

New Series

Volume 2

No. 1

January

2022



# Maria

A Journal of Marian Studies

Published by the Marian Centre for Studies

Pages 1-15

**Author:** Andrew Unsworth

**Title:** Richard Swinburne's Discussion of the Virgin Birth: Bridge or Barrier in the Conversation between Orthodox Christian Faith and Contemporary Intellectual Culture?

---

#### **Abstract**

Richard Swinburne is an Orthodox Christian and one of the most accomplished living philosophers of Religion. In several of his works he mentions the role of the Virgin Mary in Christian thought and practice. While his defence of the probable truth of traditional Christian doctrinal claims is magisterial and admirable, nevertheless, some Christian commentators note that his philosophical and theological presuppositions and conclusions are not always consistent with those of Christian Orthodoxy. If true, this inconsistency is problematic and potentially detrimental to his project. Using Swinburne's reflections on the Virgin Birth as an example, I will explore the question: Within the context of contemporary Anglo-American intellectual culture, is Swinburne's attempt to offer a defence of the probable truth of the Virgin Birth, a bridge or barrier to the advancement of Christian apologetics?

#### **Author**

Andrew Unsworth is an independent scholar and Director of On-going Priestly Formation, Archdiocese of Liverpool, United Kingdom.

(This paper was prepared as a contribution to the Centre of Marian Studies conference of July 8-10 2021, 'Bridges and Boundaries: The Role of the Virgin Mary in Faith and Culture')

## Introduction

Richard Swinburne is an Orthodox Christian and one of the most accomplished living Philosophers of Religion. His defence of the probable truth of traditional Christian theism and the Church's doctrinal claims, especially in the light of the objections of contemporary intellectual culture, is magisterial. It is hard not to respect Swinburne and his commitment to the construction of a comprehensive and defensible Natural Theology and Christian Metaphysics in the light of the questions and concerns of the academy in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> His precision and rigour in rational argument, his diligence in historical enquiry and the personal integrity manifested in his courteous dealings with others, especially his critics, is admirable.<sup>2</sup> In several of his works, he mentions the role of the Virgin Mary in Christian thought and practice, but the issue of the Virgin Birth (Virginal Conception of Jesus)<sup>3</sup> receives by far the most developed treatment.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> His major works include: Richard Swinburne, *Space and Time*, London: Macmillan, 1968; *An Introduction to Confirmation Theory*, London: Methuen, 1973; *The Concept of Miracle*, London: Macmillan, 1970; *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1977, 2nd edn, 2016; *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1979, 2nd edn, 2004; *Faith and Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1981, 2nd edn, 2005; *The Evolution of the Soul*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1986, rev edn, 1997; *Responsibility and Atonement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989; *Revelation From Metaphor to Analogy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1992, 2nd edn, 2007; *The Christian God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 2007, *Is There a God?*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1st edn, 1996; 2nd edn, 2010; *The Aquinas Lecture, 1997: Simplicity as Evidence of Truth*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997; *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; *Epistemic Justification*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001; *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003; *Was Jesus God?*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008; *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012, corrected edn, 2013; *Are We Bodies or Souls?*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. For Swinburne's comments on Mackie's critique of his work and his general acknowledgement of the validity of others' critical responses see *Is There a God?*, 1st edn, 140. Various aspects of his work are critiqued in two major collections, the first of which contains his responses: Nicola Mößner, Sebastian Schmoranz and Christian Weidemann, (eds), *Richard Swinburne: Christian Philosophy in a Modern World*, Frankfurt: Ontos-Verlag, 2008, especially Richard Swinburne, 'Reply to my Critics', 189-226; Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower, *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the Virginal Conception of Jesus will be referred to throughout this article as the Virgin Birth. This same convention is used by Richard Swinburne. Despite the fact that the two terms are theologically distinct, here they will be used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Swinburne, *Responsibility*, 208; *The Christian God*, 197-9, 233-5; *Existence*, Oxford, 2nd edn, 296, 299, 304, 318n, 319-20, 325; *Revelation*, 2nd edn, 111, 168, 219, 238, 211-3, 322; *Was Jesus God?*, 48, 50-1, 96-9; *Coherence*, Oxford, 2nd edn, 61.



