Swinburne on the Atonement: Reflections on Philosophical Theology and Religious Dialogue, by Amir Dastmalchian

Abstract

This study examines an important part of Richard Swinburne's case for the plausibility of Christianity, namely his Atonement theory. My examination begins by presenting Swinburne's theory before alluding to the many criticisms it has attracted. I conclude with some lessons which can be learnt about philosophical theology and its use in inter-religious dialogue. My main contention is that if philosophical theology is going to be used for inter-religious dialogue, then it should not be used with the expectation that disagreements will be overcome.

Introduction

If I were to tell you I had discovered a new planet, or a new tribe in the rainforest, or a new medical treatment it would be natural for you to demand evidence. Similarly, if I were to tell you that there is a triune God with Jesus of Nazareth being God incarnate, sent to humankind for redemption and salvation, then you would also probably want to demand evidence. Perhaps the most recognized Christian philosophical theologian of our times, Richard Swinburne, has sought to provide this evidence. In this paper, I discuss the implications of Swinburne's endeavor for inter-religious dialogue. I focus on one aspect in particular of his case for the plausibility of Christianity, that is, his Atonement theory.[1] I begin by presenting Swinburne's Atonement theory and then alluding to a number of criticisms of the theory. I draw upon my discussion to contend that in inter-religious dialogue the type of philosophical theology employed by Swinburne should not be used with the expectation that inter-religious disagreements will be overcome. Philosophical theology, at best, can only help us clarify our own thoughts, communicate our own intuitions, and make our own religious beliefs seem coherent. The reason for this lies in the divergence of intuition among people and that different people are, therefore, not persuaded by the same arguments.

This contention is in contrast to how Swinburne sees things. Although Swinburne has recognized the limitations of his case for Christianity,[2] there is a clear implication in his writing that beliefs which conflict with Christian beliefs are false, as Swinburne says:

> I do not need to make a detailed investigation [of other religions] if I can show that none of those religions even claim for themselves characteristics to be expected a priori of a true religion and claimed by Christianity, and that there is enough evidence that Christianity does have these

characteristics. For then I will be in a position to argue that there are reasons adequate to show that the Christian religion is more likely to be true than they are.[3]

Swinburne's View of the Atonement

The Atonement doctrine explains the Christian belief that humankind has been saved from the consequences of his disobedience to God by Jesus reconciling humans with God. Jesus is believed to have provided a mechanism for individuals to atone for human sins. The need for an intermediary between man and God in matters of reconciliation is a distinguishing feature of the Christian tradition. Not only do other theistic traditions tend to preach more direct means of reconciliation with God, but the Christian tradition has tended to emphasize the dire need for reconciliation.

The Christian teaching on the Atonement has never received canonical formulation, and many different versions of it have, therefore, been offered. Swinburne's understanding of the Atonement has variably been described as a forgiveness,[4] reparation,[5] and satisfaction-type theory.[6] Swinburne himself calls his understanding of the significance of the life and death of Jesus a sacrifice model.[7]

According to Swinburne, there exist universal moral principles that correspond to objective moral facts such as the badness of killing and the goodness of keeping promises (all things being equal).[8] There is broad consensus among people about what the moral facts are.[9] Swinburne says that a person can be either objectively guilty or both subjectively and objectively guilty.[10] Guilt arises from failure to fulfill obligations, in other words, the performance of actions contrary to universal moral principles. If somebody unwittingly does a wrong, then he is objectively guilty; otherwise, he is both subjectively and objectively guilty. For a wrongdoing person to perfectly remove the guilt with which he has sullied his soul,[11] he must make atonement for his wrong act and be forgiven by his victim.[12] Making atonement for a wrong action is a moral obligation and involves four factors: repentance, apology, reparation, and penance.[13] Making atonement can also be thought of as reconciliation, so when a wrongdoer is seeking to be atoned with his victim, he is seeking to be reconciled with his victim.[14]

