THE PROBLEM OF DOCTRINAL DECIDABILITY:

METHODS FOR EVALUATING PURORTED

DIVINE REVELATIONS

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Abstract: The plethora of contrary doctrines pertaining to salvation, among the variety of religions in the world today, creates a problem for the sincere investigator who seeks to find out if there is such a thing as salvation and, if there is, how to be saved. These contrary doctrines are problematic to the degree that the sincere investigator is unable to evaluate the probability of some of these doctrines over others. In order to aid the sincere investigator with this problem, I explore methods for evaluating doctrines that purport to affect one's salvation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE AIM TO BE SAVED

> No one tends with desire and zeal towards something that is not already known to him. But . . . men are ordained by the divine Providence towards a higher good than human fragility can experience in the present life. That is why it was necessary for the human mind to be called to something higher than the human reason here and now can reach, so that it would thus learn to desire something and with zeal tend towards something that surpasses the whole state of the present life.
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> —St. Thomas Aquinas[1]

It is not unusual, given the diversity of religious belief in the Western world, for there to be interactions between believers of different faiths. Some of these interactions are obviously quite hostile, resulting in vehement arguments and the occasional threat of damnation, but other interactions between religious believers of different faiths can be very warm and pleasant. In my experience, I have witnessed both sorts of interactions, and I have also been subject to them.

This diversity of religious belief in the world produces a variety of questions and a variety of problems for religious believers. For example, we might take the view of someone I will call a *religious exclusivist*; a religious exclusivist,

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[1] *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, 69.

for my use, holds that those who are not members of her specific religion, or perhaps even her specific sect within a religion, will suffer either temporary or eternal punishment after death for either their contrary religious beliefs or their lack of particular beliefs. If this religious exclusivist holds that God is wholly good, powerful, and knowledgeable, then she may need some reason to explain how God's goodness is consistent with the pain and suffering of those outside of her religion or sect. So this reason should explain why people with contrary faiths to her own will not join her immediately or, perhaps, eternally in a heavenly afterlife upon their death (or, if heaven is composed of layers, there would need to be some reason that explains why not everyone ended up in the same level of heavenly bliss) while maintaining God's goodness. Now, this distinction between the *unsaved* (i.e. those who experience an eternal state of punishment after death—or else they have passed out of existence permanently), the *saved* (i.e. those who experience no state of punishment after death and exist eternally in bliss), and the *quasi-saved* (i.e. those who experience a temporary state of punishment after death until they exist eternally in bliss) is one that I will maintain throughout the duration of this thesis. Further, there might be degrees of punishment for the unsaved and quasi-saved or bliss for the saved and quasi-saved, but for the sake of brevity, I will not elaborate on these degrees of bliss or punishment.

The distinction between the saved, unsaved, and quasi-saved will give rise to certain questions for the religious exclusivist that are potentially problematic: Is there some sort of unconditional election to salvation where God saves only those whom God chooses to save—independent of the will of those who both desire and seek salvation but are not saved? Or, is there some other criteria for salvation, one that weighs the sincerity of the believer, their moral character, or their genuine

struggle to find the correct religion? Is the opportunity to go to heaven or hell made equal for all persons—particularly those who have not been exposed to the exclusivist's religion? Could anyone truly be worthy of some sort of hell? Could anyone truly be worthy of some sort of heaven?

In contrast, the *religious pluralist*, for my use here, is a person who holds that many or all of the established religions are capable of producing salvation for their adherents; however, this does not mean that all of these religions produce salvation just as well as their complements. Now, let us take a religious pluralist who holds that God is wholly good, powerful, and knowledgeable. This person may escape some of the problems of the religious exclusivist by positing that the souls of every religious person (or almost every religious person) will be saved upon death, but if this is the case, then there are other problematic questions. For example, if every religious person will be saved in some sort of afterlife, why would they live this life on earth at all? Or, if every religious person will be saved, does it matter which religion you hold to be true? Is there a true religion? Or, should we take every religion to be true in some respect, and should we take these collective respects to compose a true religion?

Any view on the gradient of belief between the religious exclusivist and religious pluralist will likely need to offer explanations for problematic questions too. For example, these questions would likely be framed in the following format: why would it be that one would be saved under certain conditions of grace when others are not saved under those same conditions of grace? Alternatively, we might reject all of the views given thus far by imagining that all of them are wrong. Suppose that God exists and is wholly good, powerful, and knowledgeable, but, instead of everyone being saved, let us imagine that no one is saved—everyone

ceases to exist at death and no one is brought back to life after death. This view seems plausible, but it also has some problematic questions of its own. For example, if no one is saved and there is no final judgement for human souls to receive justice for wrongs left undone in this life, can God appropriately be called just? If this life is all that there is, is there anyway to reconcile the happiness of evil people and the suffering of good people in this finite life with God's justice?

The diversity of religious belief seems to require explanations for any view of salvation that I have mentioned, and most (if not all) explanations that are offered as answers to the questions that I raised are likely to breed problematic questions of their own. However, out of these explanations, a type of salvation that strikes me, *a priori*, as the most reasonable form of salvation is the salvation wherein some human persons are saved, but there is at least some sort of temporary punishment (if not eternal punishment) for a population of persons who failed to satisfy a reasonable standard for salvation. Now, this reasonable standard of salvation would need to satisfy certain criteria in order for it to appropriately be called reasonable, and, while I do not have a complete list of criteria that would be sufficient for a reasonable standard of salvation, I think that I have, at least, a list of some necessary conditions for a reasonable standard and they are as follows:

(1)   The standard of salvation would need to separate the saved, unsaved, and quasi-saved (I am not assuming that there are, in fact, persons in each of these categories) judging by some objective criteria.
(2)   The judgement of the objective criteria would need to be applied justly to all.
(3)   The criteria should involve performing some voluntary act(s) (unless the person is incapable of the voluntary act(s), in which case, it might be possible for someone to do the act for them provided either their voluntary consent or, because of the inability to consent, reasonable consent on their behalf) or refraining from some voluntary act(s).

(4) The voluntary act(s) should not be arbitrarily picked by God, and the voluntary act(s) should affect the relation between the human person and God.

(5) The knowledge that one ought to complete or refrain from the voluntary act(s) as well as how to complete or not complete the voluntary act(s) would need to be either evident or available to be known by investigation to a population of persons. This population of persons would include either, at minimum, (a) those who would satisfy the standard of the voluntary act(s) if they knew about them or, at most, (b) all human persons who are capable of coming to this knowledge.

  (i) If knowledge of the voluntary act(s) is available by investigation, then the knowledge that one ought to investigate should be evident to either population (a) or (b).

  (ii) The investigation should not be practically impossible to complete for either population (a) or (b).

Now, with regard to these criteria, I think that they are fairly clear and agreeable, and they strike me, intuitively, as necessary for some sort of *reasonable* standard of salvation—provided an all-powerful savior. However, with the aim of anticipating confusion or objections I think that it would be good to elaborate on some of the ideas that have the potential to be problematic or misunderstood. These are standards three, four, and five.

On standard three, I think that it is clear that salvation, if it is to be exclusive in any way (whether by some temporary punishment or some eternal punishment, or else by differing levels of happiness or pain), that the grounds for discriminating against certain persons should supervene on voluntary act(s) committed by those persons (for my purpose here, I will consider the mental act of assenting to a particular belief to be a type of voluntary act). For if we suppose that the contrary were true, that persons should receive punishment or reward for some non-voluntary property (e.g. the natural color of one's hair, one's natural height, one's natural intelligent) or some involuntary act (e.g. one might go to heaven because they were coerced into performing some good moral deed or one might go to

hell because dementia impeded their ability to fulfill certain moral demands), then this set of criteria would strike me as quite unreasonable. Further, I think that the condition of some criteria being "unreasonable," in this case, is sufficient to provide strong reason to doubt that God would use it as a means for salvation. Now, I will not thoroughly defend, in this thesis, the idea that God cannot be unreasonable. However, I tend to think that God, if God exists, *must* be reasonable, and by "reasonable" I mean the correct exercise of the intellectual virtues like wisdom, knowledge, prudence, and the like. Thus, if we suppose that God is absolutely perfect both in God's person(s) and in the exercise of God's will, then I find it difficult to imagine a case wherein God would be unreasonable without manifesting some imperfection of an intellectual virtue.[2]

On standard four, I think that it would be unreasonable for God, who truly cares about the person who could be saved, to arbitrarily pick some voluntary action on her part that is insignificant and then judge from this arbitrary, voluntary action whether to save this human person after all. For example, I suspect that we would find it absurd for some excellent hero to save only and all persons who always said "gesundheit" whenever someone sneezed within their proximate vicinity— particularly since saying "gesundheit" does not, itself, express the desire to be saved, even if it is polite. Thus, it would seem that this voluntary act must not be arbitrary, and in order for it not to be arbitrary it must affect the relation between the human person and God.

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[2] Here I recognize that my exercise of reason is imperfect, and, as a consequence, my exercise of reason could come into conflict with God's standard of what is reasonable. Thus, I recognize that the imposition of *my* ideas of what standards are reasonable on God is unwarranted; even so, it does not seem to me that I am intuiting anything too controversial for what would constitute a reasonable standard of salvation here. Unless this becomes particularly controversial, I think that these conditions are reasonable and evident.

On standard five, it strikes me as obviously true that if God is both good and powerful and God desires the salvation of all humans, then God would desire that these human persons, who are eligible for salvation, are capable of coming to know the beliefs necessary for being saved (if there are any) or how they ought to behave with respect to the voluntary act(s) that affects their salvation. This would not mean that these persons must know how to become saved. However, it would mean either that they do know how to increase their odds at salvation or else that they know that they ought to investigate something that will lead them to the knowledge of what they ought to do or what they ought to believe. As we shall see, Swinburne has some things to say about God's revelation being hidden, so I will not expound on it further here.

Before proceeding further, I should like to note that I am not suggesting that God is obligated to offer some standard of salvation, but I am suggesting that *if* God offers some standard of salvation, then it would likely be a *reasonable* standard of salvation. As my justification for this idea, I would restate that God must be reasonable; further, I would add that any *perfect* moral agent, when choosing between supererogatory acts, would likely choose a better kind of supererogatory act to commit. My reasoning is as follows: let us suppose that a perfectly good moral agent is choosing between charities (she can pick only one) that she will financially support in order to benefit a population of persons, *P*, in a third world country, and let us suppose that the act of donating to a charity, in this case, would be a supererogatory act to commit. Now, our perfectly good moral agent, while not obligated to give to a charity, would likely choose a charity that she thought was better than some of the other charities to give to; it is unlikely that she, being perfectly good, would choose the charity arbitrarily or that she would choose what

she thought was a lesser kind of charity to give to (barring exceptional cases like sentimental attachment to the charity, a personal relation to the charity, or some other such thing). Further, if she intends to benefit P because she truly cares about P, she will likely give to what she thinks is a better charity that will more effectively help P. For example, if most of P is suffering from starvation, then our perfect moral agent will be more inclined to give to a charity that will provide food for P rather than a charity that will provide dinnerware for P.

All things being equal, our moral agent, while not obligated to give to what she thought was a better kind of charity, would likely give to a better kind of charity in virtue of her perfect goodness. By similar reasoning, we might suppose that if God is perfectly good and God offers a standard of salvation to the sincere investigator, then God would offer a better standard of salvation, not an arbitrary standard of salvation or a lesser standard of salvation. Now, it is not clear exactly what a better standard of salvation would consist of in this case with God, but I think that a better standard of salvation would likely be both reasonable and non-arbitrary since these properties would make it easier for the sincere investigator to discern and satisfy this standard—rather than an unreasonable and arbitrary standard of salvation. If God were extending salvation to human persons because God genuinely desired their salvation, then a better standard of salvation would be more consistent with God's perfect goodness and God's desire that the standard of salvation is effective at producing salvation. Thus, it could very well be that God has not offered salvation to humanity; all the same, if we suppose that God has offered salvation, then the standard for this salvation would likely be both reasonable and non-arbitrary.

Now, if we assume that God exists, that God is wholly good, powerful, and knowledgeable and that God freely wills our existence, then it would be reasonable

to suppose that God likely possesses a certain positive disposition toward us. Further, if we grant that each person is a unique universe of complex personality, character, will, and mystery that is both capable of being saved and whose redemption from defects is good and desirable for any excellent moral agent, then it would be reasonable to suppose that God would seek to save at least some human persons by offering a reasonable standard of salvation. Now, once someone has agreed to the idea that a perfect God, who is wholly good and powerful, can and would save human persons since it would be good and reasonable to do so, then she will likely begin to look for a means by which she can ascertain God's reasonable standard of salvation before attempting to satisfy this standard. However, this brings us to a problem for our sincere investigator because there seems to be a plethora of religions that claim to offer God's standard of salvation that one should satisfy, and these standards are conflicting. Given that there are many religions to choose from and that there appears, at our outset, to be no clear method by which our sincere investigator can evaluate religions for their efficacy at producing salvation, there seems to be a problem with the standard of salvation itself. Specifically, the investigation appears to be practically impossible, and this is because we do not have, yet, a clear means by which we can evaluate the multitude of religious claims. Thus, the sincere investigator of the reasonable standard of salvation is stuck trying to solve this complicated problem, and the existence of this problem could threaten the idea that there is a reasonable standard of salvation at all.

Now, I noted that it is not necessary on the reasonable standard of salvation for one to know what the voluntary act(s) are that satisfy this standard; it is only requisite that we, who would do them, know that we *ought* to do the voluntary act(s)

and *how* to do the voluntary act(s) (or else know that we ought to mount an investigation inquiring about the voluntary act[s]). Further, I noted that the voluntary act(s) would not be arbitrary; rather, they would affect a particular relation between us and God. Thus, it could very well be that there is some standard of salvation and that no group of religious persons knows the voluntary act(s) that satisfy the standard of salvation. Instead, it could be that the voluntary act(s) is something as simple as being a good parent. Such a set of voluntary actions contained within the activity of being a good parent would certainly seem to establish a particular relation between one and God—it would help one to see God as her parent. Or, the voluntary acts might be performing charitable deeds for those in significant need. Such voluntary acts would certainly seem to establish a particular relation between one and God—one might come to realize how God is really the charitable source of his existence. However, the problem is that neither of these things may actually be the voluntary act(s) that satisfy the standard of salvation; without epistemic access to the supernatural state of salvation or a supernatural witness who can testify concerning salvation, we cannot know what standard is sufficient for salvation. As a consequence, we are left with two main duties in the effort to be saved: an obligation to perform all of our own moral duties to the best of our ability (in case one or more of those duties satisfies the standard of salvation by establishing a particular relation between us and God) as well as the obligation to investigate as many religions as we can (unless we become convinced of one along the way) to see if God has revealed the voluntary act(s) that satisfy the standard of salvation in one of those religions to some prophet. As we proceed, our relevant question is: as we investigate these religions, what criteria could we use to evaluate them?

It is my hope in this thesis to explicate methods for evaluating purported divine revelations. I intend to pursue this goal, in the second chapter, by reviewing literature on the nature of divine revelation and why one would expect to receive divine revelation through a religion. Next, in three two I aim to articulate the central problem of this thesis with more exactness, and there I offer defenses against the strong version of this problem that I call the *Problem Set*. Next in chapter four, I offer defenses against the weak version of this problem that I call the *Problem Set**. For example, I offer Swinburne's tests for candidate divine revelations as well as my own ideas on what criteria would likely be consistent with an authentic divine revelation that conveys the voluntary act(s) that affects one's salvation. Next, I discuss some of the complexity of an ethical evaluation of a religion, and I offer an example of an ethical evaluation of a religion. Finally, I conclude with ideas on how some attempts to solve this problem might help with additional problems in the philosophy of religion.