Nevertheless, some Christian commentators note that Swinburne's philosophical and theological presuppositions and conclusions can be at variance with those of the official teaching of the Orthodox Churches (and the Catholic Church). If true, this inconsistency is problematic and potentially detrimental to his project. In a relatively brief but nevertheless perceptive reflection on Swinburne's project, Thomas Weinandy has observed that Swinburne's 'univocal', 'false' or 'misconceived presuppositions' can 'give rise to spurious issues and erroneous conclusions'. Weinandy notes that: 'Swinburne wants ardently to promote the faith, but the faith that he ultimately promotes is one that he has already predetermined, having previously configured it to conform to what he considers to be rationally believable.'<sup>5</sup>

This astute observation articulates well my own misgivings about Swinburne's apologetical strategy in general and in particular my concerns about the way Swinburne considers the Virgin Birth as a theological datum. Given these insights, I will explore the question: Within the context of contemporary intellectual culture, is Swinburne's attempt to offer a defence of the Orthodox Church's teaching on the Virgin Birth a bridge or barrier to the advancement of Orthodox Christian apologetics?

### **Swinburne's General Approach as it Relates to the Question of the Virgin Mary**

According to Richard Swinburne, that God exists is more probably true than not true. He makes a cumulative case argument for the existence of God; in the first instance, he refers to this as bare theism. Swinburne argues that the God he believes exists is attested to by the three major theistic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Swinburne's theism, the belief in a God understood as personal, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, free, omni-benevolent etc., is built on the principle that each individual argument for God's existence, be it ontological, cosmological or an argument from order in the universe or from the observation of universal moral imperatives, provides a rational case for God's existence. In the case of

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap, 'Review Article: Swinburne's *A Priori* Errors' in *First Things* 1-3, 20 February 2009, at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusive/2009/02/swinburnes-a-priori-errors>, last accessed by the author 30/10/2021.

claims as to the truthfulness of accounts of historical events, religious experiences and miracles that refer to the agency of the God of theism, evidence is required in the form of veridical historical testimony i.e. that a certain set of events can be demonstrated adequately to have taken place and can count towards the conclusion that it is more probable that certain Christian doctrinal beliefs are true.

Each of these individual forms of argument, be they *a priori* or *a posteriori*, provides or supports a case for a particular truth claim or set of related truth claims. For example, that God exists or that the Virgin Birth of Jesus actually happened. In Swinburne's scheme, if God probably exists, God's existence would be a necessary condition for the Christian belief that Jesus was virginally conceived and born by means of a supernatural miracle that violated the laws of nature. Put together as a whole, each individual argument contributes to a much stronger cumulative argument for the truthfulness of a particular event or events in the life of Christ, and that it actually took place as reported in the scriptural tradition of the Church.

Swinburne's C-Inductive argument for God's existence, as Swinburne calls it, where each individual argument for the existence of God is combined with the others into a coherent whole, and where 'C' indicates a cumulative case argument for God's existence; suggests that the force of the overall argument is increased and strengthened by successive additions of particular individual arguments. Swinburne's contribution in this area marked a milestone in twentieth century Christian apologetics.<sup>6</sup>

That God exists is an explanatory hypothesis that seeks to account for why things are as they are and not otherwise. This argument postulates that the theistic explanatory hypothesis entails belief in the existence of a person without a body, with the characteristics traditionally attributed to the God of theism, and that it is comprehensive enough to account for everything that is. Swinburne calls this hypothesis a 'personal explanation' of the universe; by universe he means both the visible material creation and the invisible spiritual creation. He contrasts this with the 'scientific explanation' of the Materialists.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne states that: 'The general character of the natural world...makes it probable that there is a God, but why should

