Negative Natural Theology and the Sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus:
A Reply to Swinburne

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     Swinburne's argument for the Resurrection depends on what he calls his "crucial premise" that God does not permit massive deception on matters of vast importance to humanity.[1] In our critique of Swinburne, we adduced two kinds of counterexamples to show that God (if he exists) has, in fact, permitted massive deception—both unintentional and intentional—on matters of vast importance to humanity, and, therefore, presumably, would permit grand deception in the case of the Resurrection.[2] Swinburne replied by dismissing our counterexamples for two reasons: the first kind, not being cases of intentional deception, are *irrelevant* and the second kind, although being cases of intentional deception, do not involve sufficiently *strong* evidence, in particular, strong evidence of a divine signature.[3] We respond here by defending the relevance of both groups of counterexamples to Swinburne's claim that God does not permit grand deception and by providing more sustained treatment of our central counterexamples—the

ABSTRACT: We respond to Swinburne's reply to our critique of his argument for the Resurrection by defending the relevance of our counterexamples to his claim that God does not permit grand deception. We reaffirm and clarify our charge that Swinburne ignores two crucial items of Negative Natural Theology (NNT)—that God has an exceptionally weak tendency to raise the dead and that even people with exemplary public records sometimes sin. We show, accordingly, that our total evidence makes it highly probable that Jesus was not sinless, incarnate, or resurrected and that God has permitted massive deception regarding these defining Christian dogmas.

  [1] Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003). See, in particular, Swinburne's "Appendix: Formalizing the Argument," 204–16.

  [2] Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, "Swinburne on the Resurrection: Negative versus Christian Ramified Natural Theology," *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 253-63.

  [3] Richard Swinburne, "Does God Permit Massive Deception?," *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 265-70.

sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus. To do this, we show that Swinburne continues to ignore two crucial items of Negative Natural Theology (NNT) and that, when these are added to the evidence Swinburne adduces for the Resurrection, the total evidence makes it highly probable that Jesus was not sinless, the incarnation of God, or risen from the dead and, thus, that God has permitted massive deception regarding these defining Christian dogmas.

Critique of Swinburne's Reply to Our Counterexamples

Swinburne gives two reasons for dismissing our counterexamples to his claim that God does not permit grand deception. His first is that the examples we adduce of unintentional deception are not cases of "deception" as he defines it and, thus, irrelevant. While he acknowledges that philosophers are divided over whether "deception" is to be defined as strictly intentional or as allowing both intentional and unintentional varieties, Swinburne emphasizes that he uses "deception" in the former sense whereas we use it in the latter. [4] He observes, accordingly, that what his crucial premise rules out is that God allows the *intentional* deception of humanity:

> The supposition which I am ruling out is that God manufactures
> or tacitly allows someone else to manufacture the evidence
> which (together with all other relevant evidence) makes it
> probable that God has put his signature on the traditional view of
> the Resurrection and the Incarnation, when the traditional view is
> false.[5]

Since several counterexamples we adduce—cases of disagreement among Christians and Muslims over the historicity of the Resurrection and cases of disagreement among Christians themselves regarding what the Resurrection is supposed to be—are not cases of *intentional* deception, Swinburne dismisses these on grounds of relevance as showing "at most a clash of views" but not "a massive deception."[6]

This reason Swinburne gives for dismissing our counterexamples of unintentional deception critically weakens his argument. He emphasizes in his reply that his argument in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* limits deception to *intentional* deception; but, ironically, he thereby makes this argument irrelevant to the most important naturalistic theories.[7] Indeed, for his crucial premise to apply to and thus rule out *all* rivals to the Resurrection theory, "deception" must be understood in its inclusive sense—as we did in our original critique—so that it covers cases of both accidental deception and self-deception. Otherwise, this premise is critically weakened—denying

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[4] Swinburne, "Deception?," 266, especially n. 3.

[5] Ibid., 270.

[6] Ibid., 270.

