

## Response to my commentators

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**Abstract:** This is my response to the critical commentaries by Hasker, McNaughton and Schellenberg on my tetralogy on Christian doctrine. I dispute the moral principles invoked by McNaughton and Schellenberg in criticism of my theodicy and theory of atonement. I claim, contrary to Hasker, that I have taken proper account of the ‘existential dimension’ of Christianity. I agree that whether it is rational to pursue the Christian way depends not only on how probable it is that the Christian creed is true and so that the way leads to the Christian goals, but (in part) on how strongly one wants those goals. Hasker is correct to say that I need to give arguments in favour of the historical claims of Christianity, and I outline how I hope to do that.

I am most grateful to my commentators for the detailed attention which they have given to my writings, their very generous compliments and their very fair criticisms; and to the Editor for giving so much space to this discussion. The criticisms are of two kinds – detailed criticisms of moral views which I invoke in my theodicy (McNaughton) and in my account of the Atonement (Schellenberg); and general criticisms of my ‘apologetic programme’ (Hasker and Schellenberg).

### **Theodicy (McNaughton)**

I begin my response by considering McNaughton on my theodicy. He focuses on chapter 12 of *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998), concerned with God’s right to cause or permit harm to some for the benefit of others. I am grateful to David McNaughton for bringing to light two confusions in that chapter. The first is this. I consider ‘three models for the duties of carers in charge of those not competent to make decisions’ (McNaughton, 275) and I conclude that the only one relevant to God’s duties as carer of humans is their ‘best interest’. God should provide for us what is objectively in our best interest. I then slide over into understanding this criterion as the quite different criterion of God’s having a duty to ‘benefit overall’. McNaughton then generously suggests an argument deriving

from elsewhere in my writing why, in the case of God, I should interpret 'best interest' as sufficient interest – that because there is no limit to the good which God could do for a dependant, He cannot promote their best interest, and so all that He can do for them is to promote their sufficient good. And, he should add to clinch the argument, that any interpretation of 'sufficient good' except that of 'benefit overall' would be arbitrary and unmotivated.

I fully endorse this way of removing the apparent inconsistency in what I wrote. Indeed, in the middle of my (1998, 230) I imply that this is why I make the slide, but I should have made this clear, and clear at an early stage of the argument. And there is also, as McNaughton acknowledges, another reason why God cannot promote the 'best interest' of every human; and that is, He is the carer of all humans and indeed of all creatures. Promoting my best interest will frequently be logically incompatible with promoting your best interest (even given that the carer does not promote my best interest by infringing your rights).

The other confusion concerns what I meant by my 'rather obscure' (McNaughton, 277) claim that 'the greater the duty to care, the greater (if the duty if fulfilled) the consequent rights'. I meant by saying that a duty to care was greater, that the range of areas covered by the duty was greater. Since we are dependent from moment to moment on God for our very existence, for the powers we have, the conditions in which we live, and for whether we depend on others and in which respects, we are totally dependent on God. Our dependence on others depends on God, and is limited to dependence in certain respects and only for a certain length of time. This understanding of what I 'really meant' is roughly equivalent to McNaughton's second and third interpretations of this.

These matters of interpretation being cleared up, I turn to the central issue between us of how far God's right to impose harm is limited only by His duty to ensure that each of us is a net beneficiary. Now, of course, I acknowledged (1998, 232) that 'there are limits to the extent to which God ought to allow us to be harmed on Earth even if there is eventual compensation in the world to come'. But 'while it would be wrong to take too much from the child before giving much to it', we couldn't reasonably suppose it to be a moral principle that no carer ought at any stage in a dependent's life to make him a net loser, i.e. to make him have an initial stretch of life worse than no life. For that would rule out a doctor giving painful injections to a foetus when it first becomes conscious, even though such injections would enable it to have a happy life subsequently. The issue is, then, with respect to God, how much harm would God be justified in allowing anyone to suffer for how long, given that (loosely) the harm is a (logically) necessary condition of greater good, and that it is subsequently compensated in the life of the suffering individual.

