

Is Christianity probable? Swinburne's apologetic programme

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Abstract: Richard Swinburne's tetralogy on Christian doctrine, together with his earlier trilogy on the philosophy of theism, is one of the most important apologetic projects of recent times. This paper focuses on some difficulties with this project that stem from Swinburne's use of confirmation theory. Arguably, the problem of dwindling probabilities, pointed out by Plantinga, has not been solved. The paper is principally focused, however, on the ways in which Swinburne's confirmation theory contributes to his comparative neglect of the personal, existential dimension of Christianity. A solution for these difficulties is suggested but not elaborated.

Richard Swinburne's tetralogy on Christian doctrine is a remarkable achievement in philosophical theology by any standard. In the first volume, *Responsibility and Atonement*, he addresses the central theological issues of responsibility, guilt, and atonement for sin. In *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* he discusses the philosophical considerations relevant to the acceptance and interpretation of a revelation, more particularly the Christian revelation. In *The Christian God* he states his own version of the Christian conceptions of God, Trinity, and Incarnation. And in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* he addresses the issues concerning God's governance of the world, especially the problem of evil, often held to be the most powerful objection to the truth of Christianity.¹ The series endeavours to follow a 'natural order of enquiry into the issues covered, for one who already has some reason for believing that there is a God, confronted with the phenomenon of Christianity' (*Revelation*, 5).

In evaluating Swinburne's apologetic programme, the tetralogy must be considered together with the earlier trilogy on the philosophy of theism, comprising *The Coherence of Theism*, *The Existence of God*, and *Faith and Reason*.² Taken all together, these seven books constitute a sustained defence of the coherence and plausibility of the orthodox Christian faith. Swinburne's effort has been compared to the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, and the comparison is apt at least to this extent: we have a comprehensive overview of the major Christian doctrines, supported by

an explicit, carefully articulated philosophical position. Furthermore, Swinburne's philosophy is a rigorous, tough-minded, basically empirical brand of analytic philosophy – a combination of attributes that, in other hands, often does not work out in a way that is friendly to Christian theism. As a result, critics who wish to challenge the logical coherence of Christian belief will find a tough opponent in Swinburne. And theologians who are concerned about the coherence of their own formulations can learn a lot from him. To be sure, it is a foregone conclusion that any particular reader will disagree with Swinburne's theology at some point or other. In many cases, however, specific points can be modified without disrupting Swinburne's overall case. His work is systematic, in that it deals with a large number of interrelated topics in an organized and coherent way. But this is not the kind of system in which, as soon as one pulls on a loose thread, the whole fabric begins to unravel. Furthermore, Swinburne's own formulations of the doctrines are always worthy of thoughtful consideration, whether or not one decides in the end to accept them.

Judged in the terms suggested above, Swinburne's apologetic is highly successful. It does not, however, accomplish everything that might be desired, not even everything Swinburne himself desires for it. But before going into that, let me say clearly: this is a magnificent achievement, one for which we are all greatly in Swinburne's debt.

One of the striking things about Swinburne's theological work, considering the nature of its subject matter, is its relentlessly objective tone. The subjective, personal side of religion is not denied, but neither is it given much expression in these books. No doubt there are various possible explanations for this. But I want to suggest that the comparative neglect of the existential dimension of Christianity can be seen as resulting, at least in part, from a particular philosophical stance of Swinburne's, namely the use he makes of confirmation theory. Swinburne is concerned to assess the Christian faith in terms of its 'epistemic probability'. Epistemic probability in this sense is an objective, logical relation, concerned with the degree to which a hypothesis is supported or made probable by other propositions which constitute evidence for it. In the limiting case, the 'intrinsic probability' of a proposition is its probability on tautological evidence, with considerations of simplicity as the most important factor in determining this intrinsic, or a priori, probability. The way in which evidence supports a hypothesis is assumed to conform to the probability calculus, with an important role being played by Bayes' Theorem:

$$P(h/e \& k) = \frac{P(e/h \& k)}{P(e/k)} \times P(h/k)$$

where *h* is the hypothesis being considered, *e* is the evidence, and *k* is the assumed background knowledge. The intuitive idea here is that if a given piece of evidence is more probable on the assumption that a hypothesis is true than it would be

without this assumption, then to that extent it constitutes evidence favouring the hypothesis and increases its probability.