[7] Ibid., 265-66.

merely that God permits *intentional* deception and thus leaving Swinburne with no effective means of ruling out those rivals to the Resurrection theory that postulate *unintentional* deception, *viz.*, the hallucination theory and certain versions of the fraud, apparent death, false-memory, and impostor theories. Thus, consider the hallucination theory. That Swinburne now has no way of effectively ruling this out is clear from the startling remark he makes in his reply:

> Nor is God tacitly allowing the church or the human race to be deceived, if he allows some members of the church or the human race to be deceived if they come to hold a false view, even one which they wrongly think to have God's authority, through misassessing the evidence.[8]

But, of course, this is precisely what the hallucination theory postulates: that some of the members of the Church—the original disciples and Paul—and, through them, billions of Christians, have been unintentionally self-deceived about the Resurrection through the misassessment of the evidence consisting of the empty tomb and their experiences of "the Risen Jesus." Indeed, it is for this very reason that in our critique of Swinburne we gave counterexamples of massive *unintentional* deception to the crucial premise that God cannot permit grand deception broadly understood.

Swinburne may protest that he does provide reasons—quite apart from the one just discussed—for rejecting the so-called naturalistic rivals to the Resurrection theory. However, his attempted refutation is not exhaustive of the rivals and is cursory at best. For example, his argument against the most widely-held alternative—the hallucination theory—consists merely of two brief sentences:

> There is also no reason to expect appearances. Psychologists, of course, have told us that people do sometimes seem to see newly departed loved ones; but visions shared by a number of witnesses are very hard indeed to document.[9]

Much has been written by skeptics to provide grounds for expecting hallucinations,[10] yet Swinburne simply ignores these counterarguments. Swinburne also presses the details of the gospel Easter narratives, e.g., that the Risen Jesus vanished and passed through closed doors,[11] claiming that, in the absence of contrary evidence, we must accept the New Testament Easter traditions as historical. However, he has no sustained discussion (Bayesian

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[8] Ibid., 269.

[9] Swinburne, *RGI*, 185.

[10] See, for example, Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 129-30.

[11] Swinburne, *RGI*: 174.

or otherwise) to show that there is no evidence to the contrary. And it may well be that some of our more fundamental evidence *is* to the contrary.

Swinburne undoubtedly glosses over the naturalistic rivals to the Resurrection because he claims it to be "immensely" improbable that there should be the precise combination of evidence we find for the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus unless God brought this about by becoming incarnate in Jesus and raising him from the dead after the crucifixion. However, he gives no justification for this claim other than the cursory dismissal he provides of these rivals. So, ironically, Swinburne's argument against the naturalistic rivals is too cursory and incomplete to stand on its own and thus needs to be supplemented by his claim that it is immensely improbable that we should find the precise combination of evidence we have for the Incarnation and Resurrection unless it was God Himself who brought about this combination of evidence. Yet, again, the only discussion he gives that might be used as a justification for this claim is his cursory discussion of the naturalistic rivals. The only way around this problem, other than to offer an adequate justification of his claim that we wouldn't get *e* unless God brought it about, is to broaden the scope of "deception" to include unintentional deception and then urge that God would not permit deception in this broad sense.

Swinburne's second reason for dismissing our counterexamples to his crucial premise as irrelevant is that the cases we adduce of intentional deception do not involve sufficiently strong evidence, in particular, strong evidence of a divine signature. Accordingly, he dismisses the counterexamples we adduce of fraudsters and televangelists who intentionally fake miracles to deceive the masses about the identity of the Messiah on the grounds that they are cases in which the quality of the evidence in question "for a divine signature is poor and so taking that evidence into account makes no difference to the probability of the Christian view."[12] Thus, where *h* is the hypothesis that Jesus is God Incarnate risen from the dead and *e* is the evidence (e.g., the life of Jesus, the empty tomb, and the postmortem appearances) for *h*, Swinburne's objection, stated formally, is that our counterexamples do not involve people invoking God's authority for any hypothesis for which "[the] evidence makes the hypothesis in any way as probable as *e* makes *h*."[13] Thus, to be clear, Swinburne is dismissing our counterexamples of intentional deception as irrelevant on the grounds that the evidence in these cases, in contrast to the case of evidence *e* for hypothesis *h*, does not make their hypotheses, e.g., of false Messiahs, probable. One can thus see that, in giving this second reply, Swinburne finds it again necessary to clarify what he means by his crucial premise that God does not allow grand deception. In order to rule out our counterexamples of

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[12] Ibid., 269.

[13] Ibid., 270.

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intentional deception as irrelevant, this must now be understood to mean that God disallows intentional deception in only those cases in which the evidence in question makes the hypothesis in question probable by making the hypothesis of a divine signature probable—for, otherwise, our counterexamples would certainly hold. Although Swinburne's reason for dismissing our counterexamples of intentional deception may initially seem to invalidate our critique, we will now show that, added as a supplement to his crucial premise, it actually renders the resulting argument viciously circular.