CHAPTER II

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF REVELATION

The philosophy of revelation is a field of inquiry that has recently been attracting more interest and investigation within the philosophy of religion in the works of Swinburne, Plantinga, Menssen and Sullivan, King, Moser, Blauuw, and Abraham (to name a few). Given that the rationality of many religions (particularly Western religions) is contingent upon claims to divine revelation, the subject of divine revelation in philosophy and theology is vitally important for (prospective) adherents of those religions as well as critics of those religions. Due to attacks by Kitcher and other atheists on claims to divine revelation, the philosophy of revelation will likely become a subject of increasing interest. In order to give a brief introduction on the philosophy of revelation, I will proceed by summarizing the work of Blaauw on the nature of divine revelation and the work of Swinburne on why one should expect a divine revelation before articulating the central problem of this thesis.

Section I: Blaauw

The Nature of Ordinary Revelation

Blaauw, on the nature of divine revelation, draws a few distinctions on what sorts of divine revelation can take place; these, he thinks, are propositional revelation and self-revelation. A propositional revelation, as the name implies, is simply a case where a proposition is revealed to the epistemic agent such as, "Mary revealed to her mother that she had stolen the cookies."[3] However, a self-revelation is a revelation wherein one discloses herself to the epistemic agent, "The thief revealed herself from behind the curtains."[4] In the latter case of self-revelation, for Blaauw, the thief does not reveal any sort of proposition; instead, the thief merely reveals herself. Thus, when we speak of divine revelation, we should either refer to some case of divine self-revelation or some case of divine propositional revelation. Given this distinction, Blaauw focuses on the latter case.

Moving on to two further distinctions, according to Blaauw propositions can be revealed in either of two ways: (first) an agent can reveal proposition P by *asserting* P directly or (second) an agent can reveal proposition P by *manifesting* proposition P. In the first case, an agent might assert that P by simply writing, saying, or communicating that P in some other language (e.g. sign language) directly. However, an agent can *manifest* that P, according to Blaauw, by revealing that P without asserting that P. For example, if we suppose that a mother asks her hired private investigator if the girl in front of her is her long-lost daughter and the private investigator responds with a sincere grin, Blaauw thinks that the private investigator has *manifested* the proposition that the girl in front of the mother is her

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[3] Blaauw, "The Nature of Divine Revelation," 3.
[4] Ibid.

long lost daughter. Thus, when considering divine revelation, we might ask whether that revelation is propositionally asserted or manifested.

Provided these distinctions, Blaauw approaches the analysis of divine revelation in the context of ordinary uses of revelation (or cases of non-divine revelation). Within this analysis, Blaauw comes to the conclusion that a genuine instance of revelation takes place provided the following:

S reveals p to *r* if and only if:
(A) *s* communicates that *p* to *r*.
(B) *p* is true.
(C) *s* believes that *p* is true.
(D) the communication of *p* by *s* removes deep ignorance.[5]

Condition (A) is taken to be obvious, but in support of condition (B), Blaauw reasons that the verb, "to reveal," is a factive verb because "it is simply not possible to reveal falsehoods, just as it is impossible to know falsehoods."[6] For example, it would seem strange to imagine a case wherein two women, Sophia and Sapientia, are talking when Sophia reveals to Sapientia that Sapientia's husband is cheating on her when, in fact, Sapientia's husband is *not* cheating on her. This use of "reveal" would seem counterintuitive; our contemporary use of the verb "to reveal" seems to imply that whatever is revealed must be true.

In support of condition (C) above, Blaauw argues that in order for something to genuinely be revealed, the issuer of the proposition must believe that the proposition really is true. To use an example similar to Blaauw's, if Sophia had told Sapientia that Sapientia's husband had been cheating on her but that Sophia didn't

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[5] Ibid., 6.
[6] Ibid., 5.

really think that Sapientia's husband was cheating on her, then, Blaauw thinks, "we wouldn't want to say that [Sophia] revealed anything."[7]

Finally, in support of condition (D), Blaauw argues that "we can speak of a revelation only if something that was previously unknown becomes known. Revelation removes something: ignorance."[8] However, in Blaauw's view revelation does not remove just any sort of ignorance; it removes, what he calls, *deep ignorance*. Shallow ignorance, as opposed to deep ignorance, is the communication of more mundane facts that do not count as cases of revelation in Blaauw's view. For example, if someone does not know who the president of Russia is and another person tells them that the president of Russia is Putin, then new knowledge has been communicated to the first person, but this would not be, in Blaauw's view, a case of revelation. Instead, revelation, Blaauw thinks, is meant to be a case where a serious sort of ignorance is removed from someone; thus the condition of deep ignorance is satisfied when a communication "unveil[s] something of great significance."[9]

Now, Blaauw notes that in order to reveal something to someone, it is not necessary for one to *intend* to reveal some piece of information for that piece of information to be revealed. In fact, Blaauw thinks that there are cases of both intentional revelation and non-intentional revelation. For example, if we suppose that Sophia had written in her journal that Sapientia's husband was cheating on her and Sapientia happened to read Sophia's journal, then, in Blaauw's view, it would have been revealed to Sapientia that her husband was cheating on her.

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

Potential Problems

Given the idea of ordinary revelation offered in the previous section, Blaauw notes that there are three potential problems with this understanding of the idea of revelation, and they are as follows: First, the idea of deep ignorance seems to suggest that ignorance comes in degrees; however, if ignorance comes in degrees, then it might seem that revelation comes in degrees as well. However, Blaauw thinks that revelation does not come in degrees. Second, it is not clear what degree of deep ignorance is needed in order to satisfy the condition necessary for revelation. Third, revelation might seem to be dependent upon the whether ignorance is actually removed.

In answering the first concern, Blaauw writes that degrees of ignorance need not imply degrees of revelation, and he thinks that he can test whether the idea of revelation could admit of degrees. "Degree concepts, for instance, can be modified by degree modifiers such as 'very.'"[10] Now, it might be reasonable to say that someone is "very tall" or that someone is "very smart" because both of these ideas, in Blaauw's view, would admit of degrees, and they admit to degrees because they admit to degree modifiers. However, he thinks, the idea of revelation does not admit to degrees because it sounds incorrect to say "Sophia *very* revealed to Sapientia that…" or "Sophia revealed *more* to Susan that Sapientia's…" Thus, "on the basis of this piece of linguistic evidence we should conclude that the concept of revelation is not a degree concept."[11] Further, Blaauw notes that the fact that ignorance admits to degrees does not imply that the concept connected to it, revelation, should admit to degrees as well. He uses the example of baldness and degrees of hairs: it would

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[10] Ibid., 6.
[11] Ibid.

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make sense to say that one has "more hairs" or "fewer hairs" such that one is more bald or less bald. The amount of hairs on a bald head can vary, so this means that baldness admits to degree. However, having precisely zero hairs, which entails the degree concept of baldness, does not admit to degrees. Thus, in Blaauw's view, parallel reasoning would suggest that revelation does not admit to degrees—but ignorance does.

One might object to Blaauw's view on revelation not admitting to degrees by saying that a proposition can be "very revelatory." A revelation, R_1, that was more revelatory than another revelation, R_2, would likely contain more information than R_2. For example, "Sophia's husband is cheating on her," seems to be less revelatory than, "Sophia's husband is cheating on her with her best friend," even though both statements would be a revelation to Sophia. Now, between these two statements about Sophia's husband cheating on her, the person who communicated the former statement would have said something less revelatory than the one who communicated the latter statement. However, this objection, in my view, does not threaten Blaauw's conditions of a revelation; I take it that what is important for Blaauw's conditions of a revelation is that there is a threshold of significance for a proposition to be a revelation—not that revelation should not consist of degrees.

In answering the second concern about the need to specify the degree of deep ignorance, Blaauw writes that the degree of deepness needed to satisfy the criteria for a revelation depends on the stakes of the receiver. He defines the concept more formally in the following:

> . . . the communication of the information that p removes deep ignorance if and only if (i) the communication of p actually produces knowledge in the receiver of the information, and (ii) the knowledge

thus gained has a positive influence on the practical interests (or stakes) of the receiver of the information.[12]

Further, Blaauw writes that it is not necessary for the receiver to be aware that she is in a high-stakes situation in order for deep ignorance to be removed. He uses the example of a person who becomes aware of a Rembrandt painting hidden away in their father's basement due to their father's disclosure of the information. Blaauw writes that if this person became aware of the location of this painting without also knowing of his impending bankruptcy, then, intuitively, this case should still count as revelation. However, Blaauw notes that this shifting of the degree of deep ignorance to the idea of high-stakes would seem to simply shift the problem to the degree of high-stakes. In response to this idea, Blaauw writes that "perhaps we should give a counterfactual answer and say that the stakes are high if the subject would agree to being in a high-stakes situation in case someone explained to her what the stakes were."[13]

In answering the third worry about whether ignorance is actually removed in the case of revelation, Blaauw considers the view of Wolterstorff. According to Blaauw, Wolterstorff holds that a revelation occurs when information is communicated that would remove ignorance provided both attention and interpretive skills. In response to this view, Blaauw writes that this view is incorrect, and an example that Blaauw uses in support of his view is the following: suppose that one person announced information to a sleeping person about something that is a high-stakes situation for the sleeping person. In this case, Blaauw writes that Wolterstorff's idea of revelation would be satisfied, but it would seem, according to our intuitions, that nothing was really revealed to the sleeping

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[12] Ibid., 7.
[13] Ibid., 8.

person. Further, Blaauw writes that revelation seems to require that the information communicated in the revelation really is received. For example, Blaauw writes that, "The old man revealed to us where the jewels are buried and we have no idea where they are buried," sounds incoherent.[14] Thus, revelation, for Blaauw, implies that the information conveyed has been received.

The Nature of Divine Revelation

On the nature of divine revelation, Blaauw thinks that we can qualify the conditions on ordinary revelation to give us an understanding of the conditions necessary for divine revelation. For example, he takes the case of Jesus saying, "One should love one's neighbor."[15] Starting with condition (A) (the condition of communication of a proposition from one person to another person), Blaauw thinks that Jesus is clearly asserting the proposition given; however, Blaauw notes that it is possible for Jesus to have manifested the proposition that one ought to love one's neighbor by sincerely acting that way. Thus, in Blaauw's view, this statement meets the first criteria necessary to constitute a revelation.

Before proceeding, however, Blaauw notes that it might be possible in cases of divine revelation that God neither assert nor manifest a revelation. Instead, it might be "possible for God to communicate propositions by simply causing us to believe the proposition."[16] Thus, the idea of communication in condition (A), according to Blaauw, should be interpreted quite broadly.

Briefly, with respect to condition (B) (the proposition must be true) and condition (C) (the proponent of the revelation must believe that the revelation is true), Blaauw thinks that if either the proposition were false or else if Jesus thought

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[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

it was false, then it would not be a case of divine revelation. Thus, these conditions of ordinary revelation seem to also hold for divine revelation.

With respect to condition (D) (the proposition must remove deep ignorance), Blaauw thinks that this condition on ordinary revelation should also count on divine revelation. For example, if the proposition that one should love one's neighbor trivial and well-known, then it "intuitively wouldn't count as a revelation of this proposition. The ignorance lost—and the knowledge gained—should be of importance."[17] Further, Blaauw thinks that the communication of this proposition should produce knowledge in the target audience; if the target audience did not possess the skill or attention to properly receive the proposition, then it would not be a case of revelation.

Lastly, Blaauw thinks that the four conditions of ordinary revelation also hold (in a qualified way) for divine revelation. Specifically, the conditions are as follows: the proposition must be communicated, it must be true, it must be believed to be true by the issuer of the revelation, and the revelation must remove deep ignorance in the receiver. Due to the similarities of the necessary conditions for ordinary revelation and divine revelation, one might object that there is no clear difference between ordinary revelation and divine revelation so far. To this, Blaauw responds, "In the case of ordinary revelation, but not in the case of divine revelation, information is communicated by a non-divine subject. What makes divine revelation divine is that a divine subject is responsible for the revelation."[18] Thus, divine communication requires both that conditions (A) through (D) are met and the issuer of the revelation is divine. As a consequence any sort of communication issued by

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[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Ibid.

God toward a target audience that does not fully satisfy conditions (A) through (D) should, in Blaauw's view, be called a case of divine communication—not divine revelation. Now, Blaauw notes that our sense of "revelation" might not be identical to ancient ideas of revelation in the same way that our sense of "knowledge" is likely not identical with some ancient senses of knowledge. However, Blaauw is interested in *our* sense of revelation and what we mean when we say something like divine revelation.

Section II: Swinburne

Reasons to Expect a Revelation

Swinburne thinks that if an all-powerful and all-good God exists, then it is likely that this God would become incarnate during human history and make contact with human creatures in order to convey important information to them by means of revelation. One of the reasons he thinks this is that "there are matters which it would be very good for us to know which are such that either we could not find them out for ourselves, or we have not previously proved persistent or honest enough with ourselves to do so."[19] Of the kinds of things that Swinburne thinks that it would be good for God to reveal are the four following categories: knowledge of God's nature, knowledge of the atonement for our wrongs and what the required reparation from us is, encouragement to do good and avoid evil, and clear knowledge of which actions are good and which are bad for us to commit.

With respect to the first category—knowledge of God's nature—Swinburne thinks that a God who created rational agents would likely want to interact with these rational agents in some way. However, in order to interact with God appropriately, these agents should have some sort of knowledge of God's nature and

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[19] Swinburne, *Revelation*, 80.

existence. Thus, revelations from God, according to Swinburne, would help to communicate "aspects to his being which humans are not well equipped to discover for themselves."[20] Swinburne takes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as an example; if God does exist as a community of persons, Swinburne thinks that humans could not have come to this knowledge of God's nature independent of God revealing it to us. Consequently, "if we know about God that he is a Trinity, we will know him better and so be able to worship him more appropriately for what he is."[21] Thus, through revelation humanity might come to knowledge of God that could not be reached by natural reason, and this knowledge would be important for our appropriate worship of God.

Regarding the second category—knowledge of the atonement for our wrongs and what the required reparation from us is—Swinburne thinks that God would likely deal with the sin and suffering of the world by becoming incarnate, identifying with human suffering, and providing atonement for human sins. Swinburne goes on to note that in the case that one cannot make the satisfactory reparation for some wrongdoing, it is possible for someone else to provide the reparation for the guilty party. Thus, the one to whom the reparation is owed has a means to forgive the original guilty party of the need of reparation; however, Swinburne writes, it would be good for some lesser reparation to be required from the guilty party because this would "allow us, as free rational creatures, to take responsibility for the consequences of our freely chosen actions."[22]

Given that we need to offer reparation to God for the wrong done to our fellow creatures, our misuse of our lives, and our failure to worship God properly, according

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[20] Ibid., 81.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 82.

to Swinburne, it would be good for God to require us to repent, apologize, and offer some form of reparation for our wrongdoing. So it is likely, in Swinburne's view, both that God would reveal that there are wrongs that need to be atoned for before God and that the atonement and reparation revealed by God would likely take a particular form. This reparation, Swinburne writes, could be so great that we are not capable of satisfying it, so if we could not live the sort of life sufficient to provide an adequate reparation, it would be good for God to provide the reparation for us. Even though "it is not necessary that God himself should provide reparation by living the requisite sort of life, it is clearly good that God should do so."[23] Consequently, once the good reparation is offered, Swinburne thinks that it would be good for God to forgive us of our sins.

Now, this forgiveness would not, in Swinburne's view, remove all of the consequences of the wrongdoings done in the world. In fact, he thinks that all of the suffering and evil in the world are, in the end, necessary for greater goods; for example, it is difficult to imagine how one could achieve moral perfection with regard to the virtues (like courage) if one did not form a virtuous character in the presence of evil (like fear). Consequently, it would be good of God, in Swinburne's view, to permit the evil consequences of people's bad choices to come about even if the act, itself, is forgiven.

Now, since Swinburne writes that it is good that God allows suffering in the world, he also thinks that it is good that God would share in the suffering of humans. Of course, Swinburne thinks that there is no obligation on God to do so, but he does think that it is good for God to share in the suffering of those whom God cares about like a parent willing to suffer some evil with their children—even if the

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[23] Ibid.

parent could be free of the evil when the children could not. Thus, it would be good for God to share in human suffering, show that God has shared in human suffering, and show that God believes the suffering to be worthwhile by facing it bravely.

