppose that the only relevant background theory we can establish from wider evidence was a theory about laws of nature. He did not sufficiently inquire whether we have reason to believe such laws are ultimate, and what difference it makes in our judgments about the probability of miracles if there is a God on whom such laws depend.

He concludes the first chapter with his understanding of what he calls “The Structure of Resurrection Evidence,” a discussion that is central to his whole approach. While initial evidence for resurrection will consist of such factors as testimony, memory and physical traces, there will also be counter evidence such as discrepancies in the testimony, countertestimony, alternative hypotheses about what happened, and the like.

But the biggest issue in weighing the evidence is the one he takes up with Hume, namely, whether the laws of nature are the ultimate determinants of what happens. If they are, then the physical core of the resurrection reports is very unlikely indeed. The best we could have in this case, he thinks, would be a standoff. That is, if laws of nature are ultimate they render it extremely unlikely that such an event as the resurrection could occur, and if we had detailed historical evidence that it did, we would be at an impasse. It is crucial to Swinburne’s whole case that there is good reason to believe that God exists, and thus, to deny that laws of nature are ultimate. For purposes of his argument, he insists only on the moderate

claim that the evidence from natural theology renders it as probable as not that God exists.

Next he turns to the question of whether it is likely, if there is a God, that he would become incarnate given that he is perfectly good. Swinburne thinks there are several good reasons, including: to provide atonement, to identify with our suffering and to provide information and encouragement. Of course, all of these reasons fit quite nicely with the Christian account of why God in fact became incarnate as Jesus, indeed, perhaps too neatly, a critic might charge. Swinburne is aware of this difficulty, and readily grants that we need the Christian tradition to make us aware of a theory of what we might expect a divine being to do in this regard before we can judge by objective standards whether or not evidence supports the theory.

There is obviously a sort of circularity here, but he does not believe it is a vicious one. In support of this, he points out similar examples, such as the theory of general relativity. While most scientists could not have invented the theory for themselves, once it has been proposed, they would be in a position to evaluate whether or not evidence supports it. At any rate, Swinburne concludes that the reasons given are plausible enough, if there is a God, to believe he would become incarnate. And, in keeping with his modest assessment of the previous chapter, he suggests that these reasons make it as probable as not, that he would do so.

Similar arguments are mustered as Swinburne considers the marks of an incarnate God. His public behavior must be characteristic of a perfect life, he must teach us how to live, he must show that he believes he is God incarnate, he must teach that his life provides atonement, and he must found a church to propagate his teaching. These are what Swinburne calls the prior requirements for being God incarnate, but these requirements alone are not enough to give us convincing reason to believe a prophet who satisfied them would be divine. In addition to these, there is also the posterior requirement, namely, that "the prophet's life needs to be signed by a super miracle" (p. 62).

Jesus obviously is a candidate to satisfy both the prior and the posterior requirements if there is good reason to believe he was in fact raised from the dead. The resurrection would certainly qualify as a super miracle. It is crucial to Swinburne's argument that there is no other prophet in history for whom there is good historical evidence that he meets both requirements. Moreover, he contends that it is very unlikely we would have such a configuration of evidence in a godless universe. Likewise, it is very unlikely, if God exists, that he would bring this about unless the prophet in question were indeed God incarnate, for to do so would involve massive deception his part.

In the second part of his book, Swinburne turns to the actual historical evidence to determine whether and to what extent Jesus meets the prior requirements specified in the first part. He concedes that the evidence is not always exactly what we would expect to find, for example, with respect to implying his divinity. But overall, he believes Jesus satisfies far better than any other known figure from history the prior criteria for being God incarnate, and thus the sort of person whose life and teaching God

would sign with a super-miracle. But “what is crucial for the probability of the Resurrection is that the probability of finding the kinds of evidence we do should be far greater for Jesus than for any other prophet; and that there should be a modest probability (maybe much less than) that we should find the kind of evidence with Jesus that we do” (p. 141).

In the third part of his book, Swinburne comes at last to examine the historical evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead, and thus satisfies the posterior requirement as well. In addition to the accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus, he also considers the evidence for the empty tomb, for the significance of Sunday in Christian worship, as well as rival accounts of what happened. While his discussion is concise, he deals with the central critical issues and offers a plausible way of reconciling the various accounts of the resurrection appearances in the New Testament. He concludes that it is improbable we would have the evidence we do if any of the rival accounts were true, but if Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, the data we have is to be expected.

Swinburne’s book closes with an appendix in which he formalizes his argument, deploying the machinery of the probability calculus. These final pages will no doubt be of particular interest to philosophers. Without giving all the details, it will perhaps be sufficient to pique curiosity to note that Swinburne calculates that on the total evidence it is “something like 0.97” probable that “God became incarnate in Jesus Christ who rose from the dead” (p. 214). (Readers should note, incidentally, an apparent typographical error has misplaced a parenthesis in Swinburne’s equation on p. 213). It is also worth highlighting that in a final footnote Swinburne briefly addresses what Alvin Plantinga has called the “principle of dwindling probabilities,” a problem Plantinga contends has bedeviled Swinburne’s earlier probabilistic arguments for the Christian creed. He hopes his argument in this book is immune to this difficulty.

Inevitably, an argument of this complexity involves numerous judgments of probability that others may find controversial, such as Swinburne’s judgment that the evidence of natural theology makes it at least as likely as not that God exists. Likewise, the argument depends on contested judgments about the reliability of the New Testament text. And surely some will think Swinburne has let himself off too easily in his explanation of why it is proper to deploy ideas from Christian theology in his theory of the prior requirements for being God incarnate.

Still, Swinburne has provided a fascinating way to state formally and rigorously the judgments and intuitions of persons who think the resurrection of Jesus is a belief that is well supported by historical and rational considerations. And he is surely right that the broader background evidence and what he terms the prior historical evidence should be given more attention than it often is in these debates. Those who resonate with Swinburne’s approach will appreciate this volume for closing an important gap in his impressive case for the rationality of Christian theism.