In stating his second reason for dismissing our counterexamples, Swinburne uses such phrases as "evidence of the strength," "evidence of 'the amount' and kind (that is, including a purported divine signature)," and "evidence of the kind and quantity we find for the hypothesis that Jesus was God Incarnate who rose from the dead"—the clear implication being that the evidence e for h is evidence of more than sufficient strength.[14] Indeed, Swinburne states in his reply:

> The evidence for h, which I summarized in e [is evidence] making it probable that Jesus lived a particular kind of life and rose from the dead […].[15]

However, the addition of this second reason as a supplement to his crucial premise creates a second critical problem for Swinburne—it renders his argument viciously circular. For Swinburne's ultimate conclusion is that e is *strong* evidence for the hypothesis h that Jesus is God Incarnate risen from the dead, i.e., that e makes h probable.[16] But, now, Swinburne can reach this conclusion *only by* adding his second reason as a supplement to his crucial premise, i.e., by now stating that God disallows intentional deception only if the evidence for a hypothesis makes the hypothesis probable by making the hypothesis of a divine signature probable. And he is entitled to add this reason as a supplement to his crucial premise *only if* he can show that our counterexamples to it—cases of intentional massive religious deception— must be dismissed as irrelevant. But the sole reason Swinburne gives for dismissing our counterexamples, as we have just seen, is his claim that the evidence in these cases—in contrast (allegedly) to the case of evidence e for hypothesis h—is not sufficiently strong to make their hypotheses (including the hypothesis of a divine signature) probable. And the problem here, of course, is that, to justify this claim, Swinburne needs to have *already* established his ultimate conclusion that e makes h probable. Accordingly, Swinburne's argument for the Resurrection as supplemented by his second

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[14] Swinburne, *RGI*: 212-13, and "Deception?": 265, 266, and 269.

[15] Ibid., 268.

[16] Indeed, Swinburne assesses the value of this probability to be 0.97.

reason for dismissing our counterexamples renders the resulting argument viciously circular.

Swinburne Violates the Total Evidence Requirement

We observed in our critique of Swinburne's argument that he omits two crucial items of negative natural theology (NNT) from k. The first of these is that God has an exceptionally weak tendency to raise corpses from the dead[17] and the second is the natural fact that human beings have an extraordinarily strong tendency to moral imperfection.[18] Abbreviate these, respectively, as w and s. We argued in our critique that both w and s, being *bona fide* items of evidence, must be included in k. Ironically, Swinburne identifies k as "the evidence of natural theology" yet fails to include in it these two profoundly relevant items of evidence of *negative* natural theology. His argument, accordingly, violates the total evidence requirement. As we observed in our critique, to be accurate, Swinburne must say that k in his argument comprises *merely* the evidence of *positive* natural theology (PNT), i.e., those items of natural theology that tend to confirm the tenets of Christianity, particularly the Incarnation and Resurrection. We will now argue that, when w and s are given their rightful place in k, it becomes clear that P($h|e\&k$) must be significantly less than P($c|e\&k$).

NNT and the Low Posterior Probability of h: The Weak Tendency of God to Raise the Dead

We will first show that Swinburne's penultimate conclusion that P($h|e\&k$) is not very different from P($c|e\&k$) must be false if he is correct to suppose that P($c|e\&k$) has a value greater than 0.5 (e.g., his stated value of 0.97). Unfortunately, Swinburne misunderstands the point of our criticism that he omits w from k. Concerning this he complains:

> Cavin and Colombetti's claim that I ignore the evidence that "corpses have an extraordinarily strong tendency to undergo the complete course of postmortem decomposition" is very odd, since it is a crucial part of my positive case for h that "the bodily Resurrection of Jesus (if it occurred) would be manifestly a violation of natural laws."[19]

Our point, to be clear, is that Swinburne focuses exclusively on the Resurrection as a violation of the laws of nature, e.g., those laws responsible for postmortem decomposition, while overlooking the extraordinarily weak tendency God has to suspend them. Yet this tendency from the standpoint of theism is not itself a law of nature but an ontologically fundamental

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[17] This is an immediate consequence of the information that corpses have an exceptionally strong tendency to undergo the complete course of postmortem decomposition.