The four factors, just mentioned, are involved in making atonement contribute towards undoing the consequences of a wrongful deed. Firstly, making atonement requires repentance, which is an acknowledgement of the wrong nature of the act to oneself and a resolution to amend the situation. Secondly, atonement requires an apology, that is, an expression of repentance to the victim. Thirdly, reparation is needed, in other words compensation to the victim for the harm caused to him. Fourthly, something that is costly to the wrongdoer by way of penance is needed in order for the wrongdoer to express his sorrow and to disown his wrongful act. Swinburne believes that if the wrongdoer is unable to provide the victim with reparation and penance, a

third party may provide it on his behalf.[15] It is good that this be so rather than reparation and penance be waived by the victim, or neglected by the wrongdoer, so that the wrongdoing is not trivialized.

In some cases, not all four factors are required for making atonement. For example, there is no reparation for an insult.[16] When the wrongdoer fulfils his acts of atonement, and when the forgiveness of the victim follows, the process of atonement becomes complete, and the wrongdoer's guilt is removed.[17] If the victim does not forgive, guilt will eventually be removed from the wrongdoer provided that he perseveres with his sincere acts of atonement.[18]

Swinburne says that if there is a God we have a duty to live good lives because we are so utterly dependent on Him for our existence and sustenance[19] and for the gift of life which He has given us.[20] This is a point that Swinburne argues for in greater detail in the first volume of his trilogy. In the context of arguing for the coherence of theism, Swinburne argues that God is, of logical necessity given his other attributes, a source of moral obligation.[21] Given that God exists, wrongdoing is wrongdoing against God and therefore wrongdoing is – according to conventional usage – sin. Even if a person unintentionally commits wrong, this does not detract from his guilt before God and his need to put things right by atoning.[22] Swinburne says that a good God might provide men with the reparation and penance needed for them to atone.[23] The life and death of Jesus – especially his death by crucifixion – would be an adequate reparation and penance. According to Swinburne, the life and death of Jesus is to be understood as an offering of a perfect life, the type of life that humans should lead.[24] Jesus' life and death was a sacrifice to God, which humans can benefit from in that it amounts to the reparation and penance needed for human atonement with God. Insofar as Jesus is God, the sacrifice must be understood as not automatically benefiting humans but rather something that humans can offer to God as reparation and penance. So, on Swinburne's account, the wrongdoer might address God with the following words:

> We have made a mess of the life which you gave us, we have made no reparation of our own for our sins, nor have we helped others to make atonement for their sins. But we have been given a perfect life, not owed to you, O God. We offer you this life instead of the life we should have led, and instead of the lives which others (in whose sins we are involved) should have led. Take its perfection instead of our imperfection. We are serious enough about our sins to repent and apologize and to offer you back an offering of this value as our reparation and penance.[25]

A life not owed to God is what Jesus' life is said to be. Because Jesus is purported to be God, he owes God nothing, and therefore virtually all of Jesus' life was available to be

given away. On the other hand, mere mortals – even if unsinning – owe God so much, specifically their existence and sustenance. The life of a mere mortal could not possibly be a valuable sacrifice. If a person sacrifices his life to God when he is already in debt to God, then there would not be much left of his sacrifice to give it value.[26]

Swinburne draws religious conclusions from secular philosophy. This is characteristic of Swinburne's writing, because, he insists, detailed philosophical accounts lead to stronger conclusions.[27] The crucial link between secular philosophy and Christian religion in Swinburne's account of the Atonement is Swinburne's contention that reparation and penance, along with the other acts of atonement, are an important part of atonement. Insistence upon reparation and penance on philosophical grounds gives Jesus a clear role in the atonement of man with God. The acts of atonement, according to Swinburne, should not be forsaken by a victim in serious cases of wrongdoing.[28] This is in order for wrongdoing to be treated with proper gravity by both the victim and the wrongdoer. Similarly, it would not be good for God to forgive sin unconditionally. Therefore, suggests Swinburne, we can expect the Atonement to be as he describes it. Swinburne's account of what is required for atonement, as presented in the previous paragraphs, aims to avoid the condoning of wrongdoing which he thinks is implied by unconditional forgiveness, for if the victim did not insist on any acts of atonement from the wrongdoer, then it would seem to Swinburne that the victim did not really think the wrongdoer did anything wrong. Forgiveness by the victim, maintains Swinburne, must be in response to something from the wrongdoer; the very least which would be required is an apology.[29]