---

<sup>6</sup> *Coherence*, rev. edn, 1993; 2nd edn; *Existence*, 1st edn; 2nd edn.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Swinburne, 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy' in Rico Vitz, (ed.), *Turning East: Contemporary Philosophers and the Ancient Christian Faith*, New York: St Vladimir's Press, 2012, 57.

we propose that God (if there is a God) is the Christian God?’<sup>8</sup> He suggests that the truth of bare theism ‘provides prior evidence for Christian theism’, and therefore a greater ‘prior probability’ for the truth of Christian theism and each of its separate truth claims. He also refers to ‘posterior evidence for Christian theism, which is the historical evidence about Jesus and the subsequent Christian Church. (This provides *a posteriori* reasons for believing Christian theism to be true.)’<sup>9</sup> On Swinburne’s view, the historical evidence for the Virgin Birth is relatively ‘weak’.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Swinburne’s argument from simplicity states that, the simplest hypothesis proposed as an explanation of phenomena is more likely to be the true than is any other available hypothesis and that its predictions are more likely to be true than are those of any other available hypothesis, and that it is an ultimate *a priori* epistemic principle that simplicity is evidence of truth. According to Swinburne, the explanatory power of the hypothesis of God’s existence is, in comparison with the other possible hypotheses both a ‘personal explanation’ and at the same time a ‘simple explanation’ of reality that is ultimately the most persuasive.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that Swinburne accepts that there are many people who will take exception to his general argument. In the ‘Epilogue’ to *Is There a God?* Swinburne reflects:

I reach the end of this book with some dissatisfaction. I am well aware of objections other than the ones which I have discussed which can be made to almost every sentence which I have written...I am also aware of counter-objections which can be advanced in turn against every objection to my views; and also of the need for qualification and amplification of most of the assertions of this book.<sup>12</sup>

With this in mind I will explore the nature of Swinburne’s ‘Christian Orthodoxy’.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Was Jesus God?*, Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> *Was Jesus God?*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Revelation*, 168.

<sup>11</sup> *Simplicity*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Is There a God?*, 140.

### **Swinburne's Orthodox Christian Faith**

By his own admission, and by definition, as an Orthodox Christian, Swinburne is committed to the credal claims of his Church in the sense in which the bishops of the Orthodox Churches, historically and in the present, intend them to be understood by the clergy and faithful. This understanding of Christian Revelation, the so-called 'deposit of faith', entails a 'hermeneutic of continuity'.<sup>13</sup> According to Orthodox opinion, these principles are vital, whereby the teaching Church is the depository and safeguard of doctrinal purity, integrity and continuity.

In a tetralogy of books, *Responsibility and Atonement*, *Revelation From Metaphor to Analogy*, *The Christian God* and *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Swinburne made a systematic case for the probable existence of the God proclaimed by traditional credal Christianity and the truth of the credal articles of the Christian faith. This corpus of teaching is present primarily in the testimony of the Christian Scriptures and the teachings of the First Seven Ecumenical Councils of the First Christian Millennium. This obligation motivated Swinburne to make a case for the probable veracity not only of bare theism but Christian Trinitarianism; and the attendant doctrines of the Incarnation and Redemptive Suffering of Christ on the Cross, Christ's sinless life, the authenticity of his miracles and the saving truth of his teachings and example, Christ's bodily Resurrection, the holiness and authority of the Christian Church, the survival of the human soul after bodily death and Eternal Life in God.

As Oxford University's Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, in 1995, Swinburne became a communicant member of the Orthodox Church. However, it is clear that as he embarked on his tetralogy, Swinburne was already considering his future religious allegiance. While he was received formally into the Orthodox Church in 1995, no doubt he had already begun to embrace its teachings and had begun to gravitate towards its liturgical worship for a considerable amount of time prior to this. Perhaps some of his ambivalence concerning certain matters of doctrine can be accounted for due to the faith transition he was making between 1990 and 1995. Although further additions have been made to his arguments in subsequent revised editions of his books, with regard to a number of his theological opinions, some underlying equivocation remains. The arguments contained in his

---

<sup>13</sup> The first term is an established phrase in traditional theology. The second was popularised by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his reflections on the Second Vatican Council and its relationship to tradition.

tetralogy have been added to in his *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*; and useful summaries and further qualifications of his arguments have been made in various journal articles and in the more 'popular', though far from basic, *Is There a God?*, and *Was Jesus God?*.