Now I do not think that McNaughton takes seriously enough the scale of the moral choice facing God, a scale of moral choice which we humans simply do not have to face. God is concerned, not with what benefits or harms to confer on

already existing creatures, but with what sort of creatures to create and in what sort of environment to put them, so that they are then liable to certain harms and to receive certain benefits. (If someone thinks that geneticists now have this problem, I point out that they don't have it on the kind of scale that God does. They are limited to a fairly narrow range of possible choices, and it is God who has so limited them.) And God is also concerned with whether to give creatures the capacity only for a finite life, or the capacity for an infinite life; and so with respect to those creatures for whom He makes the second choice, He is concerned for their eternal (that is, everlasting) wellbeing. Evils which seem 'horrendous' on the secular scale are not going to seem quite so horrendous on the eternal scale.

So while I agree with McNaughton that there are harms so awful that no-one, not even God, ought to impose them on anyone else, our disagreement concerns what those harms are. When we are concerned with God's initial choice, the issue concerns harms in the normative sense of 'harm'. For since there are no humans before God creates them as He joins them to bodies, there is no intelligible sense to what 'they' were before or what 'they' would 'otherwise' be like, if God had not so joined them. The only sense applicable in this context is the normative sense: to harm someone is to make them worse off than they ought to be. (In supposing that the unborn can be harmed, and so also benefited, by the life they are given, I cut a swathe through quite a few philosophical articles, since McNaughton also supposes this.) McNaughton gives no list of harms which not even God ought to impose on anyone; but he does make one general statement – that all humans have the right 'not to be physically and psychologically damaged in serious ways' (McNaughton, 273). But the trouble with this statement is that the notions of physical and psychological 'damage' imply a standard of physical and psychological wellbeing of which someone has been deprived; and so have no application to the issue of what sort of creatures it is right for God to create. If I blind you who are already sighted, I do you terrible damage (alias, a harm); but if (when there are no other races of similar creatures in the world) I cause the existence of a race of blind fish or even rational beings without the capacity for sight, I am merely a benefactor. (See, of course, Adams (1972).) For I am creating worthwhile lives. Analogously, if I cause the existence of a race of largely sighted rational beings where a few of them may lose their sight by accident or the malevolence of others, I am not wronging a member of that race by creating him; I am merely greatly benefiting him with a risk that the benefit may turn out to be much less. (For when one creates creatures and puts them in an environment really *e nihilo*, part of the package is the kind of risk in that environment to which they are subject.)

McNaughton's paper is littered with examples of duties of parents to children with the unstated implication that God ought to be providing for children in the same way. Parents have duties to 'see that the child is provided with adequate food, warmth, shelter, comfort and affection, a decent education, good medical care and so on'. But the unstated implication suffers from a similar (though not

identical) problem to that of my blindness example. Parents who fail to fulfil these duties are failing to provide existing humans with important good things which are available and not too difficult to provide, and thus making them worse off than they would otherwise be (and than similar humans actually are), rather than worse off than they actually are (as in the blindness case). And there being a maximum to the goods that parents can provide for children, unlike the goods that God can provide for us, it may reasonably be claimed that parents wrong children if they do not provide important goods not too difficult to provide. But it does not follow from that that a creator has a duty not to create creatures in environments where there is a risk that they may not have these things. That is, of course, obvious as regards 'a decent education'. If I don't provide education for my children capable of assimilating it when I can do so easily, then I will be harming them. But if (when there are no other races of rational beings in the world) I produce *e nihilo* a race of rational beings unable to teach each other to read and write, am I harming them? Or is God harming us by not teaching us now all the things which some future generation might discover? Of course not. But the same kind of point applies to some of the other things in this and other lists which McNaughton provides of goods which parents ought to provide for children. Take 'good medical care'. If I don't take my children to the doctor when they are badly ill, then indeed I fail as a parent. But do I wrong creatures if I cause them to exist in a world without medicine? I don't think so – for again, I give them a benefit (life with many good things) with a risk of losing some of them after a while. And this and similar points can be seen by the Rawls test. Faced with a choice of whether to exist in a world without medical care, or not to exist at all, almost all of us would make the former choice. Hence, the absence of medical care does not make for a life worse than no life; and so causing someone to be a person in such a situation is benefiting.