A priori reasoning, Swinburne writes, gives us good reason to suppose that God would become incarnate, live a perfect life under difficult conditions, express that he believes that he is God, and offer his suffering as atonement for our wrongdoing. However, Swinburne states that no a priori reasoning would give us evidence on when God would become incarnate and participate in human suffering. God, Swinburne writes, would need "to authenticate the information for which mere ordinary historical inquiry is an insufficient source."[24] Thus, through revelation God might communicate to humanity how to participate in an offering for atonement and forgiveness.

With respect to the third category—to provide us with encouragement to do good and avoid evil—Swinburne writes that in the same way that parents might persuade their children to do good actions and avoid bad actions by offering rewards or punishments respectively: "God too may wish to encourage good actions and discourage us from bad actions by providing rewards and punishments."[25] Now, these rewards or punishments, Swinburne writes, would be fruitless if God did not communicate them to us. Thus, through revelation humanity could be both warned of the potential consequences of their actions and be incentivized to behave morally until their character takes moral behavior up for its own sake.

Regarding the fourth category—clarity on which actions are good and which are bad—Swinburne writes that much of the evil committed by humanity is the

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[24] Ibid., 84.
[25] Ibid.

result of ignorance of which actions are good and which actions are bad. However, Swinburne thinks that if God wants people to be good, then they should do both what they think is good and what is, in fact, good. Thus, through revelation humanity might come to clearer conclusions of moral facts that are controversial.

God and Morality

From the reasons given above, Swinburne thinks that, assuming that God exists, we have good reason to expect a revelation from God. Additionally, he thinks that the communication of a revelation from God also has the potential to affect the moral properties of moral actions. Now, before giving examples wherein God's commands affect the moral properties of moral actions Swinburne offers definitions for particular types of moral actions, and his definitions are as follows:

> Obligatory actions are those which we are blameworthy for not doing; supererogatory actions are those which we are praiseworthy for doing. Likewise among bad actions, there are those which it is obligatory not to do—these are wrong actions; and there are bad actions which are not wrong and which I call infravetatory. It is wrong to rape or steal; yet it is bad, but not wrong, to watch many low-grade thrillers on TV rather than read one or two great works of literature.[26]

Continuing, Swinburne writes that differences in moral properties are supervenient on non-moral properties. For example, he wants to say that if two possible worlds are identical with respect to all non-moral properties, then it follows that they must also be identical with respect to moral properties. Further on moral properties, he thinks that there is a distinction between logically contingent moral truths and logically necessary moral truths that "must be true in virtue of the very nature of the actions with which they are concerned."[27]

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[26] Ibid., 86.
[27] Ibid., 87.

If God affects morality, in Swinburne's view, then God cannot affect or change actions that are necessarily good or bad. He thinks, though, that God can affect contingent moral truths for the following reason: it is a necessary moral truth, Swinburne writes, that "it is very good to reverence the good and the wise and the truly great, and obligatory to thank and please benefactors."[28] Now, since God is wholly good, wise, great, and the source of both our being and our knowledge, Swinburne thinks that we owe a great deal of honor, praise, and worship to God. In his view, God sustains us in our existence, and any other goodness that we receive from someone else ultimately comes from God. Thus, God would be owed our praise and honor. Swinburne continues, writing that one way to please a benefactor is to obey their commands, and, provided "the necessary truth that beneficiaries have a duty to please benefactors" and the fact that God would be our greatest benefactor, it would follow that we have a duty to please God. Thus, God's command to do something, according to Swinburne, would make it contingently the case that an action is morally obligatory when it would have been, other than for God's command, either supererogatorily good or morally neutral. Alternatively, God's command to refrain from something, for Swinburne, would make that thing that would be only infravetatorily bad or morally neutral, now, contingently wrong. Further, Swinburne writes that God's commendations can make neutral actions supererogatorily good, and God's discommendation can make a morally neutral action infravetatorily bad. However, God, who is wholly-good, would not command an action that is necessarily morally bad because "to command what you have no right to command is wrong."[29]

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[28] Ibid., 90.
[29] Ibid., 91.

In addition to God affecting the moral properties of actions that are morally neutral or else supererogatory or infravetatory, Swinburne writes that God can affect moral truths that humans ought to follow unless permitted to do otherwise by God. For example, Swinburne thinks that every life is a temporary gift from God, and it is within God's rights to take the gift back when God chooses. Consequently, Swinburne argues that God does nothing wrong by ending one life sooner than another, and God is entitled to having humans kill other humans if God commands it. He reasons as follows: "if A has the right to take something from B, he has the right to allow C to do the job for him."[30]

Lastly, there are some actions, in Swinburne's view, that are supererogatorily good that God can override and make bad—or the converse. For example, it is usually good to help the sick, but God could make it such that it is bad to help a particular sick person because, Swinburne writes, God has the right to allow someone to suffer for the sake of some greater good.

Finally, all moral commands or prohibitions issued by God, Swinburne argues, can be grouped in the following four categories:

1. God informs us of necessary moral truths, and God cannot change these truths. Also, God's commands or prohibitions regarding necessary moral truths makes them doubly obligatory.
2. God informs us of a necessary moral truth that we are bound to follow unless God permits otherwise.
3. God issues a universal command for all people to follow throughout all time, and the action in question would not otherwise be obligatory.
4. God issues a command to specific groups to do specific actions, and this command may be limited for a duration of time. This action would not otherwise be obligatory.

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[30] Ibid.

Regarding the first two categories of commands above, Swinburne thinks that the reason God would issue commands like these is to "give us with further motivation to do what is obligatory anyway."[31] However, the reasons for God issuing commands in the latter two categories are, in Swinburne's mind, more complex. For these categories, Swinburne writes that there are three sorts of reasons for God commanding or prohibiting actions and they are as follows: (first) to bring about coordinated good actions, (second) to further God's designs with actions that would be good but otherwise not obligatory, and (third) to further our trust in God by doing actions that, except for a divine command, would be wrong.

With respect to the first reason, Swinburne writes that it is important for there to be coordinated efforts on the part of God's servants in order to accomplish tasks that any single servant could not do alone. Thus, it is important, in Swinburne's view, that equally good tasks be accomplished with coordinated effort.

Regarding the second reason of why God would issue commands in these categories, Swinburne thinks that God might issue commands to fulfill specific purposes; while fulfilling these purposes would be good in Swinburne's view, they might not be obligatory without the command from God. For example, he writes that a parent might command their child to buy groceries for a sick neighbor, and the parent, by issuing this command, could intend that the act of the child, of helping out one's neighbor, builds up the character of the child. In the same way, fulfilling God's commands would build up the character of humans: "God rightly wants humans to become naturally holy, and so he has reason to help the process of our

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[31] Ibid., 93.

sanctification by imposing obligations on us (by way of commands) for some or all of our earthly life."[32]

The third reason for God issuing commands in the last two categories is, according to Swinburne, to build up our loyalty and trust in God. Swinburne takes the example of a case where an action would normally be wrong to commit, but because God has commanded it, it becomes obligatory. This example is the case of God's purported command to Abraham for him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Swinburne writes that "God as the author of life had the right to terminate Isaac's life and so to command Abraham to do so."[33] Swinburne thinks that this command for Abraham made it morally obligatory for Abraham to kill Isaac (unless there were some sort of retraction of the command on God's part). Now, Swinburne notes that in a case like Abraham's where they think that they have been commanded by God to kill someone, it would be necessary in order for him to not be culpable for the action that he have a very strong belief that God had, indeed, commanded them to kill the person. This sort of belief, arising only from "a very strong conviction of the presence of God and his voice commanding that action" or a strong belief evident from a public revelation "would suffice to make it on balance not (subjectively) wrong to perform the action."[34] Now, such an act would, of course, be very difficult for a humane person to perform even if they genuinely held a strong belief that it was the right thing to do; thus, Swinburne thinks that this sort of act for Abraham would have increased his trust in God and aided him in the process of sanctification.

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 94.
[34] Ibid.

Finally, Swinburne writes that if God does issue a command that changes the moral property of an action that it would be important for God to let us know what this command is so that we can fulfill it:

> And of course for knowledge of moral truths which are created by the command of God, we need God to tell us what they are; and if the truths about the morality of abortion or euthanasia are all in this category, then we need God to reveal to us what they are. Current moral disputes about marriage and divorce, homosexuality and cloning, who should govern states, or rule a church, illustrate further our need for God's revelation in helping us to know what is right and what is wrong.[35]

The Kind of Revelation Needed

Swinburne thinks that if God communicates by a revelation, then it is reasonable to expect that God would communicate this revelation through one or more prophets, and these prophets would have evidence of God's communication to them. This is because God, Swinburne writes, would have given humanity a responsibility for each of us to help each other, "and so it is to be expected that he would also give to humans the responsibility for helping each other to knowledge of what he has revealed, and thereby to knowledge of the way to our sanctification."[36]

Now, this revelation, in Swinburne's view, would consist in how one ought to live, and this means that once one is given that information, either they can choose to follow it or not to follow it. Given that the purpose of the revelation is to confer a choice on whether to be good in certain respects or bad in certain respects, Swinburne writes that even the revelation, itself, ought to be a source of opportunity for choice. Specifically, Swinburne thinks that it is consonant with the purpose of the revelation that the revelation, itself, be hidden to some extent in order for people to find out "by investigation how we ought to live and thereby find our way to

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[35] Ibid., 95.
[36] Ibid., 96.

Heaven, or to neglect to investigate this."[37] Thus, the revelation, in Swinburne's view, should not be too evident, but it should also be discoverable. It is the hiddenness of the revelation, for Swinburne, that would manifest one's commitment to the purposes of the revelation "by pursuing them when it is not certain that those goals are there to be had."[38] As a consequence, Swinburne writes that it is to be expected of a revelation from God that this revelation ought to be hidden to some extent in order for it to be searched out.

Revelation for Different Cultures

Given the reasons for God to offer a revelation, the subsequent problem that should be dealt with is the means of communicating the revelation; more specifically, Swinburne asks how such a revelation could be communicated across human history and human cultures.

Now, since Swinburne thinks that it would be good for God to become incarnate in order to provide atonement for humanity and to identify with human suffering, he considers two possible cases of incarnation: God could have either multiple human incarnations or just one human incarnation. Settling for the latter case, Swinburne writes, "surely one perfect human life would avail for the whole human race. It trivializes the notion of a perfect atoning life to suppose otherwise; what atones is the quality of one life, not the number of lives."[39] Consequently, this one incarnation of God, Swinburne thinks, should have a sufficient connection within the cultural environment that the incarnation takes place to cause detailed reports of the incarnation as well as provide evidence of it for future generations. This revelation, he writes, should be accessible to almost any sort of person (e.g.

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[37] Ibid., 97.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 98.

young, old, poor, educated), and it should be able to be transmitted across different cultures.

With respect to the different cultures that this revelation would be transmitted across, Swinburne thinks that God could provide the revelation in two ways: culture-relative revelation or culturally independent revelation. The culture-relative revelation would consist of God conveying the revelation "in terms of the scientific and historical presuppositions (both true and false) of the culture to which it was addressed, and giving moral instruction applicable to the situation of members of that culture."[40] In this case, Swinburne writes that God could offer, as part of the revelation, an account of the world consistent with the science of the people at that time (e.g. that the world came into existence 4,000 years prior to the revelation taking place), and it would convey moral truths that the members of the culture needed to know at that time (i.e. it would not deal with unique moral problems at different times such as medical research on human embryos, cloning, etc.). Further, Swinburne thinks that the promises of God, such as the hope of heaven, would also be couched in culture-relative knowledge of the world at the time (e.g. that heaven was spatially located above earth or some other such thing). This revelation would be sufficient to offer its immediate recipients with information on how to behave morally and a means to sanctification. In this case, Swinburne writes that false scientific presuppositions do not affect the veracity of revelation for religious statements:

> False scientific presuppositions would make no difference to the religious content of the message—that is, to the kind of life and worship which it sought to encourage. A mistaken view of what God

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[40] Ibid., 99.

had created, or where Heaven was, would not affect the praiseworthiness of God, or the desirability of Heaven.[41]

The second kind of revelation that Swinburne thinks God could convey would be a culturally independent revelation. In this case, God would give the recipients a creed of statements that make no historical or scientific presuppositions. However, Swinburne writes that this way of communicating a revelation, through human language, would use "a tool too feeble to convey an unequivocal message to all nations and generations unless backed up in some way."[42] This is because there are a number of difficulties, in Swinburne's view, with saying much of anything about God and God's relation to the world in the form of a creed that logically and rigorously captures the meaning that it is intended to convey across just one language—let alone across multiple languages and cultures. Swinburne argues that "human language can only have meaning to the extent to which its speakers can grasp that meaning," but since the humans at a specific time could not conceive of all the future forms of interpretation and cultures, "they cannot have sentences whose consequences for the concerns of those cultures are always clear."[43]

A potential solution that Swinburne thinks God could use to make the process of obscuration of the revelation slower is as follows: God could provide both a culture-relative revelation and a culturally independent revelation in order for each revelation to check the other. However, Swinburne writes that even this would not guarantee against the obscuration of the content of the revelation because "not even God can give unambiguous culturally independent instructions accessible to humans limited not merely by the knowledge, but by the concerns and interests of their own

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[41] Ibid., 100.
[42] Ibid., 102.
[43] Ibid.

culture."[44] Thus, if the revelation is going to be public, Swinburne thinks that it should consist of publically accessible traditions (written or unwritten), but he thinks that these traditions should also be accompanied by some sort of continuing guidance that aids in the translation of the revelation. This, in Swinburne's view, means that "there must be such a thing as a church in which translations have a better chance of success than they would otherwise."[45]

Now, with respect to God ensuring the correct translation of the revelation for different cultures, Swinburne thinks that God could use two possible means. First, God could use the means of an infallible authority within the church that declared the correct interpretations of the revelation when necessary. Or, second, God could ensure that the "truth would emerge in the long run by consensus within the church, distinguished as such by some organizational continuity and continuity of doctrine with the original revelation."[46] However, each of these means are limited. Regarding the first means Swinburne writes that there would seem to be an all-or-nothing status as for what the layman should believe; there would seem to be little room for the individual layman to determine what interpretations she thought would be most congruent with the rest of the revelation by her natural reason. However, the second means is also limited in the fact that it is a weak way of preserving revelation. Even so, Swinburne thinks that some means of interpreting a revelation must be in place.

> But some method there must be if the revelation is not to die out. And it must therefore be part of the original revelation which subsequent ecclesial body constitutes the interpreting church; and it must be

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[44] Ibid., 103.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 104.

derivable therefrom how its interpretations are to be recognized, and what are the limits to their authority.[47]

Section III: Concluding Thoughts

Given the overview of the nature of divine revelation by Blaauw and the reasons why one would expect a divine revelation, if God exists, by Swinburne, I would like to move on to the central problem of this thesis—the means by which we might evaluate purported divine revelations. The problem of this thesis, that I am calling the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability*, will be explicated more fully in the next chapter.

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[47] Ibid., 105.

CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM OF DOCTRINAL DECIDABILITY

Let us imagine a villainous doctor of sorts who has forced a choice upon you, his unwilling victim in a secluded laboratory, and the choice that he offers you is this:

> You're dying because of a disease that you contracted from someone you know who breathed on you. It's not your fault that you're dying; you had no justified suspicion that the person who gave you the disease was infectious nor that you were susceptible to this particular disease. Nonetheless, you are dying. I, though, am a brilliant doctor who, alone, possesses the remedy for this particular disease in the form of a *pill*. If you take this remedy, then you will both be cured of this disease and live a long, healthy life. However, if you do not take this remedy, then you will become paralyzed and live in utter agony for several days before your death. This is the choice that I am offering you: I have before you a pile of hundreds of different pills. Within this pile is the one pill containing the remedy, but ingesting this remedy with any of the other pills will nullify the remedy. Your problem is that all of the pills, including the remedy, are identical in weight, size, visual appearance, and taste. Choose your pill.

