

# RICHARD SWINBURNE: CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST

FRANK MOBBS

## PART ONE

**P**HILOSOPHERS who are theologians have been making outstanding contributions in recent years to the explication and defence of Christian belief. My purpose in offering this report on philosopher/theologian Richard Swinburne is to furnish a weapon for the Christian apologist (defender of the faith) with which to defend his belief in God from the attacks of the current brigade of popular atheists.

There is a great need for apologists, defenders of the Christian Faith. One cannot even start to present a case for Christianity, if the hearer does not believe in God. Some 16% of Australians say, in the national census, that they have no religion. Most are atheists. In the Netherlands some 40% are atheists. They are a fast growing sector of the US population. Yet most Catholics of my acquaintance, including theologians, reject any attempt to argue for the existence of God. Producing apologists is an uphill task.

Here Richard Swinburne can help. He belongs to the tradition of Analytic Philosophy. Archbishop Eric D'Arcy, himself an outstanding philosopher, argued forcefully in 1997 for the importance for theology of this philosophical tradition.<sup>1</sup> He said that the twenty-first century could well see the first golden age of English-speaking systematic theology, provided 'that Modern Logic, and the Analytic Philosophy evolved out of it are made intrinsic to the theological process.'<sup>2</sup>

What distinguishes analytic philosophers? Careful analysis of uses of language and definition of concepts, and, as D'Arcy says,

clarity in statement, sharpness and depth in analysis, rigour and tautness in argument. Such philosophers have no use for key concepts which are fuzzy, and they are quick to point out instances of meaningless pieces of language.

Many readers will be aware of the great care that St Thomas Aquinas took in framing precise questions, and in defining terms and concepts. His standards do not meet those of twentieth century philosophers, however. As D'Arcy says, philosophers are now writing theology 'with a penetration never before possible.'

### *Richard Swinburne*

He is retired after holding the Chair of Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at the University of Oxford. In an intellectual autobiography he tells us that he entered Oxford in 1954 as a convinced Christian. Soon he discovered that sophisticated intellectuals were basically anti-Christian, mostly materialists. Worse was the realisation that Christian preachers were doing nothing to answer the despisers of Christianity, relying on the notion that religion was a matter of 'faith' or commitment, not one of rational assessment and, consequently, making no attempt to show that reason had a place in establishing the foundations of Christianity. These preachers derived their philosophy from Continental philosophers who are characterised by 'a certain sloppiness of argument, a tendency to draw big, vague general pictures of the Universe, without spelling them out very precisely or justifying them very thoroughly'.<sup>4</sup>

Oxford philosophy was dominated by

ordinary language philosophy. A central tenet of it was that discussion needs to 'begin with words used in their ordinary sense, even if thereafter one introduced new technical terms by means of the former.'<sup>5</sup> Swinburne fully subscribes to that philosophy.

By this time he was convinced that modern theoretical science dominated the world view of both academics and the man in the street. He spent ten years studying it. Early in this study he realised that science posited theoretical entities—atoms, electrons, quarks—far beyond observation. These entities were posited to explain what was observed. Why could not God be posited as a theoretical entity: one which would explain how things are, but which itself is not observable?

It was at this time that I discovered that someone else had the programme to use the best science and philosophy of his day to rigorously establish Christian theology. I read Part I of the *Summa Theologiae* of St Thomas Aquinas.<sup>6</sup>

This is significant, for if one reads Swinburne's works, one notices his deep acquaintance with St Thomas, whom he frequently cites.

In 1963 Swinburne took a lectureship at the University of Hull. He began a life-time project of demonstrating that the foundations of Christian theology can be justified by appeal to the canons of science. The key to this project is the notion of probability. Much modern science is based upon estimates of probability. Indeed, Swinburne came to the view that all beliefs are estimates of probability. However, in order to prepare the ground for an argument for the existence of God based on probability, he wrote two substantial works: *Space and Time* (1968) and *Introduction to Confirmation Theory* (1973). This is typical of Swinburne. In order to establish one step in an argument he is planning to produce, he first writes a whole book proving the one step.

What he was planning was a new proof for the existence of God. In 1972 he became Professor of Philosophy at the University of Keele, and began to write his famous trilogy on the claim that there is a God: *The Coherence*



*Frank Mobbs is retired after teaching for 25 years in institutes of higher education in England, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Queensland & Victoria*

*of Theism* (1977), *The Existence of God* (1979), and *Faith and Reason* (1981). Then he wrote *The Evolution of the Soul* (1986) to prove substance dualism, that minds are not material, 'the essential part of the person must be something other than the body'.