The other aspect of God's choice which has no analogy in the situation of parental choice is that God can choose to give us an infinite life. The length of an individual's life clearly makes a difference to the length of bad things which may be imposed on that individual at an earlier stage when those bad things are compensated by a greater good for that individual at a later stage, and especially when the bad things are a necessary condition of that individual receiving that greater good. Suppose that we all live for only a year, some being born with the capacities of present-day adults, others with the capacities of present-day children, etc. In that case, the right to impose painful medical care or education or discipline of any temporal length required to facilitate subsequent wellbeing, would be far less than it is now. Analogously, where we are concerned with temporary suffering required for an eternal wellbeing, imposition of a longer period of temporary suffering than it is permissible to impose if this life is all, would seem justified. Now I argue elsewhere in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* that suffering (and/or the unprevented possibility of suffering) of some length and intensity is (loosely) a necessary condition of a person becoming a

certain kind of person as a result of their own serious choice. This is because we are serious about having a certain character only if we do the actions which reflect that character when they are difficult to do, and if we do them over a period of time. To develop a loving character requires people in bad need of our love, and to develop a courageous character requires suffering or the real danger of it. And so on. McNaughton does not challenge these arguments. But it would seem to follow that if God is making people who can choose to form a character for eternity, He would have the right to make them liable to quite a lot of suffering in order to help them to form the right character – much more than the suffering that earthly parents have the right to impose on already existing children for the sake of earthly wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Some of my suffering will be for your benefit. How much suffering for the benefit of others is God justified in imposing, even if it is subsequently compensated? Clearly here, as with suffering for the benefit of the sufferer, there is a limit. But I emphasize a strand of my argument on whose relevance to our issue McNaughton nowhere comments – that my suffering for your benefit is a good for me. I am privileged if my life is used for your benefit.

So how much suffering would a good God have the right to impose for many purposes, including above all the good purpose of enabling us to make a serious choice of the sort of people we are to be for eternity? Ten minutes, a year, or eighty years? Of course, there is never going to be a straightforward deductive argument to ‘show the *extent* of God’s exalted rights’ (MacNaughton, 275). Similarly, there are never going to be such arguments to show that such-and-such a crime deserves only thirteen years in jail rather than fourteen. But reflection on cases similar in certain respects and dissimilar in others can lead us to conclude that it is probable that a certain amount would not be too large and a certain different amount would be too large. So also analogously here. In comparison with those many cases where doctors and educators impose suffering for many minutes and even years for the sake of greater goods, and we think they are right to do so, eighty years does not seem too long a period of suffering to gain the eternity we seriously choose to have, and not one foisted upon us. But I rule out plenty – God would certainly not have the right to impose endless unchosen suffering on anyone; and several trillion years would certainly also be too long, whatever the resulting good.

But why such talk about God’s rights? Ought not God to love us? Yet there is a difference between parents who yield to a child’s every whim, and parents who love their children. The latter will have a primary concern for the children’s wellbeing in the most important ways in the long term, and the child’s whim (including in certain circumstances his wish for signs of parental approval) may have to be frustrated in the short term. And if the long term is very long, the short term may not be very short. I must admit that whenever I write sentences like the above and then watch some of the world’s horrors on TV, I ask myself, ‘Do I really mean this?’ But in the end I always conclude that I do. In a parent who has for good reason

to cause suffering to a child, emotional concern for the child's short-term well-being rightly pulls against rational concern for their long-term wellbeing. So analogically, it must be with God also. God seeks the very best for us in the very long term, and He is going to put us under a lot of pressure to get it. He is very demanding, but we'd expect that – would we not?

### **The Atonement (Schellenberg)**

John Schellenberg focuses his detailed criticisms also on my moral views, in his case those involved in my exposition and defence in *Responsibility and Atonement* (1989) of the doctrine of the Atonement. He singles out for criticism four views involved in different stages of my argument. As with all moral views, including the ones which McNaughton criticized, all that anyone can do to make them plausible is to appeal to judgements about other particular moral issues or other moral principles which one hopes one's critic will share, and then extrapolate from these to the moral view at stake. As I read Schellenberg, I begin to doubt when he and I share enough moral judgments about other matters to come to agreement over the disputed issues in any period shorter than a few years of serious argument and experience of life, let alone within the time it takes to read a philosophical article. All that I can do is to point out that his judgements are wildly dissonant, not merely with typical Christian judgements, but with the judgements of most people in almost all cultures. If he recognizes that, he will have good reason to think again.