This sort of forced choice is perfectly consistent with—and, perhaps, even expected of—a "villainous doctor." We would not be surprised if anyone who was forced into this decision, or anyone who witnessed some poor person experiencing this decision, decided to predicate the doctor with words such as "evil," "cruel,"

or "mean." However, I take it that we would be quite surprised if some perfectly sane person reacted to this situation by describing the doctor as "kind" or even "good" instead of the former predicates. Further, if this choice were exaggerated into a situation wherein one was presented with *thousands* of different choices—each one, other than the cure, leading to an *eternity* of misery and despair—then I think the word "cruel" would fall short of sufficiently describing the doctor. However, this situation might appear to be similar to what some religions hold as doctrine today. Specifically, some religions or sects within some religions hold that unless one satisfies the *putative set of necessary actions for salvation* offered by that religion or sect, then that person will likely experience an eternity of torment and misery. For my purpose here, necessary actions for salvation include either the act of assenting to particular beliefs or the act of completing (or refraining from) certain physical actions.

If the conditions of the "villainous doctor" situation are not dissimilar to each person's choice regarding their assent to a particular religion and if we are consistent in our reactions between the choice for a pill and the choice for a religion, then we should reasonably conclude that predicating God with the word "good" is, at the very least, inapt. The following question, therefore, ought to be asked: are the similarities between the choice for a pill and the choice for a religion sufficiently similar to imply problems with religious doctrine holding the idea, "God is good"?

I will contend, for the duration of this chapter, that the similarities between these two situations are not as strong as some might suppose. The remainder of this chapter is, therefore, organized by two main sections. In the next section I formulate what I call the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability*, and in the second section I discuss whether the problem succeeds in its stronger form.

Section I: What is the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability*?

I take it that the problem of this chapter can be reduced to a simple set of statements for our assessment, and the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability* is that this set of statements is very improbable when taken together, but we want to retain, if we reasonably can, statements (1)—(3). The set of statements that I have in mind are the following:

(1)   God is omnipotent, omniscient, and *wholly good.*

(2)   God will bring about salvation for at least some humans.

(3)   Within some religion(s) is a set of prescribed actions, delivered by special revelation, that are necessary for salvation.[48]

(4)   Within the set of all religions, the claims of any particular religion are not more probable than the claims of any other religion.

(5)   There exists a plethora of religions with conflicting sets of prescribed actions for salvation.

Call this set of statements the *Problem Set* (*PS*). Now, this set of ideas is not explicitly inconsistent; were we to take a subset of these ideas (say, [2]—[5]), we would not find that this subset *obviously* entails the contradiction of the remaining idea, (1). Nor does there appear to be some implicit inconsistency within this set of ideas. For example, we could imagine a possible world wherein *PS* obtains without some logical contradiction (e.g. Calvinism, or something like it, seems to be at least *logically possible*). However, the problem remains that we would not *prima facie* expect (2)—(5) given (1). In fact, given the "villainous doctor" analogy, we would expect that one or more of these ideas would be false if a good God exists. Thus, the obtainment of the conjunction of (1)—(5) is, at the very least, improbable, and it would be *prima facie* irrational for an epistemic agent to assent to this set of beliefs.

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[48] Note that the "necessity" of satisfying to this set of actions might vary for different persons. For example, according to Moreland and Craig (2003) the *religious accessibilist* holds that some religious beliefs are necessary for salvation to the degree that one has reasonable access to them. Thus, in order to put this idea aside I will assume for the duration of this paper that the sincere investigator has reasonable access to the religion(s) that contains the set of prescribed actions necessary for salvation.

It might be suggested that the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability* could exist without all of the statements in the *PS*; for example, we could take statements (2)—(5) together and, excluding (1), still have the problem of finding the set of necessary actions for salvation in some religion. In response to this idea, I would refer to the first chapter of this thesis where I suggested that from God's goodness (in addition to God's omnipotence and omniscience) and the desirability of human redemption, we have good reason to suppose that God would offer salvation to humans—in the absence of knowing God's revelation—because of God's purported attributes. This is in contrast to the villainous doctor from whom we have already obtained a revelation about a form of salvation; however, were it not for this revelation, we would reason that, in virtue of the villainous doctor's character, it is not likely that there is a cure within the pile of pills. Thus, the possibility of salvation does not entail that God, or the even the doctor, must be good, but in the absence of coming to know a revelation about there being salvation, we only suppose that there is salvation in virtue of God's goodness and God's other attributes. Now, if we take away any of these three attributes of God, then, in my view, it is not clear that we would have good reason to suppose that God would extend salvation to human persons. For example, if God is not omnipotent, God's ability to save human persons—independent of the necessary action(s) for salvation—might be called into question. Or, if we suppose that God is not omniscient, then it might be called into question whether God is really in a position to judge who should be saved, who should be quasi-saved, and who should be unsaved. For if God's knowledge is limited, it may be that God does not know what human persons really have done or really do believe. In addition, there might be other relevant facts about the human person from which God would judge to

determine whether to save them or not; ignorance of these facts would render salvation problematic in the least (since it must be just).

Of course, one might argue that it is not necessary for us to suppose that God is omnipotent or omniscient for our salvation; God need only be sufficiently powerful and sufficiently knowledgeable to justly save human persons. I grant that this reasoning, though controversial, is plausible. However, I take it that the most compelling reason to suppose that it is the conjunction of statements (1) through (5) that creates the problem is God's goodness in statement (1). We might suppose that if God is not wholly good, then this would be problematic because a God who is not wholly good might not have a compelling reason to extend salvation to human persons—even if their salvation is desirable. If God is imperfectly good, then it is not clear that God, though good, would perform the supererogatory act of extending salvation to human persons. Instead, it is God's perfect goodness, in conjunction with God's other attributes, that leads us to believe that there probably is an offer of salvation extended to human persons from God. Thus, on my view, statement (1) is important for holding statement (2), and in the absence of statement (2), statement (1) becomes suspect. Further, the conjunction of statements (1) and (2) gives us reason to suppose statement (3) because God, who desires our salvation, would likely make the means of achieving salvation known to human persons—as the arguments by Swinburne that I summarized in the previous chapter show.

Before I proceed, I should like to point out what this problem is and is *not*. This problem that I am calling "The Problem of Doctrinal Decidability" is, I take it, a subproblem within the larger *Problem of Evil*; if salvation is possible, it is an evil, after all, not to have had a reasonable means of being *saved from* some state of divine punishment. However, this problem does not pertain to the subset of evils

that contains the evils of pain and misery in the natural world (or, more narrowly, the evils that give rise to the *Problem of Suffering*). Utilizing Van Inwagen's strategy[49] on the *Problem of Divine Hiddenness* I want to consider the following hypothetical world to illustrate my point:

> W_{Utopia} Within a secular utopian society there exists no real form of suffering. Medicine and technology have advanced to a point where people no longer experience illness, pain, or grief. Everyone is given an appropriate cocktail of chemicals that maintains steady levels of happiness. There is no war, no famine, no excessive hunger, no disease, no mental handicaps, and no mental illness. Everyone has a meaningful, long life, and no one's life is cut short. Moral evils are nonexistent; instead, psychology has perfected the study of psychological health and the application of behavior modification. No one is motivated to commit evil and no one needs to. Finally, humanity lives in perfect harmony with nature and does not cause animal suffering.[50] There is no *Problem of Suffering*.
> In addition to the lack of suffering, everyone has computer implants in their brains that permit accelerated learning, reasoning, and problem solving. Scientific truths are hardly debated. Rather, scientific, experimental results are published, and the resulting theoretical implications are both obvious and uncontroversial. Politics has lost its drama, and ideas from philosophy, literature, and the arts have flourished. The last remaining, significant debate within this global society is about religion. There are reports of religious experiences that lead some people to assent to particular sets of religious doctrines that, they espouse, are necessary for eternal life. Even with the current technological advancement, these religious experiences can be neither confirmed nor denied as authentic, supernatural events. Due to these reports, a *set of prescribed actions necessary for salvation* is the last major debate.

From W_{Utopia} we can see that it is, at least, logically possible for some world to have the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability* without the *Problem of Suffering*. As a consequence, I think that theodicies and defenses that attempt to defend against the

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[49] Van Inwagen, "What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?"

[50] The Problem of Evil might still be present, depending on the relation between the problem and animal suffering. Therefore, let us stipulate for this world the following: if animal suffering contributes to the Problem of Evil, let us imagine this world without animal suffering. This could be either because human technology has eliminated suffering in nature or, perhaps, because any such animal does not exist. Let all other creatures capable of suffering (i.e. aliens, angels, and such) not suffer or else not exist.

Problem of Suffering may not uphold the rationality of particular religions in the context of this other problem. For example, given *PS*, it is not clear to me how the presence of free will—which might be used to justify moral evils that cause pain within the *Problem of Suffering*—in W_{Utopia} would save the rationality of religious belief for this subproblem within the *Problem of Evil*. The problem here, if free will affects the problem, is that the sick person from our analogy with the villainous doctor has *too many* choices by which she may exercise her free will in order to choose the cure for her terminal disease. If anything, she may have *too much* free will. Similarly, it is not clear to me how something like Hick's "Soul-Making Defense" would defend against this problem either, since soul-making would be for nothing if not for salvation—and it is salvation that is at stake. Now, it might be possible for these theodicies and defenses to be repurposed in order to accommodate this problem in the future. However, I am skeptical of the idea that such attempts will succeed.

Were (4) and (5) in *PS* true, I would challenge the rationality of most (if not all) contemporary theistic religions that hold (1) through (3). Thus, since (5) seems to be obviously true, my strategy for defending against this problem will focus on statement (4): "Within the set of all religions, the claims of any particular religion are not more probable than the claims of any other religion."

Section II: Does (4) of the *Problem Set* hold?

In Support of (4)

Coyne has argued that there is no reasonable way to distinguish between which religion or particular sect of a religion is true. "Given that most religious people acquire their faith through accidents of birth, and those faiths are conflicting, it's very likely that the tenets of a randomly specified religion are wrong. How can

you tell if *yours* is right?"[51] He continues by arguing that the only real solution to approaching any religion is to approach all religions with equal skepticism and to evaluate them by the empirical evidence of their claims. However, Coyne writes, all religions are relatively equal in their lack of evidence. Thus, he thinks that we should participate in no religion at all. "In the end, the inconsistencies between faiths, combined with the reasonable doubt that believers apply to other faiths, means that *no* faiths are privilege, none should be trusted."[52]

Kitcher also argues against the reliability of religious claims to be evaluated, suggesting (i) that acculturation often determines one's religious affiliation. Further, he argues (ii) that religious experiences from which contradicting doctrines are drawn appear to be symmetrical: "There are no marks by which one of these many inconsistent conceptions of the supernatural can be distinguished from the others. Instead, we have a condition of perfect symmetry."[53] Kitcher continues by arguing (iii) that religious claims are so varied that any attempt to consolidate those claims into a single religion could be nothing more than a mere spiritual religion and (iv) that the spread of religions may not be due to the presence of miracles (or other supernatural evidence). Instead, the spread would be due to the mere utility or social advantages[54] of the religion.[55] Kitcher concludes with the following:

> We cannot yet aspire to tell the full story of why religions of so many
> different kinds have been prevalent across human societies, but the
> specific instances in which historical and sociological explanations can
> be given strongly suggest that the causes of success stem from the

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[51] Coyne, *Faith Versus Fact*, 85.
[52] Ibid., 86.
[53] Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 142.
[54] Kitcher offers the example that upper-middle-class women in the Greco-Roman world might have been more attracted to Christianity because Christian husbands were less abusive and more faithful to their partners, and pagans, seeing that Christian groups recovered better from disease because they likely cared more for each other's wellbeing, might have been attracted to Christianity for better health. This is because better health might have been perceived to be a sign of divine blessing.
[55] Ibid., 141-44.

attractiveness of stories and alleged historical claims, on the emotions they provoke and the actions they inspire—and that they have nothing to do with the literal truth of those tales and stories.[56]

Thus, for Coyne and Kitcher's arguments, it would appear that (4) and (5) are true—that we are faced with a plethora of contradicting religions and no real way of evaluating the probability of a particular religion over that of the alternative religions. Coyne and Kitcher then conclude that no one is justified in holding that any particular doctrine containing what I will call a *set of prescribed actions necessary for salvation* (call this *PAS*) is true. Thus, if Coyne and Kitcher are correct with respect to (4) and (5), and if some religions are correct with respect to (3), then we really are in a sort of "villainous doctor" state of affairs.

After considering the arguments offered above by Coyne and Kitcher, I would grant the more general ideas that they argue for as important concerns that support (4). However, I think that Coyne and Kitcher's reasoning is seriously flawed. For example, Kitcher wrote:

> If, however, you had been acculturated within one of the aboriginal traditions of Australia, or within a society in central Africa, or among the Inuit, you would accept, on the basis of cultural authority, radically different ideas. You would believe in the literal truth of stories about the spirits of the ancestors and about their presence in places, and you would believe these things as firmly as Christians believe in the resurrection, or Jews in God's covenant, or Muslims in the revelations of the Prophet.[57]

I have three critiques of his argument. First, it appears that Kitcher's claims are obviously too strong. Kitcher supposes that had his reader been born in a different culture, then she *really would have believed* in the native religious ideas of that particular culture. On the contrary, I think that there are evident counterexamples in the world of people who fail to adopt the religious beliefs presented to them by

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[56] Ibid., 144.
[57] Ibid., 141.

their social environment. Similarly, there are many converts to religious belief, and some of these conversions seem to take place through argument and reasoning instead of by mere acculturation.

Second, it would seem that Kitcher makes a false inference of sorts. Specifically, he seems to think that both the *variety of backgrounds* from which different people develop their religious beliefs and the *diversity of religious beliefs* in the world are somehow sufficient to warrant a problem of credulity for those who assent to the religious beliefs of their cultural background. Now, I would agree with Kitcher on the idea that there are duties that individuals have to seek true beliefs, and I think individuals have the duty to consider how their beliefs affect the lives of those around them. I am morally against credulity. However, I would suggest that *it simply does not follow* that because one was acculturated within a particular religious environment that it is irrational for her to assent to the religious beliefs that she developed from that religious environment. My defense of this idea would consist of an argument in parallel to that of arguing for the reality of an objective morality across cultures. For example, moral customs and beliefs *do* vary across different cultures. Those who believe in some set of moral customs or beliefs often derive that set of customs and beliefs from their social environment. However, it does not follow from these facts that one is irrational in assenting to those moral beliefs that derived from one's culture. Nor is it the case—because of the diversity of moral customs and moral beliefs across cultures—that there are not some moral customs and beliefs that *really are better*, or even more rational, than others. Thus, any proponent of Kitcher's ideas regarding the rationality of religious beliefs might, if they were to apply the principles of such reasoning consistently, be forced to accept some sort of moral skepticism. If this were the case, then I would argue that in the

absence of an objective morality, the intuition behind the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability* simply dissolves. If nothing is objectively good or evil, then there is nothing really morally egregious about what the doctor, in my example at the beginning of this chapter, does. Further, I take it that Kitcher's reason for rejecting theistic religions is that there is a problem of credulity on part religious persons, but the problem of credulity is a problem, for him, because of its *moral* implications. For example, Kitcher wrote elsewhere on this topic:

> The legitimacy at stake is ethical. [...] Secularists can [...] abandon Clifford's ambitious principle, and yet deny the ethical permissibility of holding religious doctrines by a 'leap of faith.' Precisely because religious commitments typically pervade the lives of the devout, they are not insulated from actions with serious consequences for others. [...] Only if the tie between belief and action were completely cut, or if conduct were under the firm control of an internal censor, dedicated to ensuring that only ethically permissible actions are performed, could the adoption of specific doctrine on the basis of faith be legitimate. [...] Giving a general license to commitments to religious doctrines that outrun the evidence allows the members of the diverse array of human cultures and societies to act on the basis of whatever interpretation they give to whatever sayings or texts they choose, to permit their inspiration to be *Mein Kampf* or the *120 Days of Sodom*, and that is to tolerate fanaticism in all its guises. Unless the application of doctrine is always subordinated to a commitment to the ethical values, unless there is no 'suspension of the ethical,' the invocation of faith cannot legitimize acceptance of religious doctrine.[58]

Thus, it is not clear that Kitcher's own position, which morally condemns certain religious practices, could sustain the implications of his strategy of attack.