He was already planning four books on specifically Christian doctrines when he became Nolloth Professor at Oxford. Since then he has produced the four books, plus many more, and numerous articles. These writings are of great value to apologists.

I have dealt only with the development of his philosophical theology. His personal history warrants a mention. The Nolloth Professorship is traditionally held by an Anglican. Swinburne was an Anglican until some years ago, when he transferred to the Greek Orthodox Church.

### ***Proving the Existence of God***

I want to focus on Swinburne's proof for the existence of God. It has features which may be novel to Christian readers.

In *The Coherence of Theism*<sup>7</sup>, Swinburne argued that the traditional concept of God is coherent, that is, makes sense. It is not possible to prove or disprove that there is a four-sided circle, because such a concept is incoherent. There is nothing to prove. There are philosophers who argue that the very notion of God is like that of a four-sided circle: it does not make sense, so it is pointless to try to prove or disprove the existence of God. In this book Swinburne methodically argued that there is a notion of God that makes sense. Note that a

290 page book is devoted to the analysis of concepts—a mark of the analytical philosopher.

It is a further and altogether different question to ask: Does this thing exist? Swinburne's answer to this question lies in *The Existence of God*.<sup>8</sup> His argument for God's existence can be described as an argument based on an accumulation of probabilities. Traditional arguments for God's existence, e.g. those of St Thomas, take a set of premisses from which the conclusion 'God exists' must follow. These are deductive arguments. Swinburne employs inductive arguments which are of a different form: the evidence cited in the premisses makes 'God exists' more probable than 'God does not exist'. So the conclusion is more weakly established than that of a deductive argument. Swinburne is not bothered by this at all, because he points to the behaviour of scientists who appeal to probability all the time. His argument is that his proof for God's existence meets the standards of science; hence, it is as rational to believe in God's existence as it is to believe in the existence of atoms, quarks, black holes, minds, and the unconscious in humans, or the process of organic evolution. We cannot observe these things, but their existence better explains what we observe than their non-existence.

How does Swinburne's proof go? Not everything is explained by the existence of God. But some sets of evidence are best explained by God's existence. These evidences are: (1) a complex physical universe exists; (2) there is a general pattern of regularities of succession (physical laws); (3) the universe contains conscious beings, notably humans; (4) there appear to be providential features of the universe: the cosmos provides for basic needs of men and animals; (5) the cosmos provides opportunities for humans to cultivate a good moral character, and goodness of character is a very great good; (6) revelation: history contains abundant reports of prophets and men of God who seem to have communicated information from God; (7) religious experience: vast numbers of humans report religious experiences.

However dubious we are about most of these reports, they are too widespread and persistent to be dismissed.

These are facts. How do we explain their existence? Maybe there is no explanation. Things do not have to have an explanation. But a scientific mind tries to find an explanation, and is not satisfied until it has an explanation or is certain that none is obtainable.

On this basis, Swinburne begins to try to find an explanation for the occurrence of the seven sets of evidence. He argues that on the basis of our background beliefs, *i. e.* the beliefs we have prior to trying to find an explanation, we would have a low expectation that any of these things would occur, if God did not exist. God's existence raises significantly the probability that they would occur.

So let us adopt as a hypothesis that God does exist, where God is defined as having these properties: God is a personal being (having powers to act intentionally, and having purposes and beliefs); his powers are infinite (he can bring about any event he chooses); he is omniscient (whatever proposition is true, God knows that it is true); he is perfectly free; he is eternal in the sense of being everlasting (at any time, God exists); he is the creator and sustainer of the universe; and he is perfectly morally good.

If there is such a being, argues Swinburne, it is significantly more probable that the seven sets of evidence would exist than if it were the case that God did not exist. One set of evidence does not make it sufficiently probable that God exists. But as we add each set of evidence, it increases the probability of God's existence, just as in a murder case the one fact that the accused had a motive does not settle that he is the killer, but if we add that he was at the scene of the crime when it was committed, that he was seen to be armed, and so on—each piece of evidence increases the probability that he committed the murder. God is the best explanation for the occurrence of the seven sets of evidence; therefore, it is more probable

than not that God exists, so it is rational to believe in God.