Throughout *The Existence of God* this apparatus is used to show how various pieces of evidence (many of which are captured by the traditional theistic arguments) serve to raise the epistemic probability of the hypothesis that God exists. Swinburne also argues that, since God as conceived by theism is an extremely simple being, the hypothesis of God's existence is a very simple hypothesis and as such possesses a fair degree of intrinsic probability. It is, of course, out of the question to assign precise numerical measures to the probabilities involved here, but Swinburne finds himself able to affirm, in the book's conclusion, that 'on our total evidence theism is more probable than not' (*Existence*, 291). In subsequent volumes the machinery of probability theory is less prominent, but the overall programme remains the same.

One difficulty encountered by this programme becomes evident when we compare *The Existence of God* with the last volume in the series, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. In the former book, as we've seen, Swinburne concludes that theism is 'more probable than not' on our total evidence. In reaching this conclusion he gives extensive consideration to the problem of evil, and asserts, rather boldly, that the world's evil does not lower the probability of theism – that 'with *e* as the amount and kind of evil which there is in the world, $P(h/e \ \& \ k) = P(h/k)$ ' (*Existence*, 277). Furthermore, in reaching this conclusion he finds it unnecessary to consider religious doctrines concerning an afterlife; the problem of evil is disposed of appealing only to this-worldly considerations.

In the later book, however, this stance has been significantly modified. The theodicy he develops there does appeal in a major way to the Christian view concerning life after death. Now there is little doubt that Swinburne is right that 'most other contemporary humans are a lot more likely to be convinced if theodicy does bring in such doctrines' (*Providence*, xi). But admitting this considerably complicates the situation as regards the confirmation and epistemic probability of theism. Previously he was able to neutralize the problem of evil, and arrive at a favourable assessment of the probability of theism, without considering an afterlife. But now he admits that this strategy probably cannot succeed – and this means, that if we assess theism *sans* an afterlife the problem of evil may count against it in a significant way, and it may well be the case that theism is no longer more probable than not. Suppose, on the other hand, we do invoke an afterlife (and it has to be a certain kind of afterlife) in addressing the problem of evil. In this case, we are not assessing the hypothesis merely of theism, but of theism plus the doctrine of an afterlife. And since theism as such does not entail an afterlife, the probability of the combined hypothesis of theism plus an afterlife may well be lower (perhaps quite a bit lower) than the estimate, 'more probable than not', that Swinburne formerly gave for theism by itself. Furthermore, Swinburne's argument assumes (plausibly enough) that several other Christian doctrines need to be

brought in as support for the kind of afterlife his theodicy needs. If so, then the hypothesis to be confirmed involves theism *plus* an afterlife *plus* various other Christian doctrines, and the resulting probability, on our total evidence, goes even lower.

This situation is merely one instance of a quite general principle which has been labelled by Alvin Plantinga the ‘principle of dwindling probabilities’.³ This principle comes into play in cases where we are evaluating the probability of a fairly complex hypothesis, comprising a number of logically independent propositions. In such cases, we must proceed as follows: first, determine P_1 , the probability of the first proposition on the evidence. Then, determine P_2 , the probability of the second proposition on the evidence plus the first proposition, and multiply this by P_1 . Next, determine P_3 , the probability of the third proposition on the evidence plus the first and second, and multiply this by the product of P_1 and P_2 . And continue in this way until all the propositions comprised in the hypothesis are accounted for. In symbols (where a , b , c , and d are the propositions of the hypothesis, and k our total evidence),

$$P(a \& b \& c \& d/k) \\ = [P(a/k) \times P(b/k \& a) \times P(c/k \& a \& b) \times P(d/k \& a \& b \& c)]$$

The difficulty, of course, is that, even if the individual probabilities are reasonably high, multiplying them together causes them to diminish rapidly. For instance, if each of the four probabilities on the right side of the formula is a healthy 0.7, the product of the four will be only 0.24, about one chance in four. And the more independent propositions are involved in the hypothesis, the smaller the resulting probability becomes. Plantinga develops a more detailed illustration involving specific Christian teachings, and shows that, even if we assign fairly high values (or ranges of values) to the individual probabilities, the cumulative probability is disappointingly low.⁴

Once pointed out, this difficulty is sufficiently obvious that one wonders why it has been generally overlooked. Plantinga suggests an answer when he says, ‘in giving such a historical argument, we can’t simply annex the intermediate propositions to k (as I’m afraid many who employ this sort of argument actually do) but must instead *multiply* the relevant probabilities’.⁵ Plantinga is suggesting that, once we have determined some proposition to be sufficiently probable to warrant our acceptance, we tend to consider it as ‘settled knowledge’, thus in effect raising our estimate of its probability from 0.6, or 0.8, or whatever, to 1. But of course, nothing in probability theory provides any sanction for this raising of probabilities, which in this context amounts to a kind of epistemic theft.