This point is most obvious in Schellenberg's first criticism of me, when he claims that there is no such thing as objective guilt. And to illustrate this point he takes an example which I should have thought was about as unfavourable to his position as one could find. He unintentionally runs over his child with his car, and then concludes, 'there is nothing wrong with *me*'. What *does* he say to his wife? – 'I'm sorry'? But this 'sorry' is not intended to express 'remorse', only 'regret', and so it fails to bring out the asymmetry of reaction by himself and his wife to what has happened, which one would expect to find. For presumably he and his wife regret what has happened equally – so why is not she as quick to say, 'I'm sorry' to him as he is to her? The answer is obvious – *he* has caused the tragedy. And the reason why that makes all the difference is the one I gave – 'in interacting with others, we accept responsibility in advance for not causing them certain kinds of harm'. Schellenberg wants to qualify this principle with the clause, 'insofar as we can help it' (Schellenberg, 292). But I suggest that the principle stands without the clause. This can be seen by the fact that when I undertake explicitly to do something and there is no explicit qualification of Schellenberg's kind, there is clearly no such implicit qualification either. I make a promise or borrow money and then – through no fault of my own – can't fulfil or repay. What do I say to my creditors? – 'I regret the situation in which you find yourselves. I've been short of

money in my time too'? Of course not. I've failed and there is something wrong with me, even if it is not my fault that I've failed. But the moral situation is the same, even if the undertaking is only implicit. My intuitions on this matter are shared by two writers very far from the Christian tradition – Bernard Williams and Tom Nagel (1976, 123–124 and 140–141). Williams considers an example of a lorry driver who 'through no fault of his' runs over a child, to illustrate his contention that 'agent-regret' (the attitude which the lorry driver will have to his action – and, Williams suggests, will rightly have), differs from mere 'spectator-regret'. Nagel comments that if the driver had been guilty of a minor degree of negligence, 'he will blame himself' for the death of the child, whereas 'he would have to blame himself only slightly for the negligence itself if no situation arose' where a child's life was at stake; and Nagel too suggests that the driver's attitude is right. Of course, by far the larger part of the Christian tradition has emphasized that subjective guilt is of a qualitatively different kind from objective guilt, and requires far more serious treatment, and that too, I believe, echoes the general secular view.

Schellenberg's second criticism is that as God suffers 'no harmful consequences' from our wrongdoing, it is inappropriate to make reparation to God. 'Has some divine project in the universe been thwarted?', he asks rhetorically (Schellenberg, 293). But although the question is so phrased as to expect the answer 'No', the normal Christian answer is 'Yes'. God sought to make good people, to the extent of people who fulfil their obligations to Him and each other, and they have failed. His generous gift of life has been abused. Maybe He expects 'humans to live imperfect lives'; in the sense that He thinks it probable that any given human will do so. But that does not alter the fact that when we fail, it is our fault that we have not fought against temptation strongly enough – though, of course, our guilt is less than it would have been if we had failed when doing good was easier for us. If I fail to repay a debt to you, when I could have done so even though it was difficult, I certainly owe you reparation. And it was certainly no part of God's 'game plan' that we should fail in our obligations to Him – He wanted us to succeed, hard though it would have been for us. The fact (*if* it is a fact) that God is not 'literally upset or wounded' by what happens, is irrelevant. If we have wronged someone, we owe them reparation, whether or not they are upset by what has happened. (The same response is appropriate to a point which Schellenberg makes in his third criticism.)

When I come to Schellenberg's third and fourth criticisms of my moral views, I seem to find in them one implicit misunderstanding of those views. I do not hold that it is impossible for a human to fulfil her obligations to God, nor that it is always impossible for anyone – if she has wronged God – to provide adequate atonement. It's just very difficult, and people don't. I wrote (1989, 146) that 'objective sin is *almost* unavoidable' (my this-paper italics) and that 'subjective sin is very hard to avoid'; and I wrote (1989, 148) of the 'difficulty' which man will have in making proper atonement to God. Given all that, yes, we could intend that reparation



made to a fellow human could serve as reparation to God for hurting that human – so long as the reparation was sufficiently large. And, yes, humans could (Schellenberg, 296) ‘make reparation to God for past wrongs by filling their lives’ with otherwise supererogatory good lives. The problem is simply that we don’t. Hence the need for God to help us.