Swinburne's View of the Atonement Assessed
Having presented Swinburne's Atonement theory a number of criticisms can be noted with the aim of drawing conclusions in the next section about the philosophico-theological approach Swinburne takes to religious belief. Some critics of Swinburne's Atonement theory question the moral theory upon which it is based. Other critics have accepted Swinburne's moral theory but have questioned the Atonement theory which has been built upon it. The criticisms, which to a certain extent overlap, can be summarized in the nine statements, which follow.

1. There is no such thing as objective guilt.[30]
2. Reparation is not necessary for atonement with God. God cannot be harmed, and so there is nothing to be compensated for.[31]
3. One reparation is enough: reparation does not need to be made to both the victim and God.[32]
4. The life and death of Jesus is not suitable reparation, because only a wrongdoer can make reparation – the sacrifice of another cannot be used.[33]

5. A good God would not have tolerated seeing His son suffer.[34]
6. Life is not a gift freely accepted, and so there is no responsibility to obey God.[35]
7. The Atonement is multifaceted, whereas Swinburne's account is not.[36]
8. Swinburne's account of the Atonement implies that there would be merit for the person that obeys God and, therefore, achieves salvation. However, according to Ephesians 2: 8-9, salvation is not the result of effort.[37]
9. The relationship between God and humans is loving; therefore, there is no place for rights and obligations in an account of the Atonement.[38]

Space prevents me from describing these objections in detail and from giving the responses Swinburne has to some of them. However, it suffices to note that the sheer extent of criticisms suggests that something is not quite right, namely, that there exists a great divergence of intuition from the intuition, which Swinburne employs to arrive at his conclusions regarding the Atonement. While the objections to Swinburne's view of the Atonement may not all be insuperable (for the sake of argument), they collectively cause us to doubt Swinburne's Atonement theory.[39]

Swinburne's reliance on questionable intuitions is a feature of his case for Christianity. For example, Swinburne suggests that it would be good for God to create a partner to love and for Him, together with His partner, to create a third partner in order to share the love.[40] Swinburne employs this type of reasoning to support the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Swinburne, there is overriding reason for the first divine individual to bring about the second and for them together to bring about a third. However, there is no overriding reason for them to continue to multiply. I suspect that if Christianity had prescribed belief in, say, five divine persons, rather than three, Swinburne would not have made this latter point. In this particular case, even Swinburne admits that his intuitions are highly fallible but,[41] as we have seen, it is not the only example, and more examples can be given still. Take the instance where Swinburne supposes that God has an urge to tell us about the reparation He has apparently provided and concludes that there must be revelation.[42] But even if it is the case that humans need to atone to God by offering the reparation which God has provided it may be that God wants to give humans no hints regarding details. This could be so that humans do not become complacent regarding reparation. Take also the instance, as seen above, where Swinburne reasons that the sacrifice of a single perfect life is sufficient to compensate for the sin of the whole human race while offering no independent argument for this conclusion. It is reasoning like this which leaves many a person, I suggest, lost for words, because the conclusion seems groundless (in this case, for example, because there is no way in which to quantify the sacrificial value of Jesus' sacrifice). Has Swinburne not simply fallen back on Christian doctrine rather than supported his intuitions with argument independent of Christian doctrine?

If Swinburne's expectations about the Atonement are wrong, then the only support the doctrine has is from revelation. But, as we have seen, Swinburne believes that, for reasons to do with the Atonement, we should expect a revelation. If Swinburne's views on the Atonement are wrong, it means that revelation would have been somewhat weakened as a source of support. So, Swinburne would have to concede that the doctrine of the Atonement (as he understands it) is on the one hand unsupported by reason, and on the other hand less supported by revelation than he originally estimated. Arguments against Swinburne's account of the Atonement might not bring his whole case for Christianity crashing down, but it does seem that the edifice he has constructed is unstable.