[18] Cavin and Colombetti, "Swinburne," 261.

[19] Swinburne, "Deception?": 270.

disposition of God. It is this *bona fide* information of NNT that Swinburne unwittingly excludes from k.

Swinburne overlooks, not only the exceptionally weak tendency God has to suspend the laws of nature, but the negative implications it has for the following principle to which he appeals in his argument from equal best acts:

> [God] will do one of any incompatible equal best acts open to him; and, since all such acts are equally good, the probability if there are n such acts that he will do one particular one must be $1/n$.[20]

While the first part of this principle is correct, Swinburne is mistaken to suppose that the probability that God will do any one of n equal best acts is $1/n$. Thus, consider the following restricted equal best acts counter-principle:

> If an act A is an equal best act but also an act of kind K, and a person P has a strong tendency to refrain from doing acts of kind K, then it is improbable that P will do act A—the degree of improbability being proportional to the strength of the tendency.

It is clear that this principle, rather than Swinburne's, holds without exception since it takes into account the tendencies of persons to refrain from doing equal best acts of certain kinds. But, then, given the information of NNT that God has an extraordinarily weak tendency to suspend the laws of nature responsible for postmortem decomposition, it is, contrary to Swinburne, improbable on $e\&k$ that God would suspend these in order to use the super-miracle of the Resurrection to place his signature upon Jesus' life and vindicate his death by crucifixion as an atonement for sin. And, since this is so, Swinburne is mistaken to conclude that $P(h|e\&k)$ is not very different from $P(c|e\&k)$—unless he concedes that $P(c|e\&k)$ has a very low value.

NNT and the Low Posterior Probability of h: The Moral Imperfection of Jesus

We will now show, contrary to Swinburne, that the value of $P(h|e\&k)$ must be extremely low. Swinburne fails to see this because he misunderstands our discussion of the moral imperfection of Jesus. He does not contest our observation that placing the sinlessness of Jesus in e would violate the total information requirement and thereby invalidate the assignment of a high value to $P(h|e\&k)$.[21] However, he raises the following complaint to our appeal to Mark 1:4, 9 and Mark 10:18 as counterevidence to the moral perfection of Jesus:

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[20] Swinburne, *RGI*, 34.
[21] Swinburne, "Deception?," 270.

> Cavin and Colombetti […] cannot just assert that [this] is "strong" counterevidence without explaining why they are not satisfied with my arguments explicitly purporting to show the opposite.[22]

Yet this distorts our original statement below that this counterevidence is "equally strong":

> the New Testament evidence for the sinlessness of Jesus is late and paltry (Jn. 8:46 and 2 Cor. 5:21) and is countered by equally strong New Testament counterevidence (Mk. 1:4, 9 and Mk. 10:18).[23]

Still, this is a minor issue. The fatal error in Swinburne's treatment of the sinlessness of Jesus, which we discuss in our critique, albeit briefly, is that he ignores the fact that there is overwhelming evidence against the moral perfection of Jesus—specifically, the evidence s of NNT. Because he fails to include this most critical item of evidence in k, Swinburne violates the total information requirement and thus invalidates his argument for the conclusion that $P(h|e\&k)$ is approximately 0.97.

Swinburne observes that:

> [The] detailed historical *evidence* for the sinlessness of Jesus is his "public behaviour" which, I claim, is "such as one would expect if he led a perfect life," which together with all the other evidence for h has the consequence that Jesus was sinless.[24]

This evidence, which Swinburne places in e, comes from the New Testament. However, the New Testament evidence for the sinlessness of Jesus consists merely of anecdotal traditions covering a relatively small sample of incidents drawn from the last few years of Jesus' life in which he did not publicly sin. This information taken alone, although technically *positive* evidence for the sinlessness of Jesus, is, as noted above, *very weak*—thus forcing Swinburne to employ such phrases as "in so far as we have knowledge," "as far as we can judge," and "such evidence as there is."[25] In contrast, it is an incontestable fact of NNT that even those best of people who, like Jesus, exhibit impeccable public behavior, nonetheless have an exceptionally strong tendency to commit private or "invisible" sins on occasion, e.g., secretly lusting for a married woman or calling some disliked person "Thou Fool!" in one's heart. The item of NNT that states this fact is s; and s is very strong evidence against the sinlessness of Jesus—indeed,

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[22] Ibid, 270.