Further, I would ask: is it the case that the religious person ought to withhold assent to the religious beliefs derived from her social environment *simply because* other individuals derive alternative, conflicting beliefs from other cultures? Let us consider an example to see. We might take some religious belief, *B*, of a faithful Catholic where the content of that belief regarding homosexual persons

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[58] Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 16-19.

consists of the idea that "they must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity,"[59] and the belief of an extremist Christian cult or Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia that holds *not B* by either persecuting homosexual persons or failing to condemn the maltreatment of homosexual persons. Now, let us grant that the justification regarding *B* or *not B* for the persons holding either of the beliefs is grounded in their religions alone; let us suppose, for our example, that the faithful Catholic has strong biases against homosexual persons that, were it not for her faith, would lead her to treat homosexual persons with hostility. Would it really be reasonable for Kitcher to expect the faithful Catholic to suspend her assent to *B simply because* another religion, such as Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, holds *not B*? I would think not. Even further, would we not have some reason to expect better *moral commands* from a God who is said to be *good*? Kitcher, however, did not seem to take this into consideration when he wrote:

> Christians will naturally think of themselves as different, but, as we have seen, there is no basis for holding that the religious doctrines they avow are any more likely to be correct than those of other faiths, even of radical and intolerant versions of other faiths.[60]

Finally, if Kitcher's reasoning is correct and if he had been born or acculturated elsewhere in the world than he was, then his beliefs regarding the truth value of some *PAS* could have been different than what they are (i.e. if he came to his atheistic beliefs by argument, the reasoning for such an argument may not have been available to him in a different place or time). Ought he not, therefore, suspend his own beliefs regarding those religions *simply because* of his placement of birth or his acculturation in some geographical and social environment? Or, independent of how Kitcher came by his beliefs regarding religion, is there no such

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[59] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2358.
[60] Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 148.

thing as atheistic acculturation? In light of these questions (to which I think the answers are in the affirmative) I would contend that *if there is a problem of symmetry, the problem of symmetry would be nothing more than a problem of acculturation, full stop.* Therefore, Kitcher's own beliefs about religion would suggest that his argument aptly applies to himself. For example, Plantinga has responded to Kitcher's argument elsewhere, writing:

> At bottom, therefore, Kitcher's brief against belief in the transcendent is just that such beliefs display great diversity and that 'compete symmetry prevails' with respect to the origin of religious beliefs. But diversity as such doesn't prove much of anything (after all, the same holds for philosophical beliefs, including Kitcher's opinion about religion). And as for [complete] symmetry, to claim that it prevails is already to reject religious belief; hence it offers no promise as a decent way of arguing against such belief.[61]

The Failure of (4)

Many of the arguments summarized above by Kitcher and Coyne presume the idea that there are a plethora of religions in the world that offer conflicting *PASs* (statement [5] of *PS*). Coyne and Kitcher also support the idea that there is no reasonable means of evaluating the *PASs* of those religions in order to determine which ones, if any, are accurate when they refer to the transcendent and offer a necessary condition of belief for salvation (statement [4] of *PS*).

Obviously, the combination of (4) and (5) have the potential to form a powerful argument against rational grounds for believing that any particular *PAS* is true; so far, it is difficult to see either how the contradicting *PASs* of different religions can be resolved or else how to show that one religion, or a group of religions, is particularly better than the alternative religions.

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[61] Plantinga, review of *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism.*

I take it that there are very general and obvious methods by which religions can be weighed and scrutinized. Specifically, it strikes me as obviously true that, at least on some level, religious claims can be assessed for logical consistency, scientific accuracy (with some exceptions on Swinburne's culture-relative revelation), and ethical application. For example, a contemporary pagan practice of "casting spells" to causally affect the health or fortune of others is, quite clearly, at odds with our scientific understanding of the world today; or, in the context of ethics, I take it that there is no real contest when weighing the ethics of Zen Buddhism toward other human beings compared to that of Aztec human sacrifice. Finally, we have found no Greek gods on the top of Mount Olympus. Thus, religious claims can at least be assessed on these levels of skepticism, so Kitcher's claim to symmetrical justification for religious claims—and statement (4) in the *PS*—is, as stated, clearly false. For some qualified version of the argument though, the problem remains in the following question: how many religions, after "tossing out" the falsified religions by the criteria above, would that leave us with? I suspect that it would still leave us with the *Problem Set* for a significant subset of the world's top contender religions, so there is still a problem surrounding (4). Let us replace (4) with a qualified version of it, (4)*, and let us call the *Problem Set* with (4)*, *Problem Set** (or *PS**). Here is our new problem:

(4)* Among the top contender religions, there is none which is more probable than all of the others.[62]

I want to note, however, that work has actually been done on (4)* in the philosophy of religion. Methods for evaluating and comparing claims of divine

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[62] We could imagine the "villainous doctor" analogy somewhat differently while retaining our previous reaction. For example, if the doctor were to present to the sick person the same amount of pills as the previous analogy in two half-piles, and if he said that the remedy is in one half-pile of pills rather than another, then I take it that our reaction would be roughly the same. Thus, (4)* is still a problem.

revelation have been developed, particularly within the works of Swinburne as well

as a particular work by Menssen and Sullivan.[63] In support of this view, Slater

writes:

> What such apologists for traditional religion fail to do, in Kitcher's
> view, is to 'face up to the most serious reasons for doubt about their
> favored transcendent being—typically the Christian God—rebutting
> the oversimplications of Darwinian atheism instead of addressing
> the challenge of secularism' (p. 257). Again, it is difficult to know
> specifically which defenders of traditional religious faith Kitcher has
> in mind, but I imagine that it would not be difficult to produce some
> examples. The trouble facing such a claim, however, is that there are
> clear counterexamples to it, such as the Christian philosophers that I
> mentioned above, [(William Alston, William Lane Craig, Alvin
> Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne)] who have dealt extensively and
> rigorously with the sorts of criticism that Kitcher raises in his
> discussion of the argument from symmetry. As it stands, then,
> Kitcher's assertion seems to be false, as it appears to assume that no
> traditional religious believers have responded to the kind of secularist
> challenge that he raises. [...] The closest that Kitcher actually comes to
> acknowledging this impressive and diverse body of work is when he
> observes that there are Christian philosophers who 'chop the logic
> with even more skill than the critics [of religion]'—but having done so,
> he immediately proceeds to dismiss their arguments with the claim
> that 'all of this is beside the central point. It is a sideshow to the
> many-sided challenge *of* secularism' (p. 258).[64]

Thus, it is not clear in what sense Kitcher really intends to persuade his opponents

to his side since, in spite of a vast amount of literature that Kitcher does not engage

with, he produces strong claims that have already been addressed like the following:

> The trouble with supernaturalism is that it comes in so many
> incompatible forms, all of which are grounded in just the same way.
> [...] There are no marks by which one of these many inconsistent
> conceptions of the supernatural can be distinguished from the
> others.[65]

So far, I have completed the narrow aim of this chapter of critiquing

statement (4); I have provided strong arguments that show that (4) in *PS* is false.

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[63] *The Agnostic Inquirer: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint.*
[64] Slater, *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion*, 143-144.
[65] Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 142.

Now, I want to introduce methods for evaluating *PASs* in order to lower the probability of (4)*. Thus, I will proceed with arguments aimed at lowering the probability of (4)* in chapter four.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS FOR LOWER THE PROBABILITY OF (4)*

As I proceed with my attempt to lower the probability of (4)* in this chapter, I will offer with two sections. In the first section I will summarize Swinburne's four tests of a candidate revelation, and in the second section I will supplement Swinburne's ideas on the tests of a candidate revelation.

Section I: Swinburne's View

Swinburne reasons that in order to test whether a purported revelation really is from God, we might assess the characteristics of the revelation and the events surrounding the revelation to see if it is likely to be from God. Now, when assessing the revelation itself, Swinburne thinks that we can "apply the kinds of tests which we apply to a letter to see whether it comes from whom it purports to come."[66] The sorts of tests that we would apply to a letter to see if it is authentic are, according to Swinburne, three kinds: the content of the letter, the method of the expression, and the transmission of the letter.

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[66]Swinburne, *Revelation*, 107.

First, the content of the letter ought to be the sort of thing that the author would have written to the addressee; thus, in the parallel case for a revelation, the purported revelation ought to be the sort of thing God would choose to reveal to humans. Second, the method of the expression of the letter (handwriting, paper, signature) ought to be characteristic, or uniquely characteristic, of the purported author. In parallel, the purported revelation ought to be expressed by a method of expression that we would expect from God. This means that the method of expression should be unique to God alone.

Third, the transmission of the letter consists of whether the letter really could have travelled from the purported author to its addressee. However, Swinburne writes that there is no real equivalent test of purported revelation for this test of a letter, and this is because God, who is omnipotent, "can produce a message anywhere at any time."[67] Even so, Swinburne thinks that there are two other tests that we can apply to a purported revelation in order to assess the authenticity. The third test for a revelation, Swinburne writes, is the test "that the church has developed the original revelation in a way which plausibly brings out what was involved in it, and applies it to new situations in a natural way."[68] His justification for this is the idea that God would not permit a revelation intended for all humans to become distorted beyond recognition. Finally, the fourth test is whether the interpretations of the purported revelation offer the type of instruction and teaching that God would give to humans.

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 108.

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In order to explore Swinburne's methods for testing the authenticity of a purported divine revelation, I will now proceed by summarizing Swinburne's arguments on these four tests.

The Test of Original Content

When testing the original content of the revelation, Swinburne means to test the message of the revelation (not the presuppositions in which it is given) to see if it is the kind of thing that God would communicate. To illustrate what we are looking for, Swinburne gives the example of a society wherein slavery is practiced:

> If the prophet were to say, in a society in which slavery and soldiering were parts of normal life, 'Slaves, be obedient to your masters,' or 'Soldiers, be content with your wages,' and declare that he was transmitting the commands of God, those commands cannot necessarily be seen as endorsements of slavery and soldiering. The prophet may be presupposing the existence of the institution and simply telling individuals caught up in them how to behave. What these commands clearly rule out is disobedient slaves and soldiers mutinying for money at the time and in the circumstances of the command being issued.[69]

Now, there are a variety of things that we would expect God to reveal to us—particularly those things that we do not have adequate evidence to know about or, in the presence of such evidence, we have not put the evidence together to reach the important conclusion. So in addition to knowledge of God's nature, moral truths, God's incarnation, and God's proclamation that a church should preserve and interpret the revelation, God's revelations "may concern matters about which (before receiving the revelation) we do not realize that it is important that we should have true beliefs."[70] These ideas about which we should have true beliefs are ideas on important matters that deeply concern us; this, Swinburne writes, is the first part of the test of original content.

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[69] Ibid., 109.
[70] Ibid.

The second part of the test of original content is whether the content of the purported revelation is true, "and any independent reason we have for believing that some of the content of a candidate revelation is true is reason to suppose that the revelation is genuine."[71] Further, if we have an independent reason to think that some of the content of the revelation is false, then this counts against the idea that the candidate revelation is genuine. Swinburne uses the example of a purported revelation that contradicts our clear moral intuitions of necessary moral truths; if a prophet claimed to have received a revelation from God in which God said that the general activities of murder or rape were good, then this would be a good reason for supposing that the purported revelation was not genuine. Now, it may be that after God has revealed some truth that we see how we could come to that truth by reason independent of the revelation. Swinburne offers the example of philosophical arguments used to support the idea that God consists of multiple persons. These philosophical arguments come subsequent to a purported revelation that claims that God consists of a trinity of persons. Thus, even if we do not, at the time of the purported revelation, have the evidence to either support or falsify a candidate revelation, we might come to support or falsify the revelation by reason later on.

Swinburne thinks we can argue that a revelation is probably true or probably false by either a posteriori means or a priori means. For example, Swinburne argued previously that we have good reasons to suppose that God would become incarnate, identify with our suffering, and offer atonement for our failings. A posteriori (empirical) evidence that would count against this sort of revelation (that some particular person in history is that incarnation of God) would offer reasons to suppose that this person in history was guilty of some evidently immoral conduct.

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[71] Ibid., 110.

This would count against the purported revelation that this person was God incarnate since God incarnate, for Swinburne, would have to be uniquely moral. Similarly, any other relevant historical evidence that forms part of the claims of the purported revelation could affect the probability of the claim that the revelation is genuine. However, there are also claims that are part of a candidate revelation that we could not hope to falsify or support from evidence (e.g. non-necessary moral claims, certain ideas on the divine nature, and such). Thus, when weighing the content of a purported revelation, "all that can reasonably be required of the test of the content is that the content of a candidate revelation should not be very improbable on the grounds independent of the revelation."[72]

The Test of a Miracle

The first test, for Swinburne, is not, itself, sufficient to show that a purported revelation is genuine; rather, we need an additional test that assesses whether the purported revelation has God's signature—something only God can provide. For Swinburne, "a signature in a wide sense is an act which can be performed readily only by the person whose signature it is (or by someone else with his permission) and which is recognized as a mark of endorsement in the culture in which it was made."[73] Now, since God alone, according to Swinburne, sustains the laws of nature and can violate them at will, a violation (or a quasi-violation) of the laws of nature could function as a signature for God. This sort of violation (or quasi-violation) of the laws of nature, Swinburne writes, should be referred to as a miracle.

In order to clarify the idea of a law of nature, Swinburne writes that "'laws of nature' are simply statements which record in brief form these powers and liabilities

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[72] Ibid., 111.
[73] Ibid., 112.

of physical objects."[74] Now, a power of a physical object is its potential to act; for example, water has the power to turn into steam. In contrast, a liability of a physical object is its physical necessity (or physical probability) to act; Swinburne writes that this would be water's physical probability to turn into steam at 100° C. Thus, we have two sorts of liability: physical necessity from deterministic laws, or physical probability from probabilistic laws.

Further, Swinburne writes that there are fundamental natural laws that determine other, less fundamental laws of nature. A law is fundamental, in Swinburne's view, just in case it is not explained by more fundamental laws. Now, if the fundamental laws of nature provide a complete explanation of all natural events and if there is no explanation for the fundamental natural laws, then there can be no violation of the fundamental natural laws. Thus, in order for a fundamental natural law to be violated, it would be necessary for some being (such as God) to determine whether a natural law operates or not. Consequently, in order to determine whether a law of nature has been violated, Swinburne writes:

> The evidence that some event E is a violation is that its occurrence is incompatible with what are probably (on the evidence we have) the fundamental laws of nature. The evidence that a purported law is a true law comes from its explanatory power (its power to explain the data) and its prior probability.[75]

Swinburne illustrates his reasoning by considering the following example: suppose that, after observing the motion of many planets, scientists propose a law, "All planets move in ellipses."[76] Now, suppose that Mars happens to move out of its regular elliptical path for a brief period of time before returning. This event can be explained in two ways: either the event happened as a result of a more fundamental

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[74] Ibid., 113.
[75] Ibid., 114.
[76] Ibid.

law that caused the movement of the planet or else the law of nature was violated. If

it is the former, then there would be some condition in the universe that caused

Mars to leave its elliptical path and, were this condition to repeat, Mars would again

leave its path. Thus, the law "all planets move in ellipses" would not be a

fundamental law of nature; rather, it would be a consequence of a more fundamental

law of nature. Alternatively, if the event is not explained by a more fundamental law

of nature, then this would be "a non-repeatable exception to a law of nature."[77] Now,

in order to determine whether the event is a genuine exception to a fundamental law

of nature, Swinburne writes the following:

> We would have grounds for believing that the exception is non-repeatable in so far as any attempt to amend or replace the purported law of nature so that it predicted the wander of Mars as well as all the other observed positions of Mars would give us a purported new law so complicated internally and so disconsonant with the rest of scientific knowledge which constitutes our background evidence, that we would have no grounds for trusting its future predictions. [...] What we need if the exception to the original law is to be explained by a more fundamental law is a simple formula consonant with the rest of physics, of which it is a consequence that the exception to the original law occurs when it does.[78]

Swinburne notes that there might be cases that appear to be exceptions in

the laws of nature but that the events in question, independent of our knowledge,

could be explained by natural causes; in response, Swinburne writes that we could

also be wrong about some cases that appear to have natural causes but, in reality, do

not have natural causes. To solve this problem Swinburne thinks that the rational

investigator of these events simply "goes by the evidence available to him at the

time."[79] Even so, there are some events that would appear to be very improbable on

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[77] Ibid., 115.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 116.

the laws of nature, such as the resurrection of a dead man whose heart has stopped beating for 36 hours or turning water into wine without a chemical reaction.