Conclusion

Richard Swinburne's case for the plausibility of Christianity has been praised for its rigor and its being systematic.[43] I have focused on one part of this case with the aim of showing that Swinburne's view about what is needed for human atonement with God has attracted a good deal of controversy. This controversy is due to none other than Swinburne's questionable moral intuitions. The example of Swinburne's Atonement theory leads us to believe that philosophical theology is fraught with difficulty and, even at its best, not necessarily very convincing for those who are not antecedently sympathetic to the conclusions being made. This is a significant lesson for inter-religious dialogue. Awareness of the limitations of philosophical theology means awareness that there are good philosophical grounds to doubt the value of polemical inter-religious exchanges that seek to convince rather than to share. This in turn should lead to a reduction in such exchanges and an increased interest in fruitful types of exchange that are focused on learning and understanding.[44]

While rival religions might be false according to some evaluation or other, I suggest that such claims must come with a good degree of trepidation. The fact is that we humans have limited processing power and a limited ability to imagine other plausible ways of making sense of the same evidence, especially in cases where the evidence is overwhelmingly abundant.[45] We are therefore highly susceptible to overrating our own beliefs. While I concede that philosophical theology can help ensure that our religious beliefs are coherent (that is, logically consistent with each other and with other firmly held beliefs), it is not a foregone conclusion that coherence is a sufficient condition for truth. In other words, just because we have a coherent account of a matter, it does not necessarily mean that the account is true.

I am more pessimistic about the power of philosophy to resolve religious disagreements than Swinburne, who says:

Whether or not you accept my claim that the Christian revelation is

probably the true one, I hope you will agree that in the ways which I have outlined, reason can weigh the probable truth of rival religions, help us to face up to any inadequacies of our own tradition and any merits of others, and generally help us to overcome the irrational forces which are so hard at work in human religious disputes.[46]

My own view is that, in light of the type of shortcomings I have pointed to in this study, I would rather take a chance with "irrational forces!"[47] Essentially, this means seeking an alternative epistemology of religious belief – one which does not subscribe to the type of evidentialism in the opening paragraph, which equates religious beliefs with scientific beliefs.

In closing, and in summary, viewing religious beliefs to be like scientific beliefs leads us to seek evidence for our religious beliefs. This evidence takes the form of appeals to other beliefs about, say, morality, human nature, or the world. This much was seen in relation to Swinburne's philosophico-theological theory of the Atonement. The problem with philosophical theology is that the evidence can look weak because the beliefs being appealed to are themselves disputed. This is especially the case in inter-religious contexts because divergences over what counts as evidence and intuitions over what counts as a good argument are more pronounced. This position allows us to adopt other aims for inter-religious dialogue: rather than to convince and dominate we can seek to share and understand.

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[1] The case for the plausibility of Christianity is principally found in a trilogy on Christian theism and a tetralogy on Christian doctrine but also in some supporting volumes. For the trilogy see Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; Revised 1993), Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979; Revised 1991; 2nd ed. 2004), Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981; 2nd ed. 2005). For the tetralogy see Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992; 2nd ed. 2007).) The tetralogy has been supported by some further books. Swinburne describes his *The Evolution of the Soul* as a "prolegomenon" to his tetralogy; *Epistemic Justification* is described as a general epistemological appendix to the tetralogy, and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* is described as a historical appendix. For quotations see Richard Swinburne, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne*, ed. Alan G. Padgett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15 and Richard Swinburne, "Response to My Commentators," *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002), 313. For works cited see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; Revised 1997), Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] As Swinburne says, there is 'abundant room for faith in the practice of religion'. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed., 2.

[3] Swinburne, "Response to My Commentators," 310-311.

[4] Steven S. Aspenson, "Swinburne on Atonement," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), 187.