[23] Cavin and Colombetti, "Swinburne," 261.

[24] Swinburne, "Deception?," 270.

[25] Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 55, 59, and 83.

remarkably negative evidence against Jesus' moral perfection. And the problem, again, is that Swinburne fails to include this critical item of evidence in k.

Now, the negative evidence of s in NNT *dominates* the positive evidence from the New Testament in e. This is because the former is *statistically general* whereas the latter is merely *particular* and, indeed, *anecdotal*. Thus, given the information (of s) that those who exhibit impeccable public behavior have an exceptionally strong tendency to occasionally commit private or "invisible" sins and the information (in e) that the public behavior of Jesus was impeccable, it is extremely probable that even Jesus occasionally committed private or "invisible" sins. Thus, the negative evidence s is *dominating* and, consequently, when this is included in k, as it must be in order to satisfy the requirement of total evidence, it becomes highly probable on $e\&k$ that Jesus was not sinless.[26] But the hypothesis that Jesus was not sinless entails the hypothesis that he is not God Incarnate. Consequently, because s is an item of NNT that must be included in k, it is also highly probable on $e\&k$ that Jesus is not God Incarnate, or, equivalently, that $P(h_1|e\&k)$ is very low. Correlatively, the hypothesis that Jesus is not God Incarnate ($\sim h_1$) together with $e\&k$ makes it highly probable that God could not permit Jesus to be raised from the dead—either by himself or some other supernatural agent (e.g., some angel or devil). For it is an integral part of Swinburne's k that God will do an act (or authorize some lesser agent to do so on his behalf) only if he has good reason to do so, and that God's good reason for culminating ("signing") a life with a super-miracle is to truly validate that life as the life of God Incarnate. Consequently, it is an essential item of k that God can culminate ("sign") the life of Jesus through a super-miracle only if Jesus is God Incarnate. But, given that the life of Jesus was abruptly terminated by crucifixion, or, more exactly, that this is highly probable on $e\&k$, it is also highly probable on $e\&k$ that God can sign the life of Jesus through a super-miracle only if he (or some agent he authorizes) raises Jesus from the dead. However, as we have just seen above, it is extremely probable on $e\&k$ that Jesus is not God Incarnate—because his was not a perfect life. Accordingly, it is highly probable on $e\&k$ that God (or some agent acting on his behalf) cannot sign the life of Jesus through the super-miracle of the Resurrection, and, thus, that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Consequently, because s is an item of NNT in k, it is highly probable on $e\&k$ that Jesus did not rise from the dead, or, equivalently, that $P(h_2|e\&k)$ is very low. And, of course, s gets a "boost" here from the information w of NNT in k that God has an exceptionally weak tendency to raise the dead by suspending the laws of postmortem

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[26] It is far more improbable on $e\&k$ that Jesus would never sin than it is that he did occasionally sin and no one reported it—either because they did not know or did not care, etc.

decomposition. Thus, contrary to what Swinburne concludes, the value of $P(h_1 \& h_2 | e \& k)$, i.e., $P(h | e \& k)$, must be extremely low.[27]

NNT and Our Central Counterexamples to Swinburne's Crucial Premise

The sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus are dogmas of faith that are strongly disconfirmed by our total evidence $e \& k$—if the evidence of NNT is not suppressed. Our total evidence makes it highly probable that Jesus is not sinless, not God Incarnate, and, consequently, not risen from the dead. Moreover, because k includes the background information that Christians have believed the dogmas of the sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus for two millennia, it follows on $e \& k$ that these three dogmas constitute exceptionally strong counterexamples to Swinburne's crucial premise that God does not permit the grand deception of the Church and humanity on matters of vast importance.

Conclusion

We have shown, not only that the sinlessness, Incarnation, and Resurrection of Jesus are powerful counterexamples to Swinburne's crucial premise that God (if he exists) does not permit massive deception on matters of vast importance to humanity, but that these dogmas are, in fact, extremely improbable on our total evidence $e \& k$ when these include the evidence of Negative Natural Theology (NNT). It appears, then, that rational degree of belief in the hypothesis that Jesus is the Resurrection of God Incarnate is extremely low. The prospects for a successful Christian ramified natural theology remain quite dim. [28]

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[27] It also follows, once again, that $P(h | e \& k)$ must be very different from $P(c | e \& k)$, unless the value of the latter is also extremely low.