In an autobiographical essay entitled: 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', Swinburne describes his deeply held traditional Christian faith. This faith developed during his childhood despite neither of his parents being Christian and was first given expression in the Anglican Communion, largely through his school experience. Of the intellectual culture in which he grew up, he writes:

My home, my school, my military service..., and above all my university were all highly intellectual places, where I was exposed to all the achievements and current attitudes of the modern academic world. These attitudes were, it seemed to me, basically anti-Christian.<sup>14</sup>

Swinburne's intellectual project has always involved a recognition of the need to make traditional credal Christianity intellectually respectable among those contemporaries who were and are its cultured despisers, as well as those more benign academics who find Christianity intellectually problematic but are willing to listen to and engage with rational argument in its defence.

His writings in the field of Philosophy of Religion have been prolific, original and influential. His novel blend of Anglo-American style analytic philosophical method and probabilistic argumentation applied to the subject matter of mainstream Christian apologetics, has encouraged many Christian scholars to rededicate themselves to the pursuit of nuanced philosophical reflection and robust theological assertion in the face of varieties of scepticism, scientism, materialism, nihilism and atheism.<sup>15</sup> Writing about his academic career, and those with whom he engaged, he characterises the situation thus:

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 47.

<sup>15</sup> The famous atheist philosopher of religion, Anthony Flew, attributed, partly, his own return to belief in God in old age to the powerful and persuasive arguments of Swinburne. Flew's beliefs were not fully consistent with the bare theism outlined by Swinburne but did entail belief in an intelligent designer. He died shortly after this book was written. Anthony Flew (with Roy Abraham Verghese), *There is a God: How the world's most notorious Atheist changed his mind*, New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

The ethics of sophisticated intellectuals were very different from the ethics of traditional Christians. A materialist worldview, very different from the traditional Christian worldview, was supposed to be what science favoured; and the 'scandal of particularity,' God becoming incarnate in Christ in human history, was indeed regarded as a 'scandal,' that is, absurd, by contemporary intellectuals.<sup>16</sup>

Swinburne describes his methodological approach:

In all my works on the philosophy of religion, my approach has been to start from where secular humanity and in particular secular philosophy and science stand, develop my own philosophy of that area of thought, and then show how that philosophy leads to a Christian understanding of things in some respect.<sup>17</sup>

Swinburne has written much about his commitment to the principle of simplicity and to the principle of probability in his arguments for the truth of Christian credal propositions.<sup>18</sup> Faithful to the analytic philosophical tradition, Swinburne developed a methodology involving the attempt to give a clear and exact definition and qualification of each and every philosophical statement he made. The careful attention Swinburne has given to the logical and rational coherence of his arguments is characterised by its high academic standards and intellectual rigour. Swinburne is never an easy read, but perhaps there is no exaggeration in the words of Alvin Plantinga, a Christian who disagrees in many ways with Swinburne, and another contender for the mantle of greatest living Christian philosopher of religion that, 'Richard Swinburne... over the past thirty years or so, has fashioned the most sophisticated and highly developed natural theology the world has so far seen.'<sup>19</sup>

There are many Christian scholars who, like Plantinga and Weinandy, share a Christian Faith with Swinburne but who would take issue with Swinburne's doctrinal and methodological

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 48.