Swinburne, however, is not guilty of this error. In replying to Plantinga,⁶ he accepts the principle of dwindling probabilities but claims that ‘the probabilities do not diminish even as rapidly as Plantinga in his more generous estimates suggests’ (‘Plantinga on warrant’, 210). The reason for this is that there is more

and better evidence supporting the historical case for Christianity than Plantinga acknowledges, and more than Swinburne himself has discussed in his books. (He hopes to defend these claims about the evidence in future writings.) It should be noted, however, that Swinburne still does not give even approximate numerical values for the probabilities involved (such as Plantinga gave in his critique), so that it is difficult to say how favourable he thinks the evidential situation is – let alone how favourable it really is. I conclude that Swinburne still has a lot of work to do, if he is to overcome the problem of dwindling probabilities.⁷

Before leaving this topic it is worthwhile to point out that the difficulty in question is not by any means limited to the Christian worldview. Competing worldviews, and even complex, wide-ranging hypotheses that are more restricted than a complete worldview, will face the very same problem. The moral to be drawn is not that Christianity is unworthy of acceptance, but rather that human beings who wish to reach conclusions about the general character of life and the universe are best advised to employ some method other than Swinburnean confirmation theory.

At this point our focus shifts to the claim, made earlier but not supported, that Swinburne's confirmation theory leads naturally to his comparative neglect of the personal, existential dimension of Christianity.⁸ I shall mention three distinct points in support of this claim. We begin by noting that the initial probabilities in Swinburne's theory, the ones that hold in the absence of evidence for or against a proposition, are determined a priori, based on considerations of simplicity and scope.⁹ Most probability theorists have now abandoned this logical, a priori conception of probability. The most widely accepted alternative is a subjective conception of probability which allows the initial probabilities to be set individually, in terms of each person's propensity to believe a given proposition. But our present concern is not with probability theory as such, but rather with the consequences of Swinburne's approach to this topic.

What should be noted here is that Swinburne's theory makes the task of determining the probability of a hypothesis on given evidence purely a matter of logical insight. Relevant evidence must be gathered, of course, but once that is done, determining the probability is a matter, first, of discerning the a priori or intrinsic probability of a proposition, and then of determining the logical relation between that proposition and the evidence.¹⁰ And this means that determining the probability of a proposition is a purely objective matter, with no room for the intrusion of personal, subjective considerations.

Now without doubt this corresponds to an ideal that has often been advocated (and sometimes even observed in practice) for mathematics and the natural sciences. But there is a widespread impression that this is *not* an appropriate way to understand what goes on in religious thinking. William Alston has recently argued persuasively that 'one's response to the Christian gospel depends to a considerable extent on one's value orientation'.¹¹ William Wainwright, in his

outstanding book, *Reason and the Heart*,¹² has developed this theme at greater length, drawing upon Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, and William James. And Alvin Plantinga, also inspired in part by Edwards, has insisted that ‘coming to faith includes more than a change of opinion. It also (and crucially) includes a change of heart, a change in *affection*, in what one loves and hates, approves and disdains, seeks and avoids’.¹³ (The mention of these philosophers should suffice to expunge the notion that recognizing a subjective element here must inevitably lead either to postmodern relativism or to some wild, anti-rational fideism.) Now, Swinburne could go at least a short distance in accommodating the sorts of claims made by Alston, Wainwright, and Plantinga. He could admit that, if one has desires and affections that make certain truths unwelcome, this might interfere with one’s fulfilment of one’s epistemic duty, and thus with one’s ability to pursue the truth successfully. And it might well be, in a particular case, that rectifying those misdirected affections could be a necessary precondition for arriving at true conclusions about religious matters. Even so, however, the role played by emotion and desire (other than the bare desire to arrive at the truth) would remain a purely negative one: once one has removed the interference of inappropriate motivations, assessing the probabilities remains, as before, purely a matter of logical insight plus diligence in collecting evidence. Nowhere in Swinburne’s system do we read about the man for whom ‘every moment is wasted in which he does not have God’.¹⁴