In his third criticism, Schellenberg claims that we can only hurt God by hurting his creatures if we have a real ‘personal relationship with God’, and that we don’t since he is ‘hidden and inaccessible to us much of the time’ (Schellenberg, 295). But, as even Schellenberg seems prepared to acknowledge (Schellenberg, 291), we can wrong someone objectively even if we don’t know that we are doing so. And of course for many of us, the existence of God is more obvious than it is for Schellenberg. Schellenberg’s fourth criticism seems to amount to a gut feeling that if I’m not willing to make reparation for my sins, it’s a cop-out to suppose that anyone else could do it for me. St Paul felt the same in his pre-Christian days, and so did Kant most of two millennia later. In response, I can only urge Schellenberg to take the kind of secular examples which I deploy seriously. It does matter that a wrongdoer makes some reparation to those whose property and lives are damaged, even if they don’t need this reparation. And if the wrongdoer has no means to make the reparation, and someone else offers to provide that means, it is good that the wrongdoer accept that and offer it back to his victim. Schellenberg writes that I normally look ‘for quite a lot from human beings’. Yes I do, and as I wrote earlier, I think that – like every good parent – God does too. But it certainly does *not* ‘jar with this sensibility’ (Schellenberg, 297) to provide help in abundance when a child or creature is not willing to do the perfect thing. Of course, this is only a temporary stage, God and the good parent hope; the aim is to make us perfect beings who no longer need to make reparation. Love looks for the best, but it surely helps when it does not find it.

### **My ‘apologetic programme’ (Hasker and Schellenberg)**

Bill Hasker has criticized the general approach of the ‘apologetic programme’ of which the tetralogy on Christian doctrine is a part, and some of John Schellenberg’s criticisms concern this also. Hasker claims that my whole approach to reaching a conclusion ‘about the general character of life and the universe’ (Hasker, 257) by way of confirmation theory is unsatisfactory in my ‘comparative neglect of the personal, existential dimension of Christianity’. I do not think that this is a fair criticism. My main concern is to investigate just how probable it is that the Christian theological system is true; and how could that be investigated except by examining whether our evidence supports (really makes it probable, not just seems to us to do so) the Christian theological system? The ‘relentlessly objective tone’ (Hasker, 254) is the only possible one, for anyone who is not a global sceptic.



For it does rather look as if a theological system such as the Christian one gives an account of the ultimate cause of the Universe, why it works the way it does, and what is going to happen to its human inhabitants. It differs, therefore, from scientific and historical theories only by providing deeper explanations of more than they do, and so is appropriately assessed by the objective criteria which clearly operate when judging scientific or historical theories. Just what these criteria are is a contested matter and I have defended my own account (which Hasker summarizes on 254–255) at various places including in *The Existence of God* (1991), and most fully in a book published subsequently to the tetralogy – *Epistemic Justification* (2001a). But to suppose that there are no correct criteria for assessing the probability of anything is to be a global sceptic.

And here Hasker alludes (Hasker, 257) to what I can only regard as a very strange thing – that ‘most probability theorists have now abandoned [my] logical, a priori conception of probability’. What makes this strange is that while most theorists have abandoned this conception when they are theorizing about probability, when they are writing about anything else, including anything else in the philosophy of science, they affirm as an objective matter that certain theories and predictions are probable and others not. If subjective-probability theorists are going to be consistent, they should hold that (objectively speaking) any ascription of probability to any thing or any prediction is just as rational as any other. But, since they don’t (and won’t!) hold this, they should turn their attention to formalizing the criteria of objective support rather than denying their existence. I think that I have made a good case for my account of what these criteria are, and none of my present commentators has sought to challenge that account.

I am more than ready to allow as Hasker suggests to me (Hasker, 258) that bad motives and misdirected 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. We want some things and not other things to be true, and so we misassess the force of the evidence. (If we saw that theism was probably true – or false! – that might give us reason for doing things that we would rather not do.) And, the cultivation of right emotions will not merely have the negative function of preventing interference ‘with one’s fulfilment of one’s epistemic duty’ (Hasker, 258), but may be essential for seeing the force of theistic arguments, in helping us to see the moral values of things. When I love something, I can see that it has a value which might otherwise escape my notice, and may lead me (via reflective equilibrium) to see a crucial objective moral principle. So, too, hating something may enable me to see something wrong with it which in turn leads to a crucial objective moral principle. And we cannot assess arguments for and against the existence of the traditional God unless we know what a perfectly good being can be expected to do and we cannot know that without having morally correct views.