Shifting from the idea of deterministic natural laws, Swinburne considers probabilistic laws of nature (like events in Quantum Theory); in this case, the sort of violation that occurs on a deterministic law will not be used in the same way on a probabilistic law of nature because their probabilities permit unlikely events. For probabilistic laws of nature, Swinburne takes an exception of a law of nature to be a "quasi-violation"[80] wherein the event is very, very improbable.

To sum, violations or quasi-violations of natural laws are "changes in the fundamental powers and liabilities of physical objects not caused by other physical objects in virtue of their powers and liabilities."[81] Consequently, they cannot be explained scientifically, so, in Swinburne's view, we should look for a personal explanation of the event. Swinburne argues that in the absence of evidence of some sort of lesser spirit (whose power does not depend on God) affecting the laws of nature, "the most probable explanation of any violation or quasi-violation is that it was brought about by or with the permission of God."[82] Further reason to suppose that God would have brought the event about, according to Swinburne, would come by showing that the event was one that God would have some reason to cause. Finally, "any violation or quasi-violation of a law of nature is probably a miracle."[83]

In response to potential objections, Swinburne considers the view of Hume who thought that the purported event of a violation of a law of nature is, itself, evidence against the event. "This is because the past phenomena which make it

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 117.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

probable that L is a law of nature make it probable that it holds almost universally

and so that on the occasion in question, things conformed to L."[84] Swinburne offers

two main responses: in the first case, he thinks that there are other sorts of evidence

that some event in the past occurred, of which he gives four kinds:

1. Each person has her own memory of the event.
2. Other people have testimony of what they remember, and the more people who seem to remember an event, in general, the more likely it is that the event actually occurred.
3. There are physical traces of past events that help us to retrodict what happened.
4. The background evidence of events that happened at other places and times may offer evidence for or against the idea that the original event in question occurred. (Swinburne notes that this sort of evidence is, of course, dependent on the first two sorts of testimony.)

In the second case of Swinburne's defense, he argues against Hume's idea

"that background evidence showing what are the laws of nature would always

constitute strong evidence against the truth of any reports based on testimony that

some event had occurred"[85] that violated a law of nature. Swinburne's reasoning is

as follows: first, there is no reason that the background evidence of a law of nature

always outweighs detailed historical evidence. Second, "Hume's main mistake was to

assume that in cases of a violation of laws of nature, our evidence about what are

the laws of nature is our main relevant background evidence. [...] Yet all background

evidence about whether there is or is not a God is also crucially relevant."[86] This is

because if God exists, then God has the power to set aside the laws of nature at will.

Now, Swinburne concedes, if miracles were the only evidence of God's existence,

then Hume's critique would be more potent, but since there are other, independent

reasons for supposing that God exists in Swinburne's view, there are reasons from

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[84] Ibid., 118.
[85] Ibid., 119.
[86] Ibid., 119-120.

the background evidence to suppose that a violation of a law of nature could occur. Further, Swinburne writes, the evidence suggesting that God violated a law of nature would be stronger if "we can show that a God has reason on the particular occasion for doing what he does not normally do."[87]

Thus, as a test for a genuine revelation, the evidence of a violation of a law of nature in connection with some purported revelation is also evidence that the purported revelation is from God; in Swinburne's view, the stronger the evidence of a violation of nature, the more probable it is that a revelation connected to that violation is genuine.

The Tests of Church Fidelity and Developed Content

Part i: An Interpreting Church

In order for the revelation given by God to be interpreted in the light of new cultures and contexts, Swinburne thinks that it would be important for there to be a church to preserve the content of the revelation and interpret it in these other contexts. Now this church, for Swinburne, "would need to be constituted in a way determined by the original revelation, and in virtue of that constitution have authority to reach conclusions about which interpretations are correct."[88] The need for this sort of interpretation and preservation of the content of the revelation is apparent, Swinburne says, from the recent centuries of religious disagreement over religious texts. These disagreements range from varying interpretations of the literal or non-literal account of the creation of the world to contemporary moral issues in religion like that of homosexuality, divorce, and other sexual matters. "Without a procedure for authenticating an interpretation of what religious books

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 121.

have to say about these issues, there will be no content to there being any revelation of such detailed moral truths."[89] This means that the third test of a candidate revelation, for Swinburne, will be "whether the original revelation includes a revelation of how an interpreting church is to be constituted"[90] as well as if the interpretations of that church are plausible interpretations of the candidate revelation itself.

In order for theologians of a church to interpret the contents of a candidate revelation, they must appeal to similar techniques like those used by historians who interpret ancient political or philosophical positions. For example, Swinburne notes that an ancient politician may have argued for some law on the basis that the law in question would produce economic growth for the poor, and a contemporary historian may write that this ancient politician was a Utilitarian since the politician seemed to believe that laws should help alleviate the greatest suffering for the greatest amount of people and produce the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. Provided that "the historian comes from a different background from that of the politician, he will try to express those principles by means of his own categories."[91] Thus, the theologian, Swinburne writes, will also try to formulate the ideas implicit in an ancient revelation in terms of the categories of his own culture. Similarly, Swinburne notes that Kant did not express his views on embryo research or genetic therapy, but "a Kantian scholar may find a way of expressing Kant's moral principles which, perhaps together with some metaphysical principle about

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[89] Ibid., 122.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 123.

the nature of humans which Kant would have accepted, will yield a plausible answer."[92]

In Swinburne's view, the test of an interpretation of a thinker's ideas is whether the general principles that the historian interprets from the thinker's ideas "are simple ones which entail almost all the sentences purported written (or uttered) by the thinker (understood in some literal way)."[93] Now, there may be a few sentences that are purported to have come from the ancient thinker that are inconsistent with what the historian takes to be the thinker's position, and Swinburne thinks that the historian can use one of three ways to deal with these sentences[94]:

(1)   The sentences inconsistent with the historian's interpretation should be interpreted in a non-literal way.
(2)   The thinker did not, in fact, offer the view that is inconsistent with the historian's interpretation but that is attributed to him.
(3)   The historian's interpretation of the thinker's ideas fit so well with much of the thinker's ideas elsewhere that the thinker, were he present with the historian, would come to deny the sentences in question that contradict the historian's interpretation.

In order to resolve a dispute about which strategy should be taken by a historian when interpreting a thinker's views, "it would be right to trust an interpretation by someone who had known the thinker personally," and even if this person did not remember exactly what the thinker said on this topic, "he would have unconsciously absorbed the thinker's kind of thinking and could help us to choose the correct one among possible interpretations of a sentence."[95] Though Swinburne does not elaborate on this idea here, it might be good to add the qualifications that the person

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 124.

who knew the speaker was familiar with their ideas and, as far as we can discern, is not inclined to pervert those ideas.

Finally, since Swinburne thinks that it is crucial that God would provide some sort of interpreting church, evidence against an interpreting church of a candidate revelation, as a logical consequence, would be evidence against the candidate revelation itself. Now, what would count as evidence against a church as an interpreter of a candidate revelation (and the candidate revelation itself), Swinburne writes, would be "wildly implausible interpretations"[96] of the candidate revelation by the church. This would count as "evidence against the revelation itself, part of which is that the church is authorized to produce correct interpretations."[97]

Part ii: Interpretations Consistent with God's Nature

The fourth and final test for a candidate revelation that Swinburne offers "is whether the interpretations of it produced by the church provide the sort of teaching which God would have chosen to give to humans."[98] Swinburne thinks that the sort of revelation that we would expect from God would be composed of ideas on important topics for humans and that these ideas should not be very, very improbable on other grounds. Now, if the content of a revelation were not itself very, very improbable on grounds independent of the revelation, then the interpretation of the revelation (if it is very likely to be a correct interpretation of the revelation) should not be very, very improbable either.

Interpretation of the revelation that is not improbable on other grounds, Swinburne writes, could be reinforced by some sort of miracle. However, Swinburne thinks that "such an authentication of revelation would [...] defeat the purpose of a

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 125.

revelation" because "the point of a revelation is to provide honest and diligent inquirers with some information, quite likely to be true, about the way to salvation, on which those who seek salvation for themselves can rely."[99] If there were too much evidence of a revelation, then salvation, in Swinburne's view, would become too easy for those "who do not have a settled will to pursue it above all other goals."[100] For Swinburne, salvation is too important to give to those who do not pursue it above every other goal. Consequently, some evidence, such as a miracle, for a candidate revelation is necessary; however, overwhelming evidence in the form of successive miracles would, for Swinburne, defeat the point of the revelation.

Swinburne's Conclusion

Swinburne writes that if there is a purported revelation that passes all four of the tests that he offers and if there is good evidence that there is a God, then the purported revelation is likely true.[101] In addition, Swinburne thinks that there is a converse relationship between the likelihood of a purported revelation being true and evidence for God's existence. That is, the teaching of a historical prophet that is supported by significant evidence in favor of a violation (or quasi-violation) of a law of nature is evidence that God exists. Swinburne uses the following analogy:

> If the police have evidence making it to some degree probable that there is a terrorist loose in the community, and so that there will be an explosion, then the occurrence of an explosion is additional evidence that there is a terrorist loose.[102]

Finally, Swinburne notes that evidence in favor of a purported revelation will be evidence against any incompatible purported revelation; thus, evidence in favor of

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 126.
[102] Ibid.

one religion with essential claims that are incompatible with other religions is evidence against those other religions.

Now, if we suppose that God exists, as Swinburne has argued elsewhere, and that we have good reasons to expect a revelation from God, then we have good reasons to suspect that there is a revelation from God out in the world. Consequently, it would seem to follow from Swinburne's reasoning that evidence against a purported revelation could be counted as evidence in favor of the alternative purported revelations that are not vastly improbable on other grounds. For example, if we suppose that a murder has been committed and we have good reason to suppose that the murder is one of three suspects (suspect A, suspect B, or suspect C), then evidence against the idea that A committed the murder is, itself, evidence of the exclusive disjunct that either B or C committed the murder. By similar reasoning, evidence that counts against a specific religion being true counts as evidence in favor of the exclusive disjunct of its competitor religions being true (so long as they are not improbable on other grounds).

Section II: Alleviating the Burden of the Investigator

Prima Facie Methods of Evaluation

From Swinburne's four tests, it seems clear that there are methods by which a sincere investigator may approach the theistic religions of the world in an attempt to find out which one(s), if any, contains a genuine revelation from God. However, I think that there are additional methods for investigating a candidate revelation that would supplement Swinburne's tests, and these methods are ways to alleviate the great demand imposed on the investigator by Swinburne's tests. This is because— assuming that Swinburne is correct with respect to his method of evaluating candidate revelations—the sincere investigator of God's revelation would have the

burden of assessing which religion is most probably from God. However, in order to make this assessment, the investigator would have to have access to every religion in the world, as well as the resources to investigate these religions just in case the evidence for one religion can be better explained by the evidence for another religion. For example, if one supposes that Christianity is true in virtue of it passing Swinburne's tests, it could be that some other religion also passes the same tests. However, this other religion may, as part of its purported revelation, offer some explanation for there being evidence for Christianity (e.g. it might posit that something such as demons, with the permission of God, had the power to cause the purported miracles in favor of Christianity), and it may have a history of even more fantastic miracles in favor of it than that purported for Christianity. Thus, in light of these possibilities, the sincere investigator would seem to be burdened with an enormous task of researching each and every religion just in case some religion could explain the probability in favor of another religion with better evidence and claims. However, Swinburne tries to counter this elsewhere:

> But I suggest that, for most of us, there is not nearly so much point in investigating the credal claims of religions which have not spread throughout the globe and which are not pushed upon us, as in investigating the major religions. The failure of the former to spread among those who do not come into contact with them is some evidence that they are not worth more serious attention.[103]

From this quote, it's clear that Swinburne thinks that the sincere investigator is not too overburdened to research every single religion in existence. In conformity with this sort of reasoning, it would seem that if a religion is having trouble spreading, then it is likely that such a religion does not possess compelling evidence for those who come into contact with it to adopt it. However, I take it this is not *strong*

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[103] Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 262.

evidence against one's obligation to investigate some of the lesser-known religions of the world; further, it is not clear exactly how much a religion should spread, in Swinburne's view, before it should be given serious attention. Provided these limitations, I am not in disagreement with Swinburne here, but I will offer my own arguments on this problem within the next few pages after I establish the context for my reasoning.

Given the Introduction at the beginning of this thesis, I wrote that if God offers a standard of salvation by which human persons might be saved, it would be necessary for this standard of salvation to be a reasonable standard of salvation. Further, I wrote that the criteria by which God would judge one's salvation should involve some voluntary act on part of the agent. Thus, if we really suppose that our salvation is at stake and that the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability* really is a problem, then we would expect of the genuine divine revelation that it would claim that we ought to perform particular actions or that we ought to refrain from particular actions (or both), and these actions (whether we know it or not) ought to affect the probability of our salvation.

Now, the claim that purported revelations can be evaluated by Swinburne's tests is problematic in the respect that there are many, many religions (or even many sects within religions) that prescribe contrary actions, and these actions may affect the probability of one's salvation. Thus, the initial problem of applying the tests of a revelation is where to begin or—if we have begun the evaluation but are stuck in the process—how to proceed. In order to lessen the burden of the investigator, we might consider what would be the *preferable* sort of religion that God would have established for human persons to follow in order to increase their odds at salvation. We might say that a religion is preferable insofar as it, *prima*

facie, stands out for the better—and so is more likely established by God—among the other candidate religions without us having to dive too deeply into the doctrines of the religion. In parallel reasoning, when a detective is investigating particular murder suspects she might suppose that certain suspects are, *prima facie*, more preferable suspects to investigate than others. For example, a murder that clearly required strenuous physical labor would make suspects with a greater potential for strenuous physical labor more preferable as primary suspects—even if it were possible for other, weaker suspects to have committed the murder as well. A sickly or weak person would, *prima facie*, not be a good suspect for the investigation unless some evidence were discovered (e.g. an adrenaline shot) that would satisfy an exception of the *prima facie* reasoning against him.

In order to lessen the burden on the sincere investigator for our purposes here, we might expect for God (who desires the salvation of the investigator) to offer more apparent marks by which the probability of a religion is, *prima facie*, higher— prior to utilizing Swinburne's tests. Now, the more obvious ways by which a religion would seem to stand out for the better would be the following: (a) the religion is easily accessible to a majority of human persons; (b) it contains enlightening moral truths that a moral exemplar (like God) would communicate; (c) it persists through time; (d) it encourages the practice of proselytism; (e) it expresses that God has a positive disposition toward us; and (f) it offers motivation for performing the actions that affect the probability of one's salvation.