The second point to be noted here is Swinburne’s insistence, in *Faith and Reason*, that believing a proposition just *is* believing its epistemic probability to be higher than that of some alternative.¹⁵ Now, this equivalence (it is not, of course, a definition) is not entailed by the probability theory, but its attractiveness, given that theory, is understandable. Once having adopted the notion of epistemic probability as fundamental, it is appealingly elegant to explain other epistemic concepts, including that of belief, in terms of it. Yet the claimed equivalence seems clearly wrong. For one thing, it generates an infinite regress, and the regress appears to be vicious, in spite of Swinburne’s protestation to the contrary. (Suppose, as Swinburne claims, that believing entails ‘believing so-and-so more probable (or more likely) than such-and-such’. Must we then also believe that ‘so-and-so [being] more probable than such-and-such’ is itself more probable than some alternative? And so on, ad infinitum?) On Swinburne’s own account, very small children and even animals have beliefs, but it is quite implausible to suppose that they have the required notion of probability. Does Swinburne really mean to deny that there are gamblers who recognize that, by all objective measures, the horse they have bet on is less likely to win than another, and yet they believe that their own horse will in fact win the race?¹⁶ To be sure, there may be a degree of irrationality manifested in such a situation. But there is not much to be said for a theory that rules out human irrationality as a matter of logic!

One result of this equating of belief with probability assessment is to close off

yet another possibility for recognizing the role in belief of subjective motivation. It might have been supposed that evaluating the epistemic probability of a proposition is one thing, and accepting the proposition as one's own belief is another. And that, even if the probability assessment is (contrary to what was suggested above) purely a matter of logic and evidence, the actual believing may involve motives and affections in a fundamental way. But if we identify believing with the assessment of probability this option is closed off, and believing becomes, in principle, a purely objective affair.

An interesting and important consequence of this stance is that our principal obligation – and most likely our only obligation – in matters of belief is to seek to believe rationally by obtaining evidence, scrutinizing our principles of inductive inference to see that they are the best available, and considering carefully whether the beliefs being investigated are made probable by the evidence.¹⁷ Swinburne entertains various reasons why we might attempt to induce in ourselves beliefs (say, a belief that God exists) that are not probable on our present evidence (e.g. by seeking to forget some relevant evidence, or by looking for evidence selectively in places where only favourable evidence is likely to be found). But he is not in the end very sympathetic to any such reasons. What he altogether fails to consider, so far as I can see, is the way in which 'reasons of the heart' dispose us to find various beliefs more or less plausible, and more or less probable on our evidence. As before, it would be open to Swinburne to state that bad motives, misguided affections, can distort our evaluation of probabilities and that it may be necessary to rectify this before we are able properly to conduct our logical assessments of probability. In fact, however, Swinburne does not say even this much. As a result, I believe he is left with an account of what is involved in coming to faith, and maintaining oneself in faith, that is very different from the way these matters are experienced by many reflective believers. It just doesn't seem to be true that the optimal response, when one is assailed by doubts, is limited to the sorts of epistemic procedures recommended by Swinburne!

Our final example concerns Swinburne's account, in *Revelation*, of the way in which an enquirer comes to accept the Christian revelation. Philosophy can assist the process of acceptance in various ways, but it can't do the whole job. Christianity, after all, claims a historical revelation, and so historical inquiry concerning that revelation must play an important role.¹⁸ And this introduces the topic of biblical scholarship and criticism, a topic on which Swinburne's approach strikes me as remarkably optimistic. He writes:

And how are we to know what Jesus Christ did teach? The primary process for finding that out must be historical investigation of just the same kind as that which would be pursued by historians investigating the teaching of any other teacher. This is the kind of work which New Testament scholars have been doing so very well with rich energy and ingenuity for the past hundred or so years.¹⁹

What is striking about this is that Swinburne's enthusiastic praise of the scholars

ignores the powerful anti-supernaturalistic bias that has informed a great deal (though not all) of biblical scholarship during the period in question. This bias has influenced not only the handling of the accounts of miracles, but also the assessment of Jesus' teaching, as seen, for instance, in the widespread resistance to the notion that Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah. Consider the following from Alan Donagan:

I do not think I was unusual in absorbing, as an undergraduate, the notion that biblical scholarship (of course I did not actually read any) has shown the New Testament canon is largely a second-century work of fiction, preserving some authentic elements of the original teaching the Apostles, and much less of that of Jesus; and that the unedifying history of [scholarship] ... has shown that it is impossible to establish what the early teaching of either was. However, what it was not could be stated with some confidence: for example, Jesus did not predict his death before he entered Jerusalem for the last time; he did not teach his uncomprehending disciples that it would be sacrificial; and he did not command them to observe the rite of the Eucharist as, *inter alia*, its perpetual memorial.²⁰

Now Swinburne is certainly not unaware of this anti-supernaturalistic bias.²¹ But why doesn't he address it head-on? I suggest that the answer lies in his prior commitment to a purely 'objective' methodology, one in which, in principle, personal commitments and subjective experience have no role to play. Since he believes such a methodology is the right one to pursue, he attributes it, as a matter of charity, to the biblical scholars, rather than ferreting out the (often unacknowledged) biases and presuppositions that may be at work. As a result, he concedes too much to the critics, because he fails to challenge their anti-supernaturalistic bias at the outset.²²

The results of this New Testament criticism, Swinburne acknowledges, are far from unambiguous. It is worth quoting at some length his own conclusion about the matter:

The task of discovering some vague outlines of what Jesus said and did and what happened to him is not, I suggest, an impossible one. It would be odd if with so many documents contained in the New Testament, as well as extra-Testamental documents, some reasonable, if vague, conclusions about the teaching and actions which gave rise to those documents could not be reached. However, it must be acknowledged that such enquiry cannot yield certainty, only a significant balance of probability; and only a somewhat vague conclusion as to the general tenor of Christ's message, not his exact words. (105–106)

In setting forth some of these 'vague conclusions', Swinburne lays considerable stress on the evidence that Jesus intended to form a community to carry on his message – and this community, the Church, is in his view the remedy for our inability to arrive at firm conclusions about Jesus based on the historical evidence alone. 'The Resurrection subsequent to the events of the Passion would provide a guarantee of the truth of the original teaching and so of the basic reliability of the

Church's subsequent declaration as to what that teaching was and how it was to be interpreted.²³

At this point I want to argue that Swinburne's argument places the enquirer in a decidedly uncomfortable position. Her knowledge of what Jesus did and taught depends, in the first instance, on historical investigation. This investigation, however, leads only to 'vague outlines of what Jesus said and did', leaving very large areas of uncertainty which can only be alleviated by reliance on the authority of the Church. But until she is convinced that *a revelation actually occurred*, she has no reason to suppose that the Church is a reliable source of information on these topics.²⁴ So it looks as though the enquirer is trapped in a vicious circle. She needs to know what Jesus taught in order to estimate the probability that a revelation has occurred, but her principal source for the content of his teaching can be assumed to be reliable only if she already accepts that there has been a revelation.

Admittedly, there is just the possibility of an escape from this trap – which is why I characterized her position as uncomfortable rather than hopeless. It might be that the Resurrection, when combined with the slender conclusions about Jesus' acts and teachings warranted by historical enquiry, is sufficient to render probable the conclusion that a revelation has been given in Jesus. And if this is so, and if we can verify that his teachings authorized a Church to interpret them to later generations, then the authority of that Church might come into play to give us the fuller knowledge about Jesus that we need. But this scenario is not one the enquirer should welcome with great enthusiasm. First of all, that a bodily resurrection of Jesus actually occurred is far from being a consensus result of the objective historical scholarship praised by Swinburne. Pretty clearly, the majority view among biblical critics is that a bodily resurrection did *not* occur – a point which is implicitly conceded by Swinburne, when he outlines his own historical argument for the Resurrection (see 110–113), an argument for which he makes no claim of scholarly consensus. Furthermore, it is far from clear that the meagre summary of Jesus' teachings warranted by historical enquiry is sufficient to enable the putative revelation to pass the 'content test' (see 86–89) proposed by Swinburne. Given the somewhat impressive, but far from conclusive, historical evidence for a resurrection, and deep obscurity, beyond a very few points, about what the supposed revelation contains, why isn't the most reasonable conclusion that we simply don't have enough to go on?