## PART TWO

### *His argument for the existence of God in more detail*

I cannot convince you that God exists, if you do not care whether he exists or not. Nor can you convince me of the truth of atheism, if I could not care less whether God exists. One is likely to care if he has a clear idea of the nature of God. In Part One I sketched the essential properties of God: God brought into existence all that exists and keeps it in existence whilst it exists. What a marvellous being is that! Moreover God is said to be unsurpassingly good and makes possible our lasting and deep happiness. It is very worthwhile investigating whether he exists.

So let us examine in more detail the argument summarised in Part One. Of course, I am summarising a detailed and technical argument.

The philosopher, Aristotle, said philosophy begins by wondering. Science is similar in that scientists begin by wondering why things behave the way they do. Both are looking for explanations. We are looking for an explanation for something—the existence of a complex physical universe. It is enormously complex. But it is possible that this sort of universe did not exist. It could have been simple: one inert atom of hydrogen, for example. So a universe could be much simpler or more complex than the actual universe; the range of possibilities is immense. Why this one?

A possible answer is that the present universe is the result of a previous state of the universe. Thus we commonly explain something. But why does the previous state cause the present state? Because the previous one had the power and the liability (tendency) to do so. But why those precise powers and tendencies rather than any other of the vast possible range of powers and tendencies? We tend to think that things could not be different. But there is no limit to these possibilities. Yet

all the possibilities would have to be eliminated to get a state of the universe which would produce the present state.

It is common to offer a scientific explanation at this point. Such an explanation employs as data (a) the set of initial conditions of the universe and (b) the laws obtaining at that time and thereafter. But why the precise set of initial conditions and laws? Science cannot answer that question. Maybe there is no explanation. However, consider as a hypothesis that there exists at all times a being bearing the description of God that I have given. Such a being has the power to bring about this or any other universe, knows how to do so, is free to do so, and has good reasons to do so. Such reasons include providing for the possible occurrence of humans with capacities for knowing and controlling things, and for building a good character and achieving lasting happiness. Such a universe could also be beautiful. God could have good reason to bring about such a universe, whereas God could not have a good reason to bring about a universe consisting of an inert atom. Were the universe one inert atom, the atom would furnish insignificant confirmation for the hypothesis that God exists.

Let us consider the second set of evidence: the law-like behaviours of all physical things. The same laws of nature govern the most distant galaxies we can observe through our telescopes as operate on earth, and the same laws govern the earliest events in time to which we can infer as operate today.<sup>19</sup> If things behave in the same way every time, one seeks for an explanation of the sameness. Is there an explanation for the occurrence of these laws?

Maybe there is no explanation but that does not prevent our trying to discover one.

To this end, suppose there exists a being with power to bring about the laws, and who brings it about that they do operate, and who could have good reason to bring them about. One good reason is that humans could come to know how things work and thus learn to control them, and thus live and achieve goals

and satisfaction. A world containing human persons is a very good thing.

So the hypothesis that God's existence and choices explain why things behave in law-like ways is confirmed by the evidence. Given God, we would have some degree of expectation of such regularity. Without God, we would have a much lower expectation. The manifest regularity, then, better confirms the hypothesis that God exists than does the hypothesis that he does not.

That the universe contains conscious beings, notably humans, constitutes the third set of evidence which Swinburne considers.

The universe could have been exactly the same as the existing one, except that it contained no conscious beings, animals and humans. The occurrence of conscious beings is extremely rare. As far as we know, such beings occur only on planet Earth. Not only that, the conditions in nearly all the universe are ferociously hostile to life, and even more hostile to conscious life, and such conditions are many and exact.

From what we know of the universe, there is a very low probability that animals and humans would exist, for they have minds (souls).<sup>10</sup> Minds have mental properties such as sensations, desires, beliefs, and purposes, and are joined to bodies. Is there an explanation for this fact? It is much more probable that minds would exist if something like a person chose to bring them about than if the normal processes of nature took place.

The fifth set of evidence is the existence of providential features of the universe. The universe contains (1) humans with felt desires and opportunities to satisfy those desires; (2) interdependence: opportunities for human co-operation; (3) opportunities for influencing others, and for increasing each other's power, knowledge, and freedom; (4) moral capacities, including the capacity to cultivate a good character; (5) brevity of life, which gives seriousness to our decisions: they do make important differences; (5) opportunities for limitless growth in knowledge, control over

the world, and for the exercise of responsibility.