With respect to the first way in which a religion might stand out, that (a) it is easily accessible to a majority of human persons, we might reason that the accessibility of a religion depends on the capacity of its essential features to be understood by a wide variety of persons of varying degrees in intelligence and social

status. Further, the religion is more accessible if it does not require of its (prospective) followers that they perform specific rituals that are very difficult for certain classes of persons to do (e.g. make a pilgrimage to a faraway place, own certain things, speak certain languages, perform certain physically challenging tasks), and it is more accessible to the degree that the essence of its claims that affects one's salvation can be simplified to a few types of simple actions or a few easily remembered beliefs. The religion is accessible to the intelligentsia to the degree that it can withstand rigorous, intellectual critique, and the religion is accessible to the impoverished when it does not require too much from them. For the reason that an accessible religion would be more apt at increasing the odds of salvation for more people if it were true, it is, *prima facie*, a better religion (and so it appears to be more likely from God). Thus, we might seek to evaluate the most accessible religions first since it is more likely that a good God would make available revealed truths that concern salvation for a vast population of persons.

With respect to the second way, that (b) it contains enlightening moral truths that a moral exemplar (like God) would communicate, we would look for those religions that offer the most profound moral teaching that, independent of the religion, we might not know. These moral teachings would be truths that we would not come to know on our own, but we could discern that they are true apart from the purported revelation. Consequently, we would expect profound moral and spiritual advice from the content of the purported revelation, as well as from the followers of the religion who have taken up the pattern of thought expressed in the purported revelation. The religion should therefore offer certain moral exemplars who have lived according to the moral advice given by the religion, and it would be better for

these moral exemplars to demonstrate that the actions prescribed by the religion are capable of being followed by a variety of persons in a variety of circumstances.

With respect to the third way, that (c) it persists through time, we would look for a religion that has not died out. If God's revelation, as expressed through a religion, is pertinent to the salvation of human persons, then we would expect for God to help preserve the existence of the religion. Further, if, for some reason, attempts were made to extinguish the religion or the religion was being taken over by a new religion, then we would expect God to intervene in some way (by means of a miracle or by more subtle, psychological means) in order to preserve the existence of the important revelation. Thus, the age of the religion will increase the preferability of the religion, and this is because the older that the religion is, the more opportunity it has had to go extinct—and so the more it has withstood the tests of time, of rival religions, of advancements in science, and of possible attempts to eradicate it.

With respect to the fourth way, that (d) it encourages the practice of proselytism, we would expect that the more God desires the salvation of many human persons, the more likely the content of the special revelation will encourage the practice of proselytism in order to increase the amount of human persons being saved. Of course, the proselytism prescribed by the religion must be non-coercive since coercion would compromise the *PAS* being satisfied *voluntarily* (or standard three of the reasonable standard of salvation offered in Chapter I). Thus, religions that practice proselytism as a result of the purported revelation are more preferable than religions that have less encouragement or no encouragement to practice proselytism from their purported revelations.

71

With respect to the fifth way, that (e) it expresses that God has a positive disposition toward us, we would expect that if God is going to offer us salvation, then it is clear that God desires our salvation. Now, since one does not seek to save what is not valuable (unless one is slothful or stubborn—which are imperfections that we would not likely find in God), it would follow that God finds human persons to be valuable if God is going to try to save us. Thus, we would expect that for any purported revelation it would, *prima facie*, more likely come from God if it expressed that God had some positive disposition toward us, and it would more likely not come from God if it expressed that God had a negative disposition toward us (exceptions would include temporary, negative dispositions for wrongdoing or foolishness). Further, if God sustains us in our existence, then there is, *prima facie*, better reasons for supposing that God values that which God sustains in existence than not (e.g. one does not sustain an evil in existence unless it is necessary for some greater good, and we have no reason to suppose that humanity is merely a necessary evil). Of course, it might be possible for a being like God to save what is not valuable to God, but it certainly would not be reasonable for God to do so. Thus, if God were to extend some sort of salvation to human persons, then we would expect from any candidate revelation purporting to be from God that it express that God has a positive disposition toward human persons—even those who are not yet saved (since they are also sustained in existence by God).

With respect to the sixth way, that (f) it offers motivation for performing (or refraining from) the action(s) that affects the probability of one's salvation, we would expect that if God desires the salvation of human persons that it would be likely that God would command, as part of the content of the revelation, not only actions that human persons should (not) do but also offer motivation (not) to perform those

actions. Of course, it would not be necessary for God to offer a motivation for performing the action(s) that affects the probability of one's salvation. For example, I wrote in the first chapter of this thesis that it would merely be necessary either that one should know that they ought to perform the action(s) or that they should be able to come to know that they ought to perform the action(s) (and that they should know that they ought to mount an investigation into these sorts of actions). However, we would expect that if God desires the salvation of human persons that God would offer incentives for performing (or refraining from) the relevant actions, and these incentives could be anything from warnings of some sort of punishment to offers of some sort of reward. If God did not provide incentives for human persons to perform (or refrain from) the action(s) that affects one's salvation, then it would be possible for most, or all, of the adherents of a religion to fail to be saved. For example, provided, first, that Christians were to take Jesus' command literally that one should gouge out his eye if it causes him to sin, second, that most Christians sin by their eyes (e.g. lust, envy), third, that most Christians do not gouge out their eyes, and fourth, that Christianity ends up being a religion with a genuine revelation from God that offers a means of salvation, then it could be that relatively few Christians (i.e. blind Christians, Christians that miraculously do not sin through their eyes, or Christians that gouge out their eyes) are saved. Consequently, in virtue of the facts that Jesus did not provide reasons to take him literally or more motivation for one to gouge out their eyes (e.g. by repeating this command, elaborating on the importance of gouging out one's eye, or by offering some reward for those who gouge out their eyes), we suppose that Jesus, if Jesus really were offering salvation and intended for his followers to be saved, did not expect his followers to really gouge out their eyes. Thus, we would expect that if God desired the salvation of human persons who came

73

to accept God's revelation that there would likely be some additional motivation present in the revelation that insisted that people should perform (or refrain from) certain action(s).

Now, when we come to evaluate a few religions that are relatively close in their preferability and are highly preferable, what I take to be the obvious next step is to both highlight and evaluate the greatest differences between the purported revelations of these religions. If all of the differences are minor, then it is likely either that all of these religions have low, equal probabilities or that they are equally true with respect to the things that matter. If we suspect that it is the former, it would be good to evaluate those religions with Swinburne's tests in the order that they are preferable. If it is the latter case, then God has likely offered some form of revelation within each religion and preserved the content of the revelation to such a degree that the differences between these religions do not significantly affect the probability of salvation between the members of the different religions. However, if the differences are major, then it would be good for the sincere investigator to focus on these differences and evaluate them, as much as she can, from an *a priori* perspective (so as to save her from the huge burden of empirical research regarding the historical claims of equally preferable religions) at the outset. For example, religion R_1 may prescribe that human persons ought to assent to belief B_1, but religion R_2 may prescribe that human persons ought to assent to belief B_2. If B_1 is incompatible with B_2 then we have a contest between the religions, and the sincere investigator, on the basis of the differences between these two religions, may evaluate these differences, *a priori*, for both the likelihood of the differing prescriptions to affect the probability of one's salvation and the ethical implications of the differences. For example, we might consider the case where some Orthodox

Christians separate the men and the women during their religious services such that men sit on one side of the chapel while women sit on the other side of the chapel. Now, if a competitor religion prescribes a different sort of practice—either that the women and men should switch sides or that they should not sit separately in the chapel—we will have a difference between these religions. In this case, the prescriptions of the religions are incompatible with each other, but given that the criteria for a reasonable standard of salvation includes that the criteria for salvation should affect one's relation to God and that it is not clear how the practice of separating women and men in church or combining them affects one's relation to God *a priori*, the prescriptions seem to be unimportant in the context of salvation. Thus, if separating the women and the men during a religious ceremony is one of the differences between two religions that have major differences, this difference is likely irrelevant for salvation. Now, what would be relevant would be the ethical differences of the religions; this is because if God is wholly good, then the state of our moral characters and the ethical implications of our actions likely affect our relation to God. Thus, if one religion claimed that it was morally permissible for an adult to marry prepubescent children when another religion claimed the contrary, this sort of difference would likely be relevant for salvation. Further, in the *a priori* we might judge that the religion which endorsed the marriage of a prepubescent child with an adult would be less preferable than its competitor. Thus, it would, *prima facie*, be less likely from God.

Solving Relatively Equal Probability

Given the above tests for the preferability of a religion that attempts to alleviate the burden of investigation for the investigator, it might be possible for the most probable religions to result in equal probability either on Swinburne's tests or

the preferability tests. The reason why religions might come out equal on Swinburne's tests would be that the evidence in favor of miracles for multiple religions comes out equal due to problems with historical evidence. If it just so happens (however improbable this event may be) that certain religions come out equally probable on Swinburne's tests, then I think that the preferability test could be utilized to settle for a higher *prima facie* probability between the religions.

CHAPTER V

THE APPLICATION OF ETHICAL EVALUATIONS

As Swinburne noted, we would expect that for any revelation issued by God that this revelation would be consistent with God's good character. However, Swinburne seems to presuppose a particular sort of ethical theory for his purposes of the evaluation; for example, he seemed to think that because of God's command, Abraham would have been justified in killing Isaac since God is the author of life and it is God's right to give and take life as God desires. However, some other philosophers, like Kant, would likely hold that Abraham would not have been justified in killing Isaac—as we will see in the deontology section of this chapter. Thus, Swinburne seems to be evaluating religious claims in light of particular ethical theories that are, themselves, controversial. In anticipation of this sort of critique of Swinburne, I do not think that an evaluation of candidate revelations would weaken if Swinburne's sort of ethical theory comes under attack.

Instead, I think that no matter the realist, objective ethical theory (except for Divine Command Theory), there will likely be particular actions that are consistent

with those ethical theories. Thus, an evaluation of candidate revelations, in terms of the ethics of the candidate revelation, will somewhat depend on the presupposed acceptance of a particular ethical theory of the investigator. For example, if the investigator is a Utilitarian, then the fact that the candidate revelation portrays God as having commanded or acted in a way inconsistent with Utilitarian ethics will count as evidence against the purported revelation. Or, if the investigator is a Deontologist, then the investigator will evaluate the candidate revelation in the context of a particular form of Deontology. Thus, the likelihood of coming to a consensus on the ethics of the content of a revelation could prove problematic. Even so, if there is good, independent evidence that a candidate revelation is from God (perhaps there was some evident miracle) when this candidate revelation appears to be inconsistent with the ethical position of the investigator, then the revelation itself should either count against the ethical theory of the investigator or else against the idea that God is wholly good. Of course, rejecting the idea that God is wholly good has serious implications (particularly if we know that God exists and has communicated a revelation to us). But if we have good reasons to suppose that God is wholly good, in virtue of natural theology, and that God is wiser and more knowledgeable than us with respect to ethics, then it would seem that strong evidence in favor of a candidate revelation, inconsistent with the investigator's ethical position, is itself strong evidence against the ethical position of the investigator. Thus, ethical evaluations of a candidate revelation would be strong up to the point of miracles; the presence of miracles, however, offers good reason for us to rethink our ethical positions if they conflict with the revelation.

In order to see what an evaluation of a religion would look like, it would be good to proceed by evaluating a candidate revelation from the perspective of certain

ethical theories. We might come to evaluate *PASs* by expecting particular things of those *PASs* consistent with some of the statements in our *Problem Set** in Chapter III. For example, if we suppose that statement (1) of *PS** holds (that God exists and is good), then we would expect that any purported divine revelation should be consistent with the character of a good God. Now, since the meaning of "good" will be different for different ethical theories, I aim to offer an example of how such an evaluation could work on two major ethical theories: consequentialism and Kant's deontology.

Section I: Consequentialism

For the purpose of our evaluation of a purported divine communication on consequentialist ethics, let us suppose, for the moment, that all of *PS** holds; except, let us suspend our belief about the veracity of (4)*[104]. In order to see if (4)* holds, let us take some *PAS* in the world. Of course, this *PAS* is either true or it isn't. Now, since we are supposing that some consequentialist ethical theory holds, this permits us to conclude that lying is morally wrong or morally good contingent upon the good and bad consequences of the lie. Thus, lying would be good if it brought about a *better state of affairs* and bad if it brought about a *lesser state of affairs*. Given the implications of the moral status of lying on this sort of theory, we may conclude from this theory of ethics that it is possible for God both to be wholly good and to issue some lie in order to obtain a *better state of affairs*—if the goodness obtained through lying could not be obtained without the lie and the goodness of the lie outweighed the badness of the lie.

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[104] As a reminder, (4)* states, "Among the top contender religions, there is none which is more probable than all of the others."

Given that we are using consequentialist ethics for this evaluation, there is a unique problem that I would like to note before proceeding. Throughout this thesis, I have summarized Swinburne's positions and offered my own views on how to find the most reasonable choice for religious belief. On consequentialist ethics, it is not clear that God would attempt to offer a genuine *PAS* within a rational religious system. Instead, God might purposefully deceive or compel human persons through some form of dishonest persuasion to satisfy the set of prescribed actions within the genuine *PAS*. However, this form of persuasion should not cause or force human persons to satisfy the *PAS* against their will, and this is because forcing someone to act against their will is incompatible with an action being voluntary—a violation of the third standard of salvation outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. So I will proceed with the idea that, on consequentialist ethics, God would not be seeking to offer a rational religion with true claims about the world so much as a religion that persuades its adherents or any prospective adherents to satisfy the true *PAS*. Thus, on consequentialist ethics, we should look to find the most persuasive religion—not the most rational religion.

An evaluation of the persuasiveness of an idea is controversial since the degree of persuasiveness depends largely upon the needs, desires, and background (e.g. culture, history, biases, intelligence) of the intended audience. Thus, I will not be able to suggest that religion X possesses persuasiveness to a certain degree greater than religion Y for a *specific* audience with mixed desires, needs, and background; instead, I will be forced to evaluate religious claims by appealing to a very common practice of persuasion for a very *general* sort of audience with a mixed background: the attempt of a lawyer to persuade a jury. This sort of persuasion would likely make use of all sorts of fallacies that philosophers would scoff at, but if

God desires the salvation of all human persons and if some form of consequentialist ethics hold, then the use of fallacies to persuade human persons to salvation might just be the morally good thing to do. Thus, we would expect that this religion would make use of various appeals to the basic *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos* of persuasion— even if this form of persuasion comes across as dishonest to the philosopher.

As we proceed with the idea that God might act as a sort of divine lawyer in the attempt to persuade the jury to God's side—to satisfy the *PAS*—I think that we can reasonably expect certain things of this divine lawyer. For example, the divine lawyer would seek to make a case that, while not entirely rational, does not appear to be *too* irrational to the jury. Further, God would likely do things to strike at the emotional heart of human persons by appealing to their desires for happiness, justice, beauty, goodness, and other things to make them *want* to be persuaded to God's side. Finally, God must portray God (and anyone that God handpicks to persuade on God's behalf) as having the best of intentions and without any sort of duplicity of character or significant reasons to doubt their honesty.

Now, as we proceed, there are obviously some things that a divine lawyer, or any good lawyer, would *not* do. For example, God would *not* use an apparent incredible source as the *principle means* of communicating a true *PAS*. This is because the incredibility of a source gives us good reason to doubt that the information conveyed by that source is true—just as the apparent incredibility of a witness in a court of law gives the jurors good reason to doubt that the witness's testimony is true. Thus, with respect to the *principle* source, the apparent incredibility of a *principle* witness threatens the persuasiveness—and cogency—of a whole case in a court of law. As a consequence, if God were trying to persuade us of a particular *PAS*, then either God would not use an incredible source as the principle

means of disseminating the true *PAS* or else God would ensure that the incredibility of the source would remain hidden from the knowledge of the jurors—that it was not *apparent*.