It's fairly clear what the solution to this dilemma is going to be. The enquirer will have to begin with the account of Jesus given by some actual community with which she is in contact. And she will have to decide, on the basis of what is offered to her, whether the claim to a revelation in Jesus is credible or not. At some point, to be sure, she may have to consider whether the claims made by the community are credible in the light of historical evidence. But when that happens, the kind of scholarship that finds warrant only for the 'vague outlines of what Jesus said and did' is likely to be perceived more as the problem than as the solution. Pertinent

here is an observation made by Alan Donagan, after coming to Christianity (or coming back to it) in later life. Writing about his own experience as well as that of other reflective converts, he says, 'Accepting the Nicene faith has been, for all I have talked to, in large part a matter of forming a critical attitude to much biblical scholarship'.²⁵

We have now considered several respects in which, I have argued, Swinburne's confirmation theory creates difficulties both for him and for the enquirer. It seems clear that the solution of these difficulties will have to involve the recognition that epistemic subjects are real, flesh and blood human beings, whose acceptance of various propositions is, and cannot help but be, influenced by desires, affections, subjective experiences, and prior commitments. This recognition opens the door for the Wainwright's 'critique of passionless reasoning', a critical consideration of the motivational concerns that play so large a role in a person's willingness or unwillingness to accept certain beliefs. And this in turn opens a way for a much richer account of our obligations with respect to our faith (for those of us who are believers) than is provided by speaking only of the need to collect evidence and to scrutinize and apply our own epistemic standards. It also allows us to take account of the motivations to disbelief that (regrettably) inform a good deal of biblical scholarship, rather than acceding in the self-serving pretence that scholarly disbelief is purely the result of objective, unbiased enquiry.

I propose, furthermore, that the role in belief of personal commitment allows a solution to the problem of dwindling probabilities that is so vexing for an apologetic such as Swinburne's. Human beings, when considering what to believe about important matters, simply do not behave, epistemically, as probability theory says they ought to. On the contrary: when we have reached a conclusion that is convincing to us, we *commit ourselves* to that conclusion, and take it as a basis for our further reflection. Such a conclusion need not be held dogmatically, as immune to any possible future questioning. Nevertheless, we cease for the time being to question it, in order to use it in the investigation of further questions. In saying this, I do not believe that I am making a proposal that it is open to us either to accept or reject. On the contrary, this is the way we *actually* think, and I believe there is no real alternative to doing so – or no alternative short of radical scepticism, which is no alternative at all. But the justification of these brief and, I fear, somewhat cryptic remarks must wait for another occasion.²⁶

In this essay I have identified what I perceive to be a group of problems confronting Swinburne's apologetic, and have suggested a direction in which the solutions to those problems may be found. But those solutions have barely been hinted at here, nor have I shown (though I'm inclined to believe) that no other sort of solution is possible. In closing, however, I want to say that neither the problems nor their possible solutions detract significantly from the scope and power of Swinburne's achievement. It remains one of the outstanding bodies of work in the philosophy of religion in our time.²⁷

Notes

1. All four volumes published by Oxford University Press (Clarendon Press), in 1989, 1992, 1994, and 1998, respectively.
2. All three published by Oxford University Press (Clarendon Press) in 1977 (rev. edn, 1993), 1979 (rev. edn, 1991), and 1981 respectively.
3. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 280.
4. For details see *ibid.*, pp. 268–280.
5. *Ibid.*, 280.
6. See his review essay on Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, 'Plantinga on warrant', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 203–214. And see Plantinga's 'Rationality and public evidence: a reply to Richard Swinburne', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 215–222.
7. Swinburne also points out that in *Faith and Reason* he argued that 'the faith needed for religion is basically a commitment to seek a goal by following a way; it does not require the belief that the goal is there to be attained nor that the way will attain the goal – it requires only the beliefs that there is quite a chance that the goal is there and can be attained, and that if it can be, the way in question is the one which will most probably attain it. If you really want the goal enough, that's all the belief you need to direct your steps' ('Plantinga on warrant', 211). To this Plantinga replies that Swinburne 'may be right in holding that there are good arguments for the conclusion that the probability of Christian belief with respect to public evidence is sufficient to warrant a sort of Pascalian wager, a commitment to follow the way in question in the hope that the goal can be attained. ... I was claiming only that these arguments are not sufficient to support full belief, the sort of belief accorded to the great things of the Gospel by those who actually believe them' ('Reply to Richard Swinburne', 221).
8. I am not forgetting the chapter on 'The argument from religious experience' in *The Existence of God*. The emphasis of that chapter is welcome and helpful, but in spite of that I believe the judgement expressed in the text stands up.
9. See Swinburne *Existence of God*, 52–57. Generally speaking, simplicity increases the a priori probability of a hypothesis, and broad scope decreases that probability. Swinburne holds that, when the two measures point in different directions, simplicity generally dominates scope – thus, the existence of God is fairly probable because of its simplicity, in spite of the vast scope of this hypothesis.
10. Except in special cases, neither of these probability assessments can be arrived at through a formal logical procedure, though Carnap attempted to create a method for doing this. It should also be noted that in some cases the likelihood of a particular piece of evidence on a given hypothesis can be determined empirically, on the basis of statistical sampling. But this will not be possible when dealing with a general metaphysical hypothesis, such as the existence of God.
11. William P. Alston 'Religious belief and values', *Faith and Philosophy*, 18 (2001), 37.
12. William J. Wainwright *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
13. Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 269–270.
14. Søren Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (transl.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 178–179.
15. 'I suggest that the primary concept of belief picked out by public criteria is the concept of believing so-and-so more probable (or more likely) than such-and-such' (Swinburne *Faith and Reason*, 3–4).
16. Swinburne asserts, 'If I believe it is not probable that Liverpool will win their next game, then ... I cannot believe that they will win' (*ibid.*, 4). I think there is an ambiguity here. I would maintain that it is quite possible for me to say, 'It is not probable (based on objective measures of probability) that they will win, but all the same, I believe they *will* win'. What I cannot say, is 'Probably, they will not win, but I believe they will win'. The reason I can't say this is that in saying 'Probably, they will not win', I in effect *endorse* the judgement that they will not win, and that is inconsistent with my believing the contrary.
17. Once we have done all of this with sufficient diligence, we shall have arrived at what Swinburne calls 'rational_s belief' (see *ibid.*, 54) – and this is all that it is possible for us to do in order to attain to true belief.

