

Rationality and public evidence: a reply to Richard Swinburne

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First, my thanks to Richard Swinburne for his probing and thoughtful review of my book *Warranted Christian Belief* (*WCB*). His account of the book's main line of argument is accurate as far as it goes; it does contain an important lacuna, however. The focus of the book is twofold; it is aimed in two directions. First, just as Swinburne says, I argue that there are no plausible *de iure* objections to Christian belief that are independent of *de facto* objections; any plausible objection to the rationality of Christian belief, or to its warrant (the property that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief), or its justification, will either be obviously mistaken or will (as with Freud, and Marx and a thousand others) presuppose one or more *de facto* objections. This is intended as a contribution to apologetics; it is important, because many or most objections to Christian belief are of just the sort I attempt to discredit. ('I don't know whether Christian belief is true or not – who could know a thing like that? – but I do know that it is irrational, or unwarranted, or not rationally justified, or...'.) Second (and this is the focus Swinburne fails to mention), I proposed the extended A/C (Aquinas/Calvin) model as, from the perspective of Christian belief, a plausible account of the way in which Christian belief is, in fact, justified, rational and warranted. So the book is aimed in two directions: first towards readers generally, whether Christian believers or not, and second towards Christian believers.

Swinburne raises several objections to *WCB*: for example, he objects to my theory of warrant (developed in *Warrant and Proper Function*¹ and recounted in *WCB*); he argues that there is no connection between proper function and design; he thinks I don't take Historical Biblical Criticism (HBC) seriously enough, and that I'm also mistaken in my estimate of the defeating propensity for Christian belief of suffering and evil. I shall resist the temptation to detailed self-exculpation (it is indeed a temptation) and concentrate on one connected congeries of topics. Despite the above objections, however, it looks to me as if Swinburne believes my main sin is one of omission rather than commission. After giving his account of

the main line of argument of the book, he says: ‘There is a monumental issue which Plantinga does not discuss, and which a lot of people will consider needs discussing. This is whether Christian beliefs do have warrant’ (206).

I argue that (probably) Christian belief has warrant if and only if it is true, so that any argument for the conclusion that it lacks warrant will have to constitute an argument for the conclusion that it isn’t true. Since I don’t also argue that Christian belief *is* true, Swinburne remarks that: ‘And so we are back again with the question we can only answer with affirmation or counter-affirmation; we cannot in any interesting sense ask whether it is rational to believe that Christian belief has warrant – he says, or seems to say’ (206–207). A consequence, he thinks, is that ‘Plantinga seems not to have much to say to those Christian believers whose beliefs are not of Plantinga’s kind, and nothing to say to the adherents of other religions and of none’ (207). Finally, Swinburne thinks there is an important sense of ‘rational’ that I have overlooked or at any rate neglected:

The question which worries the atheist and many a theist is not, I suggest, Plantinga’s question about whether Christian belief is warranted in his sense, but my question about whether it is rational in the above sense – whether it is probably true, given our evidence – and it would have been good if Plantinga had considered that question. (207–208)

So the criticism is fivefold: (a) I don’t discuss the question whether Christian belief *has* warrant; (b) with respect to that question (on my view), we can only announce affirmations and counter-affirmations; we can’t fruitfully argue about the matter; (c) on my view it also looks as if ‘we cannot in any interesting sense ask whether it is rational to believe that Christian belief has warrant’; (d) as a result I have little to say to those Christians whose beliefs are not of my kind; and (e) I’ve overlooked an important sense of ‘rational’, one in which believers and non-believers *can* sensibly argue about the question whether Christian belief is in fact rational.

That’s a serious bill of indictment: what do I have to say for myself? To begin with, note the relation between (b) and (c). In WCB I argue that:

- (1) (Probably) Christian belief has warrant if and only if it is true.

But if (1) is correct, it is plausible to think that:

- (2) We can fruitfully argue about whether it is rational to hold that Christian belief has warrant if and only if we can fruitfully argue about whether it is rational to *accept* Christian belief.

So (b) and (c), we might say, are functionally equivalent. Now why does Swinburne think that on my view we can’t fruitfully argue about whether Christian belief has warrant (and hence about whether it is rational to believe that it does)? What he means, I think, is this: *believer and unbeliever* (on my view) can’t fruitfully argue about this topic. (Maybe believers can argue among themselves about it: followers

of Lev Shestov might claim that Christian belief doesn't have warrant and is all the better for that; followers of John Locke and John Calvin might take quite a different tack.) That is because (again, on my view) we can't find good arguments for Christian belief whose premises (as well as the principles connecting premises and conclusion) are part of public evidence.