I do not think that I have ever denied any of the above, but I acknowledge that

I have not given it proper prominence and I am pleased to do so here. Yet I have, I believe, given prominence to the role of emotions in the Christian journey in two other respects. The first concerns their importance at the end of the journey. We seek to be people of a certain kind, and that involves having the right emotions – wanting the right things and loving people for the right reasons. A theme of the later chapters of *Faith and Reason* (1981) and of *Responsibility and Atonement* was that only those with the right desires would be happy in heaven. The second concerns their relevance to which goals it is rational to seek. The main theme of *Faith and Reason* was the relevance of one's judgements of the probability of Christian theism (or any rival religious system) to the rationality of living in the way which it commends. And I argued that that rationality depends, as well as on the probability of the system, on how much one wants (as well as on how much one thinks one ought to seek) the goals which the system offers – e.g. the beatific vision. So, it follows that those with a longing for God will be rational to pursue a way with only a low probability of achieving the beatific vision of God, whereas those without such a longing will not; and so that 'a change ... in what one ... seeks and avoids' (Hasker, 258) can make all the difference. And given that there are good emotions and bad emotions, there will be right amounts of these emotions to have. In my pedestrian style I wrote (1981, 141) that, 'it is good that a man seek great goals', and seek to ensure 'above all, that if there is a God who calls men to friendship with himself, that call is answered'. 'Only a man with that kind of ambition is a great man.' Not quite up to Kierkegaard's poetic standards (see Hasker, 258), I admit; and I put on it the qualification that there are other goals (e.g. absence of pain, and creation of great literature) which are obviously worth pursuing, albeit to a much smaller degree, whether or not there is a God. But perhaps there is enough here to satisfy Hasker that I have not neglected 'the personal, existential dimension of Christianity' (Hasker, 251).

But it remains the case that the vision of God is only a goal worth pursuing if there is a God of which to have a vision, and the less probable it is that there is the less rational it will be to lead the Christian life, in view of the lesser but genuine worthwhileness of other goals. So there is no avoiding the assessment of the probability on evidence of Christian theism; and – if that is less than half – the probability of Christian theism relative to the probability of other religious systems which offer goals similar to the goal which Christianity offers.<sup>2</sup> And here Schellenberg comments that I do not make this comparison, and indeed show (Schellenberg, 288) 'only the most superficial acquaintance with the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions'. Touché.

However, I do not need to make a detailed investigation 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. To be more precise, I will be in this position if I can show the following things:

- A That there is a significant probability that there is a God, and that if there is a God, He would become incarnate to identify with our suffering, to reveal things to us and to make atonement for us, and that He would show that He had done this by a super-miracle; and there is no evidence in connection with any prophet other than Jesus to be expected, even with moderate probability, if God had become incarnate in that prophet and had signed their life with a super-miracle;

and

- B That there is evidence of the kind of life Jesus led to be expected with moderate probability (maybe less than half) if God had become incarnate in Jesus for those purposes, but with much less probability otherwise;

and

- C There is evidence to be expected if the Resurrection took place with moderate probability (maybe less than half) but with much less probability otherwise.

If I can show these things, I do not need to consider the details of other religions. For no other religion has a founder prophet whom the religion claims to have been God Incarnate for those purposes, and has a foundation event of purportedly super-miraculous character for which its advocates have claimed that there is the kind of serious historical evidence (whether or not one thinks it very strong) that there is for the Resurrection of Jesus. Given these things, it would follow that no religion can produce the historical evidence for a claim about an incarnation of the kind described which there is reason to expect if that religion is true, nearly as strong as can Christianity. It does not need a lot of detailed work on other religions to show that they are deficient in at least one of the two respects on which I have commented. I simply accept what their adherents say about the other religions at its face value. It is obvious that Islam does not claim that Mohammad was God Incarnate. And it is obvious that the evidence for the occurrence and miraculous character of any or all of the foundation events of Judaism, such as the plagues of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, is not up to the level of the testimony of writers a few decades after the reported events to the testimony of more-or-less contemporary witnesses to the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus.