18. 'I seek to provide a matrix into which the detailed historical work of the past century, and work yet to be done on the events of the first century in Palestine and the subsequent development of the Christian Church, can be slotted to yield theological conclusions' (Swinburne *Revelation*, 101).
19. *Ibid.*, 103. For a history of these studies Swinburne refers the reader to S. Neill and T. Wright *The Interpretation of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
20. Alan Donagan 'Can anybody in a post-Christian culture rationally believe the Nicene Creed?', in Thomas P. Flint (ed.) *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 113. No doubt if Donagan had read widely among biblical scholars, he would have found some that did not agree with these negative conclusions. (Later on, as an adult enquirer, this is what he actually did.) Still, he gives a fair summary of views that have often been presented as the 'settled results' of such scholarship.
21. It is noteworthy that in his reply to Plantinga Swinburne expresses more awareness of such bias than ever surfaces in *Revelation*. There is, he says, 'a lot of evidence from the Gospels themselves as to what Jesus taught (*more than the average biblical commentator might allow*) and so we do not depend too much on what the church said he taught – though we do depend on it quite a lot'; Swinburne 'Plantinga on warrant', 210, emphasis added. And he explicitly cites historical biblical criticism as a major putative defeater of Christian belief – one he thinks Plantinga does not take seriously enough (212).
22. For an excellent discussion of the bearing of presuppositions on biblical scholarship, see C. Stephen Evans *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), especially ch. 8, 'Critical history and the supernatural'.
23. Swinburne *Revelation*, 118. It strikes me as significant that, whereas Swinburne's chapter on 'The original revelation' is eighteen pages long, the following chapter on 'Church' is twenty-seven pages.
24. Consider a parallel: there is little doubt that Gautama intended to form a community, the Sangha. And that community has quite a bit to tell us about what Gautama said and did. But objective scholarship does not regard the Sangha as possessing any intrinsic authority on these topics; scholarly conclusions about the matter are wholly governed by the standards of ordinary historical enquiry.
25. Donagan 'Post-Christian culture', 113.
26. Philip Quinn has suggested to me the possibility that, even if we do in fact think this way, we may be irrational in doing so. And if we are unable (as I have suggested) to adopt scepticism as our habitual mode of thought, it may be that we are condemned to think irrationally by our very constitution as human beings, much as Hume suggested. That this should be so is not, I acknowledge, inconceivable. But to sustain this conjecture, we should have to assume both (1) that there is in fact an objective epistemic probability, the same for all rational thinkers, that attaches to any given proposition in relation to specified evidence; and (2) that a rational person will apportion her belief strictly in accord with epistemic probability so understood. In my view both these assumptions are false, but I cannot argue the matter further here.
27. My thanks to Peter Byrne, Alan Padgett, Philip Quinn, Eleonore Stump, and Charles Taliaferro for their generous and extremely valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.