In citing these evidences, Swinburne is challenging our taking them for granted. They cry out for explanation. How is it that in all this unimaginably vast and complex and mindless universe—how can we explain their improbable presence?

Were there to exist a being with a mind, beliefs, intentions, power, knowledge, and who is good in the sense that he is disposed to promote good things, the existence of this being would make the fact of the providential features more likely than otherwise. The evidence confirms the hypothesis of the existence of God.

### *The Problem of Evil*

The ascription of goodness to the creator and sustainer of the universe seems to be contradicted by the presence of much evil. Evil is of two kinds: natural (*e.g.* diseases and earthquakes) and moral (*e.g.* deceiving and murdering). If there is God, then he could have created a universe in which such evils did not occur, or in which only lesser evils occurred.

So runs the objection which social research shows to be the commonest cause for rejection of belief in God.

Swinburne does not deny the existence of evil. Evil exists as surely as goodness. He argues God is good in the same way as, say, a human father is good.

Swinburne picks out the assumptions behind the argument from evil. They are that a good person (a) never permits evils or (b) permits evils less than those of some given level.

But, replies Swinburne, there seem to be many good persons who not only allow evils but also promote them. They are good persons in that they permit and promote evils in order to promote a greater good. Examiners fail students and judges impose penalties to promote a greater good. And they are good persons. In general, the greater goods that God makes possible are those of humans' capacities

to make very important choices, to exercise vast responsibility, and to form noble characters. These are very great goods. However, it is impossible for them to occur unless there are evils. Humans must have the capacity to harm others, and to control natural forces so as harm, and be inclined to promote evils yet be able to resist (often with difficulty) temptations to do evil. Also the universe must contain a mixture of natural goods and evils, which must, to some extent, be beyond human control. God could have created a universe with no evils in it, but the consequence would be that there are no good persons.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there is no way of knowing what kinds of evils and degrees thereof are incompatible with there being a good God.

In short, the existence of natural and moral evils supports the hypothesis of the existence of God.

The sixth set of evidence comes from history. Many are the reports of apparent revelations by God to individuals. Many such reports will not stand scrutiny, so can be dismissed. That still leaves reports for which the evidence seems very strong. The evidence for Jesus Christ's being the bearer of a message from God is particularly strong. How can we explain this sort of evidence?

Swinburne's answer is that the kind of God he has been describing so far is a person who

is supremely good and so could be expected to make provision for contact with humans. Revelations are to be expected, if God exists, but not so, if God does not exist. Therefore, the strong evidence for revelations increases the probability for the existence of God.

The vast multitude of claims to religious experience comprises the seventh set of evidence. They pervade the history of every society in every age. It seems to many people that they have had direct experience of something divine.<sup>12</sup>

Swinburne does not think this evidence is compelling—on its own. But on the hypothesis that God exists, such experiences are much more likely to occur if God exists than if he does not. So religious experience goes some way to confirm the existence of God.

Note that God is a personal explanation for the evidences. There are only two ways of explaining the occurrence of anything: scientific or personal. Science can offer some explanation, but not a full one. Only a personal explanation fully explains.<sup>13</sup>

Swinburne's argument for God's existence is very valuable to the apologist because it appeals to scientific method, which has come to dominate thinking, even by those who are unconscious of their use of it. His short book: *Is there a God?* deserves to be mastered by all who seek to defend a rational case for God.

#### NOTES

1. Eric D'Arcy, 'Towards the first golden age', *Australasian Catholic Record* 74 (3) 1997, 294-306.

2. *ibid.*, 294.

Richard Swinburne, 'Intellectual autobiography', in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) edited by Alan G. Padgett, 1-18.

3. *ibid.*, 2.

4. *ibid.*, 3.

5. *ibid.*, 8.

6. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.

7. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, revised edition 1991.

8. Richard Swinburne, *Is there a God?* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 49.

This book of 144 pages provides an excellent summary of Swinburne's *The Existence of God*

(1979) and also answers objections made by critics, notably those of the Australian, J. L. Mackie.

9. Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

10. On the Christian view of Heaven, it is impossible to perform morally good acts there—'[Heaven] lacks a few goods which our world contains, including the good of being able to reject the good.' Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, 113.

11. David Hay has reported the results of his extensive research on claims to have had religious experiences in his *Exploring Inner Space: Is God Still Possible in the Twentieth Century?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

12. '... I do not deny that science explains, but I postulate God to explain why science explains.' Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, 68.