As John Schellenberg notes, I emphasized in *Revelation* (1992, 2 and 112) the crucial importance of background evidence that there is a God likely to intervene in human history, in assessing any detailed historical evidence that He had done so. Let me repeat the analogy which I gave there, but put it in a way that shows why

establishing A, B, and C above will make it fairly probable that Jesus was God Incarnate who made atonement for us and rose from the dead. Suppose you have a theory of physics T, supported by a wide range of background evidence  $k$ , that in the course of the history of some galaxy certain circumstances will occur only once and that then one supernova in the galaxy will explode. Suppose that you have further evidence  $e_1$  to be expected with moderate probability (less than half) if these circumstances were realized on some occasion. Suppose too, that you also have further evidence  $e_2$  (about that occasion) also to be expected with similar moderate probability if a supernova had exploded (e.g. debris in the sky). Let  $h$  be the hypothesis that a supernova exploded on the occasion in question. Suppose that it is very improbable that you would have both  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  unless a supernova had exploded under the specified circumstances, that is unless  $h$  is true. And suppose that  $k$  includes evidence that, despite the availability of many relevant data about the galaxy, there are no data nearly as strong as ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ ) that any other supernova in the galaxy has exploded so far. Suppose, too, that if T is false, it would (given  $k$ ) be impossible for  $h$  to be true. Then even if T is marginally less probable than not-T on background evidence, ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ ) together still make it probable that the supernova exploded – because although it is not too probable that they would occur if a supernova had exploded, it is so improbable that they would occur if it hadn't, that even if T is somewhat less probable than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , a supernova explosion is still the most probable account of what happened. But if T is quite improbable on background evidence, then  $h$  too will be quite improbable on that evidence and so the overall balance of evidence may be against an explosion.

T is analogous to a theism, supported by background evidence of natural theology  $k$ , which predicts a certain sort of incarnation (one designed to satisfy the goals specified in A), evidenced by a super-miracle;  $h$  is the hypothesis that Jesus provided such an incarnation and that his life was culminated by a super-miracle;  $e_1$  is the evidence of the kind of life Jesus led, and  $e_2$  is the evidence of witnesses, etc. relevant to the Resurrection. If ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ ) together are very improbable unless  $h$  is true, but only fairly improbable if  $h$  is true (as B and C claim), and since it is impossible for  $h$  to be true unless T is true; then if T is true and  $k$  includes evidence that there are no rival candidates to Jesus for whom there is evidence of anything like the modest strength of  $e_1$  and  $e_2$ , then ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ ) make it probable that  $h$  is true. Even if it is somewhat less probable than  $\frac{1}{2}$  on the background evidence that T is true, the great improbability of the conjunction ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ ) unless  $h$  is true will still make it probable that  $h$ . But if T is very improbable on background evidence,  $h$  will also be very improbable on that evidence. And then the improbability of the conjunction if  $h$  is false, may not be enough to make  $h$  probable overall. So I need A as well. Of course, everything turns on the range of probability values covered by 'moderately probable', 'very improbable', etc.; but it is easy to see the general point without going into precise details.

It is because many New Testament scholars assume, in effect, for the purposes

of their study that there is a very low probability on background evidence alone that there is a God likely to intervene in human history, that they exhibit the ‘powerful anti-supernaturalistic bias’ which Hasker notes (Hasker, 260). He goes on to ask ‘why I do not address [this bias] head-on’. But I have argued at length for the existence of God; and also for the other elements of A in a piecemeal way. I have given reasons for expecting a good God to become incarnate in *The Christian God* (1994, 216–223) and to provide atonement (in *Responsibility and Atonement*), revelation (in *Revelation*) and identification with our suffering (in *Providence and the Problem of Evil*); and I have claimed in a number of places that any claim that God became incarnate in a certain human being for these reasons needs authentication by miracle. And I have shown the relevance of A to historical investigation; but very briefly. My arguments for B are contained in chapter 7 of *Revelation*, but they are of the sketchiest kind; and I haven’t argued for C at all, let alone argued that the probabilities referred to in A, B, and C are of sufficient strength to show that it is more probable that the Christian religion is true than that any other religion is true. I assumed that the requisite historical work was a task for ‘other writers’ (1994, 2). I now realize that no New Testament scholar not totally at home in recent philosophy of probability (as well as some other areas of philosophy) can possibly do this work. So I have been doing it myself, and have now finished writing a book entitled *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* which may be regarded as a historical appendix to the tetralogy (as *Epistemic Justification* may be regarded as a general epistemological appendix). I argue in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* for a stronger position than that considered above: that the ( $e_1$  and  $e_2$ )-type evidence, together with the background evidence of natural theology (broadly construed, so as to include the evidence of the pervasiveness of religious experience), make it more probable than not that Christianity is true.