By way of response: first, it isn't true at all that on my view believer and unbeliever (and fence sitter) cannot fruitfully discuss and dispute the question whether Christian belief is true and has warrant (but can only issue affirmations and counter-affirmations). Those who think Christian belief is false, naturally enough, raise objections of various sorts to the truth of Christian belief. Thus they may propose the existence of suffering and evil, or specific types of suffering and evil, as an argument against the truth of Christian belief. Postmodernists of various stripes sometimes say things that can be taken as (perhaps implicit) arguments for the falsehood of Christian belief. Pluralists sometimes argue that it is unlikely that Christian belief is true, given the wide variety of religious beliefs on offer. Certain practitioners and partisans of HBC may argue that central parts of Christian belief – the Resurrection, the Incarnation – are unlikely on the evidence. Materialists may claim that there can't be an immaterial spirit such as God is, according to Christians; and there are also those who make common cause with the old positivists in claiming that the things Christians say aren't true because they aren't even cognitively meaningful.

Nothing in my position, of course, implies that Christian philosophers need not take these and other objections seriously. On the contrary: *of course* they should; and they should refute them. In *WCB*, furthermore, I devote some six chapters to just that project – the project of refuting arguments (both *de facto* and *de iure*) against Christian belief. To my mind this undertaking is of major importance (and one to which I've devoted much of my career).

Second, on my view, Christians can quite properly offer any arguments for the truth of Christian belief they think are appropriate. I doubt that these arguments are sufficient to warrant the firmness of belief involved in faith (as traditionally understood) but it doesn't follow that they have no use at all. On the contrary; they can be extremely useful,² and in at least four different ways. They can confirm and support belief reached in other ways; they may move fence-sitters closer to Christian belief; they can function as defeater-defeaters; and they can reveal interesting and important connections. My main claim here is only that such arguments are not *necessary* for justified, rational and warranted Christian belief.

I'm also inclined to think they aren't sufficient for such belief. When Swinburne says that on my view we can only affirm and deny the truth (and hence the warrant) of Christian belief, perhaps what he means is just that I don't think any such arguments are sufficient to establish the truth of Christian belief, so that all we can do is issue those affirmations. He laments the fact that I don't offer arguments from public evidence for the truth (and thus the warrant) of Christian belief. To

see more of what is involved here, it will be useful to turn to (e): the claim that I've overlooked or anyway neglected an important sense of 'rational', one in which believers and non believers *can* sensibly argue about the question whether Christian belief is rational: 'Despite what Plantinga seems to say, there is a clear and all-important question about whether a belief is rational (or justified) which has nothing to do with whether it is justified by the believer's own lights or with whether it is produced by "properly functioning" processes' (207). What is this question? 'In a strong internalist sense, a belief of a person S is rational if it is rendered (evidentially) probable by S's evidence' (207). And what is S's evidence? 'A person's evidence consists of the contents of his basic beliefs (weighted by his degree of confidence in them) – that is, the contents of those beliefs which seem to him obviously true and those beliefs which seem less obviously true but whose status is basic' (207).

Of course *my* evidence so construed will very likely be different from yours; there are propositions such that I believe them in the basic way and you don't. For example, I now believe in that way that there is a mug of tea on my desk; no doubt beliefs about what is on my desk are not among your basic beliefs. So S's evidence will be specific to S: call it 'private evidence'. In addition to private evidence, however, there is also *public* evidence: 'But as well as such evidence, there is a lot of totally public certain evidence – that there is a world, that it is governed by scientific laws, that humans are conscious, etc. etc.'. Perhaps we may think of public evidence as something like the intersection of the various sets of private evidence; and in this intersection, says Swinburne, we find some propositions that are certain. Given these notions of public and private evidence, we may distinguish two corresponding senses of 'rational': S's belief is *privately rational* if and only if it is probable on S's evidence, and S's belief is *publicly rational* if and only if it is probable with respect to public evidence.

And now the question I didn't deal with: 'Whether various sets of evidence (some public, some private) make it probable that Christian beliefs are true is the question that Plantinga does not discuss' (208). This is the question that, as Swinburne says in the second quotation on 216 above, that 'worries the atheist and many a theist'.