<sup>17</sup> 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 71.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Swinburne (ed), *The Justification of Induction*, Oxford: University Press, 1974; Richard Swinburne (ed), *Bayes's Theorem*, Oxford: University Press, 2002, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'Review article: Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God?*', *Times Literary Supplement*.



presuppositions and conclusions. Indeed, the quotation above is telling, and points to the potential flaw in Swinburne's approach. Rather than beginning with a consideration of where secular humanity stands and then allowing this to dictate the nature of one's pursuit of a Christian response; the Christian believer must first seek to discern the mystery of the revealed truths of Christianity and only then respond to the challenges presented by the prevailing secular humanist culture in order not to assimilate the faith to them but primarily to challenge their assumptions and evangelise them.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Virgin Mary in Swinburne's *oeuvre* with Special Reference to the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth**

Swinburne refers to Mary and the doctrines relating to her, in several places. According to my research, little if any systematic response has been made to Swinburne's references to Mary, which in due course could become the motivation for a more extended article. What follows is a brief summary of some of these references, followed by a critique and brief discussion of the theological and philosophical issues arising. Due to the constraints of space, I will concentrate mainly on his treatment of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ and his discussion of the Virginity of Christ's mother Mary.

From the outset of his tetralogy of works on philosophical theology, Swinburne acknowledges that the Church 'has revered Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the greatest non-divine human who ever lived'. However, he is uncomfortable about some of the Church's attitudes towards Mary. Candidly, he admits that the Church has given her 'at times - to my mind - quite excessive honours'.<sup>21</sup>

His ambivalence towards Mary is palpable throughout Swinburne's writings. One is left wondering whether this recognition of the centrality of Mary but also his personal reservations with regard to Marian discourse, is the consequence of a residual personal conflict. Was his ambivalence with regard to the Virgin Birth, acquired during his formation in

---

<sup>20</sup> Compare with Swinburne's approach that of another Anglican convert to Orthodoxy, Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> *Revelation*, 2nd edn, 322.

the Church of England; or is it motivated by an acquired Orthodox distrust of perceived dogmatic excesses within the Western Latin Church; or is it more akin to Sergius Bulgakov's judgment, exemplified in *The Virgin and the Saints in Orthodoxy*, who perceives in the 'nuances which characterize the cult of the Virgin in the West...an excess that is more cultural than theological'. Bulgakov was wary of Western discourse and with regard to the Blessed Virgin, preferred the 'sober spirit of Orthodoxy'.<sup>22</sup> Swinburne attests to his own sober faith and a 'dry' and formal approach to prayer that can sometimes be overly intellectual.<sup>23</sup> This is not surprising. The perceived emotionalism of some forms of Marian devotion can be repugnant not only to Protestants, who might also have doctrinal reservations, but to Catholics and Orthodox whose faith expression and prayer life are more akin to Swinburne's. Nevertheless, our concern here is with the official doctrinal beliefs that the Orthodox Church has about the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What does Orthodoxy teach about Mary? Orthodox beliefs about Mary are enshrined in the *capitula* of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople, in AD 553, of which the second formula says:

If anyone shall not confess that the Word of God has two nativities, the one from all eternity of the Father, without time and without body; the other in these last days, coming down from heaven and being made flesh of the [all] holy [Gk: *Panagia*] and glorious Mary, Mother of God [Gk: *Theotokos*] and always a virgin [Gk: *Aeparthenos*], and born of her: let him be anathema.<sup>24</sup>

Swinburne acknowledges the primary importance of Mary in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Indeed, this is the starting point of Orthodox belief enshrined in the teaching of the Fifth

---

<sup>22</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, 'The Virgin and the Saints in Orthodoxy' in Daniel B. Clendenin (ed), *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, Grand Rapids MI: Paternoster Press, 2003, 2nd edn, 68.

<sup>23</sup> 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 76.

<sup>24</sup> The Fifth Ecumenical Council Constantinople, AD 553, 'Capitula 2', translation taken from P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, source at: <https://colligavitnemo.wordpress.com/the-fifthecumenical-council-constantinople-ii-the-capitula-of-the-synod/>, last accessed by the author 31/10/2021. For an excellent if brief commentary on the Orthodox teaching see the commentary by the English Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop, His Eminence Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of *Diokleia*), *The Orthodox Church*, London: Penguin Books, rev edn, 1983, 261-5. Also, Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989, 95-100; Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church*, Brookline MA: Hellenic College Press, 4th edn, 2005, 210.