How right Bill Hasker was to say (Hasker, 257) that I ‘still [have] a lot of work to do’ and John Schellenberg was to say that I am ‘required to sally forth once more’ (Schellenberg, 289), though not quite in the direction which he suggests. I seek in the new book to establish B and C, as well as to give a more systematic presentation of A, and thereby to allay Hasker’s concern (Hasker, 261) that ‘we don’t have enough to go on’. We do, I shall be arguing, when we take into account background evidence and the improbability of rival explanations of all we know about Jesus – the coincidence in connection with only one prophet in human history of evidence to be expected with moderate probability that he led the sort of life we would expect God Incarnate to lead, and that his life was culminated by a super-miracle; when there is not evidence of either kind in respect of any other prophet in human history. But my critics are, of course, right to say that I have not shown this so far, nor – to be fair – have I purported to do so, merely pointing out the need for a moderate amount of detailed evidence in support of the historical claims. But if I now admit – at any rate for the purposes of convincing others – that

evil counts against the existence of God unless we take into account specifically Christian claims about what God has done, the argument of *The Existence of God* to show that it is more probable than not that there is a God on the evidence of natural theology alone (broadly conceived), will not suffice. For that argument claimed that we do not need to invoke specifically Christian claims to show that evil does not count against the existence of God – as Hasker points out (Hasker, 255). So I need an additional historical argument in favour of Christian doctrines to make it more probable than not that there is a God.

Hasker draws attention to what he sees as a difficulty in applying the probability calculus to any ‘fairly complex hypothesis’ (Hasker, 256), such as Christian theism as expounded in the Nicene Creed, as opposed presumably to any relatively simple hypothesis, such as bare theism (‘there is a God’). The difficulty is that the probability of a complex hypothesis is affected by a ‘principle of dwindling probabilities’; that the probability of a conjunction is a product of the probability of the first conjunct on the evidence multiplied by the probability of the second conjunct given the evidence and the first conjunct, and so on for all the conjuncts. And multiplication of several fairly high probabilities can quickly yield a low-total probability for the conjunction. That is surely so, but all depends on just how high the fairly high probabilities are. But, as Hasker points out (Hasker, 257) any complex wide-ranging hypothesis faces the same problem. And so too do the sentences on a single page of any history book. Indeed, the relation of any hypothesis at all to its evidence can be expressed in such a way as to seem to exhibit this problem. For consider a population of 1,000 As, 900 of which have been chosen at random and found to be B. On this evidence ( $e$ ) the hypothesis  $h$  that all 1,000 As are B might seem to have a pretty high probability.  $P(h|e)$  is perhaps 0.8. But  $P(h|e)$  is the product of  $P(h_{901}|e) \times P(h_{902}|e \& h_{901}) \times P(h_{903}|e \& h_{902}) \dots$  and so on for 100 terms; where  $h_n$  is the hypothesis that the  $n$ th A is B. The terms of this series will have to have some very high values indeed (some of them of the order of at least 0.999999) if  $P(h|e)$  is to be 0.8. And that suggests that we should not be surprised to find some pretty high values for the probability of one conjunct on another conjunct and the evidence, when the conjuncts taken together form a well-integrated hypothesis.

And another feature of this situation is that while if you put all the evidence in at the start, adding conjuncts to an initial hypothesis can only diminish the probability; if you add another conjunct to the evidence at the same time as adding a conjunct to the hypothesis, the overall probability may well increase. The important issue is not the formal truth of this principle of dwindling probabilities, but what happens when we add to the hypothesis of theism on the evidence of natural theology, both further Christian hypotheses and New Testament and related historical evidence. I shall be arguing that the probability then increases. But I have the feeling that it is an inadequate response to criticisms of my previous books merely to run a trailer for the next one.

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## Notes

1. And, I have argued elsewhere, only a person with a holy character would enjoy the life of heaven which alone would be worth having forever. See my *Faith and Reason* (1981), ch. 5.
2. On a minor point (see Hasker, 258), I have now yielded to criticism in acknowledging that to believe  $p$  is not always to believe  $p$  more probable than not- $p$ . I now hold that while the latter belief entails the former, the converse does not hold where a person has no probability beliefs about  $p$ . If a person does have probability beliefs about  $p$ , he can believe that  $p$  if and only if he believes  $p$  to be more probable than not- $p$ ; but he may not have probability beliefs about  $p$ . See my (2001a), 34–37.