We should note first that it is an immediate consequence of these definitions that all of my basic beliefs are privately rational. If my Christian beliefs are basic, therefore, they will be rational in this sense. In the A/C model I suggested in *WCB*, Christian beliefs are indeed typically taken in the basic way; hence, according to that model, Christian belief is (typically) privately rational in Swinburne's sense. A further consequence of these definitions is that my basic beliefs are privately rational even if they are completely mad – even if, like Descartes' madmen, I believe (in the basic way) that my head is made of glass or that I am a gourd.

These consequences suggest that the question whether Christian beliefs are privately rational (in this sense) is not as interesting as we might have thought. We

can mend matters by revising the definition in such a way that a belief is privately rational only if it is probable with respect to that segment of my private evidence (in Swinburne's sense) that is *not a result of cognitive malfunction*. And we can accomplish this by taking a person's evidence set to be, not all of those beliefs he accepts in the basic way, but those deliverances of reason (see *WCB*, ch. 4, section IC) he accepts in that way. Then a belief is privately rational for me just if it is probable with respect to the set of deliverances of reason I accept in the basic way, and publicly rational if it is probable with respect to the intersections of all of our evidence sets. (In this way we make a connection with the sense of rationality I proposed to Swinburne in the private communication he mentions on 208.) Basically held mad beliefs will not be rational in this sense, and specifically Christian beliefs will be privately rational, for S, just if they are probable with respect to those deliverances of reason S accepts in the basic way; they will be publicly rational only if they are probable with respect to some sensibly chosen intersection of our evidence sets.

Now the fact is I do discuss the question whether Christian belief is privately rational (in this sense) for many or most of us. Chapter 3, 'Justification and the classical picture', is mostly devoted to discussion of the Lockean claim that Christian belief is properly accepted by a person S, only if it is probable with respect to what is certain for S, where the latter includes what is self-evident, about S's own mental life, or evident with respect to the senses for S. This claim is close to the claim that Christian belief is properly accepted only if it is privately rational in the above sense. (The difference is that rationality in the above sense does not require that all of my evidence be *certain*.) I conclude there that failing to meet this condition is nothing against Christian belief: it can be both rational (in the sense I explain in *WCB*) and justified even if it does not meet that condition. And in later chapters I conclude that Christian belief can also be warranted (if true) even if it does not meet that condition. So private rationality is not necessary for the acceptability of Christian belief. And of course a fortiori public rationality is not necessary for its acceptability.

Of course, all that is a matter of *discussing* the question whether Christian belief is publicly or privately rational, evaluating the importance of a positive answer to it; it isn't *answering* the question. But I also provide a partial answer. In section 6 of chapter 8 I consider an attempt to show that Christian belief is probable with respect to public evidence, construed basically as above. In my opinion, Swinburne's arguments along these lines are the best on offer; therefore I modelled the argument I considered on the argument he offers in his book *Revelation*.³ My conclusion was that (because of the problem of diminishing probabilities) this argument (and other arguments like it) does not succeed in showing that Christian belief is very probable with respect to public evidence. In fact, these arguments don't even show that Christian belief is more probable than not with respect to that evidence; they show, at most, that such belief is not wholly improbable with

respect to it. Accordingly, if I'm right, the best arguments for the public rationality of Christian belief are not particularly successful – at any rate they don't show that Christian belief is likely with respect to public evidence.

So, in the first place, I do discuss and partially answer the question Swinburne says I ignore. But secondly, this question is not of great importance for my project. I don't say it isn't of great importance *uberhaupt*; I say only that it is not of great importance for my project. That project was to show how it could be that Christian belief might have warrant – the property enough of which is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. But it is obvious that a belief may have warrant for me – including warrant sufficient for knowledge – even if it is not probable with respect to public evidence. I am a suspect in a crime committed yesterday afternoon; I have means, motive, opportunity. I am known to have committed this kind of crime before, and a credible eyewitness claims to have seen me at the crime scene. Nevertheless, I clearly remember spending yesterday afternoon on a solitary hike miles from the scene of the crime. Then I know that I didn't commit the crime, despite the fact that my committing it is more probable than not with respect to public evidence. So probability with respect to public evidence is by no means necessary for rationality, justification or knowledge – even of beliefs that are among the deliverances of reason.