Ecumenical Council (as seen above). He especially draws attention to the fact that the early Christian Church's decision to place the reference to Mary's virginity in its creeds as an article of faith was a universal but fateful one. I will adopt the authoritative doctrinal summary of the Second Council of Constantinople as a guide for my discussion.

Swinburne, in *Revelation and Was Jesus God?* sees the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Christ as referring to a miraculous event in which God caused a violation of the laws of nature. Swinburne's earliest published monograph in the Philosophy of Religion was an essay on *The Concept of Miracle*. This was a defence of the rationality of belief in the possibility that a Creator God could perform a miracle, defined specifically as, 'a violation of a law of nature'. If the Virgin Birth happened, as Orthodoxy has always maintained it did, then it is indeed a violation of a law of nature. It was clear from early on in his career that Swinburne had no intellectual difficulty with this specific concept of miracle, therefore the Virgin Birth *per se* presents no intellectual obstacle for Swinburne. Indeed, Swinburne summarises the traditional doctrine:

Jesus was conceived in the womb of his mother, 'the Virgin Mary', not as the result of sexual intercourse; Jesus had no human father. It claims that the Holy Spirit brought about this conception, and, of course, God would have needed to intervene to bring this about, since the laws of physiology require male sperm to fertilize a female egg.<sup>25</sup>

Most people would agree that this is indeed the traditional Christian account of the 'Virginal Conception' of Jesus Christ, often used interchangeably with the term 'Virgin Birth'. The doctrine is agreed upon by Orthodox and Catholics as well as those conservative Anglicans and Protestants who wish to uphold the classical interpretation of such doctrines. Historically, this was by far the most widely accepted interpretation of the events recorded in Mt. 1.18 and Lk. 1.34-35. As such, Swinburne describes the Virgin Birth as, a central item of Church doctrine for 1,700 years. While this is in a sense true, Orthodox would maintain that because it is a scriptural teaching, it has been a central item of Church doctrine from the beginning.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Was Jesus God?*, 98.

Although not attested to by all four gospels, that two gospels with two distinct and independent traditions give testimony to a Virgin Birth is significant. Swinburne acknowledges this fact and suggests that such different accounts seem to rule out that Matthew and Luke were merely 'recounting a metaphysical fable'. In this sense they could have had access to 'one fully reliable source of the story of the Virgin Birth'. Swinburne also concedes that while neither Mark and John or any other New Testament writer mention a Virgin Birth, nor do they deny it.<sup>26</sup> Use of this argument, should not be dismissed as a tenuous argument from silence. The 'single tradition' that gave rise to this belief could, logically, only be founded on the testimony of Mary of Nazareth herself. After the death and resurrection of Christ she would be able to testify to the veracity of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus to the nascent Church. We see her present in the Christian community in Acts 1.14. One ought not to forget that Luke the Evangelist, the one who records the Virgin Birth and the presence of Mary in the upper room at Pentecost, writes of the 'eyewitnesses' whom he consulted and of 'carefully going over the whole story from the beginning' as he began to write his 'ordered account' of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Lk. 1.1-4).

It is surely significant that Mark uses of Jesus, the unique designation 'the Son of Mary' in Mk 6.3. Some have argued that this could be an allusion to the belief that Christ was virginally conceived. John too, does not merely fail to mention Jesus' Virginal Conception, but in a sense expresses the mystery in a different way, which, rather than denying or ignoring the question of a Virgin Birth, seeks to reflect theologically on its implications. That Jesus Christ, the 'Word made flesh' (Jn 1.14), and 'full of grace and truth' (Jn 1.17), was 'born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself' (Jn 1.13) is pertinent to the belief in a Virgin Birth. John's Gospel contains neither a silence nor a denial, but rather an amplification and theological interpretation of the mystery of the Virgin Birth. When in the next chapter there is a reference to 'the mother of Jesus' (Jn 2.1; 2.3; 2.5), without a reference to his foster father Joseph, the spouse of the Mary according to law but not according to the flesh, it is difficult not to see an internal corroboration of the truth of Christ's Virgin Birth even in those who choose not to construct an infancy narrative in the same way as Matthew and Luke do. Furthermore, that Mark and John do not mention Joseph is surely significant, in the same way that Matthew and Luke do mention him, but after making it clear that he is not the