[5] David McNaughton, "Reparation and Atonement," *Religious Studies* (1992), 129.

[6] Steven L. Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2004), 229.

[7] Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 152.

[8] Ibid., 14-18.

[9] Swinburne has mentioned that the way to achieve agreement on matters of morality is appeal to intuition by way of debating practical examples. Swinburne refers his readers to the 'reflective equilibrium' of John Rawls. See Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification*, 172, Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed., 38-39, Richard Swinburne, "Natural Theology, It's 'Dwindling Probabilities' and 'Lack of Rapport'," *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (2004), 543.

[10] Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 73.

[11] Ibid., 74, 75.

[12] Ibid., 81.

13 Ibid.

14 For an example of Swinburne substituting talk of 'atonement' with talk of 'reconciliation' see Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 216-217.

15 Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 149.

16 Ibid., 81, 84.

17 Ibid., 85.

18 Ibid., 87.

19 Ibid. Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 123-124.

20 Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 129, 131-133.

21 Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, Revised ed., 209-216.

22 Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 148.

23 Ibid., 150.

24 Ibid., 152-153.

25 Ibid., 154-155.

26 Ibid., 154, 157.

27 Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 3.

28 Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 85-86.

29 Ibid., 87.

30 J. L. Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy," *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002).

31 McNaughton, "Reparation and Atonement," 134-135, Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy," 293-294.

32 Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy," 294-295.

33 McNaughton, "Reparation and Atonement," 142, Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy," 295-296.

34 McNaughton, "Reparation and Atonement," 141, Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," 232, Philip L. Quinn, "Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Christian Redemption," in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne*, ed. Alan G. Padgett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 291.

35 Aspenson, "Swinburne on Atonement."

36 Quinn, "Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Christian Redemption," 295.

37 Vincent Brümmer, "Atonement and Reconciliation," *Religious Studies*, no. 28 (1992), 443.

38 Ibid.: 446-447.

39 Note that Swinburne's natural theology works by building a cumulative case in favor of theism; the idea is that any one argument for theism might not be convincing but a number of them taken together are convincing. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed., 12-13. My suggestion in the text is that it seems a good cumulative case can be mounted against Swinburne's theory of the Atonement. Helm discusses accumulated evidence in Paul Helm, *Faith with Reason* (New York: Oxford, 2000), ch.4; he traces the use of accumulated evidence to Basil Mitchell and, in turn, to Joseph Butler. See Basil Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), and Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* republished in David E. White ed., *The Works of Bishop Butler* (Rochester (NY): University of Rochester Press; Woodbridge (UK): Boydell & Brewer, 2006).

40 Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 177-179.

41 Ibid., 179.

42 Swinburne, *Revelation*, 81-84.

43 Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy," 298.

44 This seems close to the Catholic position since the Second Vatican Council. At least one Catholic monk (of whom I am aware) understands the purpose of inter-religious engagements since the Second Vatican Council to be about "sharing" rather than, as previously held, evangelization. For more on the Catholic position see the dogmatic proclamation of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1964), and the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1965).

45 A similar point is made by Swinburne's predecessor as Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at the University of Oxford, Basil Mitchell. In the context of discussing religious commitment, Mitchell says that large-scale systems of belief are such that no single person can understand all their ramifications; see Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, 133. For the idea that an abundance of evidence is difficult to assess see Robert McKim, "On Religious Ambiguity," *Religious Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008) and Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Of course, it remains the case that the task of exactly quantifying human cognitive ability is for neuroscientists. However, the point that even the most intellectual of humans can be unclear about all of the implications of a large body of evidence seems fairly basic.

46 Richard Swinburne, "Christianity and the Discourse of the World Religions: The Contribution of Philosophical Theology," in *Philosophy Bridging the World Religions*, ed. Peter Koslowski, *A Discourse of the World Religions* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2003), 20.

47 Elsewhere I have discussed the weakness of Swinburne's stance on the Islamic revelation and the ramifications this has for his case for the plausibility of Christianity. See Amir Dastmalchian, "Swinburne's View of the Islamic Revelation," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 1, no. 4 (2008).