Now according to Swinburne, 'Or, of course, if he [i.e. I] had reached a negative answer with respect to the evidential question, then he would show us that Christian beliefs probably don't have warrant' (208). But what would be thus shown is only that it is not probable with respect to *public evidence* that Christian belief is warranted. And that is nothing against it. An important part of my whole project was to show how such belief could have warrant, justification and rationality when taken in the *basic* way, by way of the cognitive processes I describe. And of course it might be that such belief has those positive features, even if it is not probable with respect to public evidence:⁴ that was a central part of what I argued in *WCB*. So the question whether Christian belief is publicly or privately rational in the sense explained above is not of great importance with respect to my project.

Probability with respect to public evidence is not necessary for Christian belief's having warrant; it is also insufficient. Faith, as I was thinking of it, involves *believing* the propositions in question, and (in paradigmatic cases, anyway) believing them with considerable firmness. But a belief's being probable, even highly probable, with respect to public evidence, is insufficient for its being warrantably believed with this degree of firmness. In fact, it is insufficient for its being warrantably believed with *any* degree of firmness. Even in his most optimistic moments, I suspect, Swinburne doubts that the probability of Christian belief on public evidence is as high as 0.9. But suppose it is. Even so (and given the truth of Christian belief) that's not nearly sufficient for knowledge. I hear the weatherman announce that the probability of rain for this afternoon is 0.9. Now if I am thinking straight, I won't *believe* that it will rain this afternoon; I will believe only that it is

very *likely* that it will. And if I do rashly believe that it will rain, this belief will have little by way of warrant. Even if, as it turns out it does rain, I didn't know that it would. No; if it's to be the case that at least some people actually *know* some of the claims of Christianity, or even are rational in actually *believing* them, there will have to be a separate source of warrant for such belief, something like, following Calvin and Aquinas, the internal testimony (Calvin) or instigation (Aquinas) of the Holy Spirit. Probability with respect to public evidence, then, is neither necessary nor sufficient for warranted Christian belief; for that reason the question whether it *is* probable with respect to such evidence is not important for the project I undertook in *WCB*.

Here it is really important to be clear about the difference between my project in *WCB* and (one of) Swinburne's. *His* claim is that there are arguments of sufficient cogency to warrant what he thinks of as 'the faith needed for religion':

I argued in *Faith and Reason* that the faith needed for religion is basically a commitment to seek a goal by following a way; it does not require the belief 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. (211)

As far as I can see, he 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. At any rate I don't mean to dispute the claim. When examining probabilistic arguments for the truth of Christian belief, 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.

Two final matters. First, Swinburne thinks I don't take HBC seriously enough. But I do take it very seriously. As I said in *WCB*, there is much to be learned from it; and perhaps it is also useful for the project Swinburne pursues, the project of arguing for the plausibility of Christian belief on public evidence. But there is also the fact that much contemporary HBC comes to conclusions that are at odds with Christian belief. My project was to say something about how Christians – i.e. people who believe the great things of the Gospel – should respond to these apparently negative and corrosive results. Do they constitute *defeaters* for Christian belief? Of course they *could* constitute defeaters, even if Christian belief is taken in the basic way. My point was only this. All three varieties of HBC, in an effort to be scientific, proceed from an evidential base quite different from that of the Christian. And the mere fact that Christian belief is not probable with respect to *those* evidential bases doesn't in itself automatically constitute a defeater, or even a good candidate for being a defeater. That seems an appropriately modest

conclusion, and one that is wholly compatible with taking HBC with great seriousness.

Finally, Swinburne suggests that I have little to say to those Christians whose beliefs are not of my kind. Here I think he means that I have little to say to those whose Christian beliefs are not firmly held in the basic way. He adds that I have nothing to say to those who are not believers at all. But I think he's mistaken. Many – Christians or not – may have an inclination, even a powerful inclination to Christian belief, but may also have been heavily influenced by various alleged *de iure* objections to it. For example, such a person may think that Christian belief can be justified, rational or warranted only if it can be shown to be probable with respect to public evidence. She may also have serious doubts as to whether it *can* be shown to be thus probable. As a result, she may feel that to accept Christian belief is to violate an intellectual duty of some kind; she may therefore reject it, or hold it in a half-hearted, apologetic and unintegral way. It can be useful for such people to see that there is little or no reason to accept the sort of evidentialism that provokes these qualms, and that Christian belief can be rational, justified and warranted even if it is not probable with respect to public evidence.⁵

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).
2. And here, of course, we are all in Richard Swinburne's debt; his work along these lines is wholly unparalleled.
3. Richard Swinburne *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
4. And hence not probable, with respect to public evidence, that it has warrant.
5. My thanks to Tom Crisp, Ray van Arragon, and John Mullen.