---

<sup>26</sup> *Was Jesus God?*, 98.

father of Christ and that Jesus Christ's existence is a direct consequence of the working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

Swinburne refers almost exclusively to 'the Virgin Birth'. It is telling that he refers to the Virgin Birth as a 'purported miracle'. Within philosophical theology, such a qualification is legitimate, and Swinburne is right to imply that there are many, even Christians, who would doubt the literal or corporeal truth of the doctrine. In the past hundred years, the Virgin Birth has been the subject of one of the most significant programs of theological revision of any Christian doctrine.<sup>28</sup> However, if this kind of revisionism away from a literal and corporeal interpretation was one of the reasons why Swinburne decided to leave the Anglican Communion and become Orthodox, why therefore does he demonstrate such reticence? Of his conversion, he writes:

When I was young, it was necessary to believe in...the doctrinal propositions of the Nicene Creed, if you were to belong to the Anglican Church...but in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, Anglican bishops came to tolerate their priests holding and teaching almost any religious belief, however far from traditional Christian beliefs...I came to feel that the Church of England had lost its sense that it was a vehicle of revealed truth, and so I had to change my allegiance.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, the doctrinal proposition made in the article of the creed referring to the Virginal Conception (Virgin Birth) of Christ, must, according to Swinburne, be interpreted in the way in which the Christian Churches have traditionally understood it; i.e. in the literal or plain sense in which Matthew and Luke intended it to be understood in their gospels; how the Fifth Ecumenical Council intended it to be understood in the past and how Orthodox bishops intend it to be understood by the clergy and faithful today; that is, not as a 'metaphysical fable' or 'nativity legend',<sup>30</sup> but an actual miracle (a violation of a law of nature) in which Jesus Christ

---

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent discussion and orthodox affirmation of the truth of the Virgin Birth that considers the biblical data and the attendant issues both with theological and philosophical sophistication and with historical-critical rigour, see John Redford, *Born of a Virgin: Proving the Miracle from the Gospels*, London: St Pauls, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> For one such example see: Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*, London: SCM Press, 1972, 1988, 71-7.

<sup>29</sup> 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 75.

<sup>30</sup> Pannenberg, *Apostles' Creed*, 77.

## Richard Swinburne's Discussion of the Virgin Birth

was conceived without a human father, in the womb of a virgin, Mary of Nazareth, by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

In affirming each article of the authorised creeds: baptismal, Nicene-Constantinopolitan, Chalcedonian and perhaps also the Roman Symbol or Apostles' Creed etc; the Orthodox Christian is implicitly acknowledging the truth of each article individually and the entire creed taken as a whole. Adherence, assent, is given by religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings of the Church Fathers and to the definitive interpretation given to those doctrines by its councils and synods and by bishops, pastors and doctors as teachers of the faith.

Swinburne contrasts the relative strength of the historical claim about the passion and cross of Christ with that of the Virgin Birth. Swinburne attests:

That Jesus was crucified, suffered, and was buried, although part of the content of the Nicene Creed, needs no support at all from the fact that it is part of that content; there is massive historical evidence for the truth of these claims.

He contrasts this with its preceding article:

At the other extreme is the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, that Jesus was born of a virgin. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke report this only very briefly, and there is no other affirmation of it in the New Testament. So the purely historical evidence is relatively weak; and there is no strong *a priori* reason for supposing that if God becomes incarnate, he needs to do so without having a human father (even though the absence of a human father does symbolise his origin 'from above').<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, Swinburne speculates that: 'a virgin birth or anything else unusual is not necessary for God to become man', and that God might become incarnate, 'without disturbing any natural processes'; however, he concedes that 'a virgin birth...could be such a mechanism' and that, 'if there is a God, the act of him who controls the laws of nature, setting

---

<sup>31</sup> *Revelation*, 2nd edn, 238.

them temporarily aside' could convey the 'importance' of the person who is the subject of such divine action. Swinburne continues to speculate that:

[T]here is some reason to suppose that an incarnate God might have a virgin birth and some reason in the coincidence of testimony of two Gospels, as also in the subsequent witness of the Church in its creeds, to suppose that it occurred...Though I am inclined to believe that the Virgin Birth did occur, I regard it as unfortunate that mention of the virginity of Mary occurs in creeds; it is not a central enough doctrine to justify that.<sup>32</sup>

However, Swinburne also accepts that further weight is given to the weaker historical case for the Virgin Birth due to its antiquity and the adurance of the Fathers that it should be included in the earliest creeds. He supports this by making the following concession: 'Without this evidence from its proclamation by the Church from at least the second century, we would surely not have adequate grounds for believing it.' Swinburne's statements appear to contain a residual scepticism from his Reformed past, nevertheless, he concedes that: 'The Virgin Birth was a prominent item in all Christian creeds (at least until the appearance of some very liberal statements of Christian doctrine in the course of the last hundred years).'<sup>33</sup>

On balance, Swinburne supports the Orthodox position, but one is left wondering whether he embraces this creedal claim in spite of his reservations or because of his commitment to its truth. He concludes:

[I]t [the Virgin Birth] is clearly properly derivable from what the Church...recognised by the second century as part of the 'deposit of faith' and was so derived; and the fact of that derivation is the crucial evidence which renders this doctrine probably true.<sup>34</sup>

There is considerable evidence that in the context of debates about the rational coherence of its truth claims, both inside and outside the Church, Swinburne has made the discussion of Christian doctrines, such as the Virgin Birth (the Virginal Conception of Christ) intellectually

---

<sup>32</sup> *Christian God*, 235.

<sup>33</sup> *Revelation*, 2nd edn, 238.

<sup>34</sup> *Revelation*, 2nd edn, 238.

respectable.<sup>35</sup> He has made significant contributions in the Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mind and in the debate between Science and Religion. In this sense, he has created a significant bridge into dialogue with contemporary intellectual culture in the fields of philosophy, the sciences, mathematics, the humanities and in theology. However, as Weinandy would have it, Swinburne has at times created a rational defence of a Christian theology not always consistent with that of the Orthodox Church's but one of his own making. This can serve as a barrier to the propagation, acceptance and apprehension of authentic Christian teaching by its interlocutors. This characteristic of Swinburne's contribution can also be an alienating barrier for Christian theologians and philosophers at pains to guard and defend the integrity of the deposit of faith as it has been handed on in the Tradition, and who wish to interpret these doctrines in the manner in which the historic Orthodox Churches have intended the doctrines to be believed, understood, witnessed to and celebrated liturgically.

Granted, there is a hierarchy of truths observed within the creeds of the Church. However, it remains the case that for each article, full assent is required. From an Orthodox perspective, it is not possible to pick and choose, nor to call into question the relative veracity of one article over another. The recital of the entire creed is an unequivocal and seamless proclamation of faith, not a public assessment of the historical likelihood of comparable events, nor a speculative treatise on the probability of the truth status of each of its articles taken separately.

In examining specifically his philosophical and theological treatment of traditional Orthodox Christian teaching on the Virgin Birth, I conclude that his position is not fully consistent with that of official Orthodox Christian teaching. In his attempt to make this body of teaching intelligible and intellectually convincing to non-Orthodox, he confuses the discussion by contributing idiosyncratic elements that do not properly represent the Orthodox position. If, by means of these specific arguments, Swinburne convinces others who did not initially share those beliefs; nevertheless, there is no guarantee that they would not be at variance with the official teaching of the Orthodox Churches.

---

<sup>35</sup> On this issue, see Swinburne's comments in 'Natural Theology and Orthodoxy', 72-3.