Now, let us suppose that the principle source of the *PAS* is some "prophet." Given the assumptions and the argument above we could develop some sort of speculative argument regarding the credibility of such a prophet. The basic argument, that I will refer to as the *Speculative Argument of Credible Witnesses* (or *SW*), would go something like the following:

1. Provided a good God, we would expect of this being that if he or she revealed some true *PAS* by special revelation, then this God would choose a sufficiently credible means of communicating this important revelation.
2. If 1, this God would not choose to communicate his or her revelation through an apparently *incredible witness*[105] to that revelation.
3. Therefore, this God would not communicate by means of an apparently *incredible witness*.

Now, let us take this argument and apply it to some candidate revelation in the world: Mormonism. An example of our application would be the following: Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of Mormonism, claimed to have translated some Egyptian papyri into a religious text called the *Book of Abraham*. However, now that scholars have examined and properly translated the remaining papyri that Smith used, Ritner and others have argued that the papyri actually contain Egyptian contents unrelated to Smith's purported translation, the *Book of Abraham*. The contents of the Egyptian papyri were that of Egyptian funerary materials, and "Smith's

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[105] An *incredible witness* of revelation would be (i) anyone who could not offer a persuasive case for those persons around him or her to believe him or her regarding the revelation (e.g. perhaps either a lack of miracles or else a personal history of delusions or excessive lying), or (ii) anyone who offered significant claims about the physical world as part of the revelation that both have been found out to be false and are not implied by the scientific or historical presuppositions of the culture (Swinburne's culture-relative revelation).

'translation' does not correspond to the actual words on the papyri."[106] While Mormon defenses have claimed that Smith had translated portions of the papyri that are lost, a parallel document "shows that the content of the missing columns concerns only the afterlife of the deceased and not the narrative found in Smith's 'Book of Abraham'" and that "concluding that a record of Abraham [...] was once attached to the Smith papyri is an assertion not based upon widely accepted Egyptological analysis."[107] Further, claims in the Book of Abraham do not correspond to the regional worship of ancient gods, and attempts by Smith to copy and translate Egyptian hieroglyphs show that "Smith clearly could not read, understand or faithfully reproduce Egyptian hieroglyphic or hieratic texts."[108] Ritner has also argued:

> While recent disputes over this or that feature of Smith's interpretation typically dominate these exchanges, often lost in the greater picture is the simple fact that the Mormon defense of the Book of Abraham has been lost for well over a century. Long past are the days when any speculation could be attributed to the Egyptian language or history; such fantasies are intellectual casualties from Napoleon's Egyptian expedition and the decipherment of hieroglyphs by Champollion. [...] The basic events of Smith's romance do not correspond with either Mesopotamian or Egyptian history, and outside of Mormon confessional institutions, the Book of Abraham is not taught—or usually even noted—in studies of ancient history, religion or society.[109]

Arguing later on, Ritner wrote:

> Egyptologists have been adamant that the Book of Abraham *does* derive from P. Joseph Smith 1, which was its *purported source* according to Smith himself. The fact that Smith's published interpretation of the papyrus is pure fantasy is indication not of a lost papyrus or section, but of the *ultimate source* of Smith's wording—his imagination. Since *there is agreement* that Smith could not translate

[106] Coenen, "The Ownership and Dating of Certain Joseph Smith Papyri," in Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 82.
[107] Ibid., 82-83.
[108] Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 99.
[109] Ibid., 7-8.

accurately the hieroglyphs on Facsimile 3—despite his published claims to the contrary—there is no reason to believe that he could have translated any supposedly lost section of the papyrus with greater accuracy. Here there is no question of a lost, 'extra text,' but a portion of the Breathing Document itself, surviving in Smith's copy and interpreted fallaciously by Smith himself.[110]

Whether it was misidentifying a vignette of Ta-sherit-Min for an image of Eve talking to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, misidentifying the Book of the Dead of Ta-sherit-Min for "the writings of Joseph of Egypt,"[111] or just coming up with his own Egyptian "gibberish,"[112] the case against Smith's ability to translate Egyptian and his translation from Egyptian, if not conclusive, is very strong.

Thus, if Ritner's claims are correct and *SW* above holds, then it would seem that we could rule Joseph Smith Jr. out as the principle source of a true *PAS* even on consequentialist ethics (not to mention even easier ethical theories to work with). This is because Joseph Smith Jr. would be offering significant claims about the physical world as part of his purported revelation that has been shown to be false.[113] Thus, independent of the facts of Smith's religious experiences or the testimony of his followers concerning supernatural events, we would have a defeater for Mormonism bearing any true *PAS* that is unique to Mormonism—pending a full defense of *SW*. We would not need to dispute whether a good God could have been the source of Smith's purported religious experiences since a good God could have deceived Smith on Utilitarian grounds, in order to bring about some *better state of*

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[110] Ibid., 178.
[111] Ibid., 192.
[112] Ibid., 274.
[113] Note that by assuming that the *PAS* in question was issued by God, I am not assuming that Smith, himself, must have been dishonest when he claimed to have received the revelation (even though the most likely conclusion is that Smith was dishonest). Nonetheless, this does not challenge the idea that Smith was an *incredible witness*. What I am assuming is that since this revelation was false, either Smith lied or else God did. However, since we could not know whether it was Smith or God who was lying, Smith would still count as an *incredible witness* in the same way a person subject to illusions—who *honestly* describes his own experiences—is an *incredible witness*. Thus, if we gave Smith the benefit of the doubt, his experience of translating the *Book of Abraham* would, if God lied, be an illusion.

affairs independent of salvation. Thus, this sort of arguing would function as an example for evaluating candidate revelations on a consequentialist ethical theory. Further evidence against Mormonism on a consequentialist ethical theory would consist of showing, if it could be shown, that the content of the purported revelation either promotes or condones actions that produce *lesser states of affairs*.

Section II: Deontology

A method of evaluating purported revelations would be somewhat different on a deontological ethical theory, and this method of evaluation would differ for the different forms of deontology. For example, if we take a system of deontology that consists of absolute duties that cannot, in any circumstance, be violated, then the content of a purported revelation should not be guilty of prescribing actions that clearly violate these absolute moral duties. However, if we take a "softer" deontology that holds that duties only hold *prima facie*, then it might be possible for God, if God issues a revelation, to violate certain *prima facie* moral duties. This sort of evaluation would be trickier to handle, but Swinburne's categories of moral duties where some are necessarily evil (such that God could not command them) and others are only contingently evil (God could command them) might account for these sorts of deontological theories.

Now, in order to see what an ethical evaluation would look like on a particular deontological theory, let us again suppose that all of *PS** holds, except let us suspend our belief about the veracity of (4)*. In order to see if (4)* holds, take some *PAS* in the world. This *PAS* was issued either by a good God or it wasn't. Now, let us suppose that some deontological theory of ethics holds. For our use, we shall use Kant's deontological theory of ethics where there are absolute moral duties.

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Now, according to Pasternack, Kant rejects the idea that commands to violate moral absolute duties can come from God:

> One obvious case is where a putative supernatural event runs contrary to the moral law. Any miracle, for instance, that violates this law cannot be of divine origin (though, Kant acknowledges, it may be a "satanic miracle" [AA 6:86]). Likewise, we ought not accept putative revelations that command immoral actions. Accordingly, Kant claims that Abraham should not have accepted as divine in origin the command to kill Isaac, nor should we regard this passage as an authentic report of a divine communication (cf. AA 6:87, AA 6:187).[114]

That is, Kant held that God would never issue some revelation that either commanded a violation of an absolute moral duty or conveyed a false[115] *PAS*. Now, if Kant is correct in these respects, then divine revelation could be evaluated by both its ethical claims and its empirical claims. For example, if some "prophet" made the claim that God issued the command for us to lie in certain circumstances, then on Kant's deontology we could conclude that this claim is false, that God *did not* issue this command. Thus, if Kant's theory of ethics holds, we would likely use this sort of evaluation as a means of ruling out certain cases of purported divine revelation.

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[114] Pasternack, "Kant's 'Appraisal' of Christianity," 494.
[115] This is due to Kant's categorical condemnation of deception. For example, see Mahon's "Kant and the Perfect Duty to Others Not to Lie."

CHAPTER VI

OTHER PROBLEMS AND MY CONCLUSION

Establishing methods for reducing the probability of (4)* could affect other problems in the philosophy of religion other than just the *Problem of Doctrinal Decidability*. For example, methods for evaluating candidate revelations could help with the *Problem of Divine Silence*, problems with religious experience, and dispositions apt for understanding divine revelations. In order to show how methods for evaluation of purported divine revelations could affect these other problems, I will briefly speculate about the relation between methods for evaluating candidate revelations and these other problems.

The Problem of Divine Silence[116]

I take it that the basic form of a strong version of the *Problem of Divine Silence* would be something like the following:

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[116] This problem is also known as the Problem of Divine Hiddenness. I am calling it *the Problem of Divine Silence* because I think that Rea in "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God" makes a good case for renaming the problem.

Premise 1: If God exists and is wholly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, then God would offer conclusive evidence of his existence in order to: (a) make the invitation of salvation known and (b) extend his felt-presence to human persons in order to both alleviate pain and bring about joy.

Premise 2: God has not offered conclusive evidence of his existence.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is not the case that God exists and is wholly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing.

Swinburne, as I wrote earlier, argued that God would make his revelation somewhat hidden so that only those who seek it above other goals would be able to find it. Of course, this may have problematic implications for those who simply cannot pursue an investigation of the revelation in virtue of either their resources or their intelligence. However, the general idea that the hiddenness of a revelation would be more likely to pick out those who pursue it as a worthy goal over those who would not is reasonable. Thus, Premise 1, in this argument, would likely be rejected outright for good reasons, and a weaker statement would be substituted for it that the methods for evaluating purported divine revelations explored in this thesis could affect. Once the first premise has been properly adjusted, it will probably say something like, "If God exists and is wholly good, all powerful, and all knowing, then God would probably give us good reasons to suppose that God exists." The subsequent premise would then deny that God has given us good reasons to suppose that God exists, and then it would infer from this idea that God, so defined, probably does not exist. This move in the second premise, however, would be incredibly controversial.

I take it that it would be uncontroversial to say that some people think that they have good reasons for assenting to the idea that God, so defined, exists while other people would say that they lack these good reasons to suppose that God exists (or, perhaps, they even have reasons for supposing that God does not exist). Thus, if

God is silent in the world, then God would be silent to a certain degree—some reasonable people think that they either experience God or have good reasons for supposing that God exists and some reasonable people disagree with both of those statements. As a consequence, we might take the *Problem of Divine Silence* to exist in degrees because God's purported silence, if God exists, is in degree. Now, if we think of the *Problem of Divine Silence* as a problem of degrees, then it might be of interest to consider a speculative argument, in the context of methods for evaluating purported divine revelations, that would run something like the following:

Premise 1: If God or God's revelation is known by some reasonable people but not others, then God's silence exists in degrees.

Premise 2: The degree to which God is silent depends on the extent to which the existence of God and God's revelation is improbable on the evidence that we have. However, evidence in favor of God's revelation is evidence in favor of God's existence.

Premise 3: God's revelation is hidden to the extent that its probability is diminished.

Premise 4: The degree to which the probability of God's revelation is diminished depends both on (a) competitor, fake revelations that share the probability of being true with the genuine revelation(s) and (b) the availability of independent evidence in favor of the genuine revelation(s).

Premise 5: Methods for evaluating candidate revelations both lower the probability of fake revelations and increase the probability of the genuine revelation(s), if it exists.

Conclusion: Thus, if methods for evaluating purported revelations are successful at reducing the probability of fake revelations while increasing the probability for a genuine revelation(s), then methods for evaluating purported revelations reduce the degree to which God appears to be silent.

Since this is a speculative argument that I am offering, I will not defend this argument here. However, I think that it is possible for methods for evaluating purported divine revelations to affect the *Problem of Divine Silence*, and this argument above is one way by which solutions in the philosophy of revelation could

interact with this problem. I think that my project in this thesis could aid in future research into the *Problem of Divine Silence.*

Problems with Religious Experience

One strategy of argument against genuine religious experiences takes the following form: if we consider the diversity of religious experience throughout a variety of religions in the world today and in history, then it would seem that this sort of experience, since it generates contrary beliefs that cannot be verified independently of the experience, is not a reliable knowledge-generating process. Methods for evaluating purported revelations would eliminate competing, purported revelations from religious experiences insofar as they generate controversial religious beliefs without evidence of divine backing for those beliefs. However, the content of diverse religious experiences, insofar as they are apprehensions of some form of the divine and insofar as they do not generate unsubstantiated religious beliefs, would not be eliminated by any method of evaluation for purported divine revelations.

It might be worthwhile to explore a speculative argument from religious experience in conjunction with methods for evaluating purported revelations that argues something along the following lines: Claims of religious experience may come into conflict about the doctrinal content of those experiences. However, these claims, independent of the content of the purported experience, do not conflict with respect to the fact that there was religious experience, nor do they conflict regarding the idea that at least one religion is true. Thus, while the content of those experiences can hardly offer evidence in favor of a particular religion, the fact that a vast amount of persons have claimed to receive religious experiences would, *prima facie*, count as testimony of there being something divine to experience and would

probably count toward there being some true religion. For example, we might imagine a case wherein a few thousand people are at a beach resort, gazing across the ocean at midmorning. Now, if most of these people, without collaboration, express that they saw something across the ocean that was distinct from both the ocean and the sky, then (supposing that they are unable approach this thing on/over/under the ocean) they would have good evidence, *prima facie*, for there being something distinct from the ocean and the sky that was witnessed. Now, if we multiply the number of persons who claimed to witness this event into the millions and if we suppose that this event is repeated over time for different groups of millions of people, then we would have, *prima facie*, an even stronger case for there being something distinct from the ocean and the sky to witness. However, if we suppose that there are vast controversies between these persons about the color, shape, size, or movement of the thing across the ocean, we may have good reason to doubt that these descriptions of the thing being witnessed could be reasonably settled from witness testimony, barring two exceptions. These exceptions would be the following: either a group of persons may have a better means of coming to gaze at the object (e.g. better eyesight or a tool that enhances their eyesight) such that they are more likely to accurately describe the thing or determine whether a thing is really there at all, or else there might be prior reasons known by some of the witnesses of the thing to expect the thing to be a particular object with certain properties (e.g. if they heard news from a reliable source that a particular cruise ship was coming to their beach at about the time of the event, they might expect for the thing to be that cruise ship and for it to be a certain size, shape, or color and to move at a particular speed). Now, if there were no means to settle the controversy of the size, shape, color, or movement of the object, this would give us little reason to

suppose that this sort of controversy reduces the probability (by much) of there really being something distinct from the ocean and the sky to witness. Thus, it might be possible to reason in parallel about religious experiences.

Some argument might be developed wherein the commonalities of religious experience are united to offer a vast amount of testimony in support of there being something divine and there being a true religion. Even further, the *content* of certain religious experiences might be evaluated if we have good reasons, prior to the experience, to expect that the experience is really of an object with particular properties (in parallel to that of the cruise ship example above). Thus, if a theist has good reasons to expect that religious experiences are experiences of God or of something related to God, then it might be possible for the theist of a particular, highly probable religion to salvage religious experiences that offer content contrary to the highly probable religion's doctrines. The theist of this religion would likely reason that the religious experience is itself evidence of God, but the controversial content of the experience is likely due to some fault, voluntary or involuntary, on part of the experiencer's spiritual disposition (in parallel to the faulty disposition of the eyesight of the witnesses above). Thus, if there are good reasons, independent of the religious experience itself, to expect that a religious experience should really be of a particular object with particular properties, then the content of a religious experience that offers a contrary account of those properties is, on those other grounds, likely mistaken about those properties but not about the existence of the thing.

My research in this project about methods for evaluating purported divine revelations could aid in future research concerning either the evaluation of the

content of religious experiences or whether the commonalities of religious experiences generate a strong case for theism.

Dispositions Toward Divine Revelation

Finally, it might be possible, from the evaluation of purported revelations, for one to explore whether there is a correct disposition for approaching genuine divine revelation. For example, if it is the case that divine revelation ought to be consistent with the properties of God, particularly God's goodness, then it may also be the case that in order for one to properly understand the deeper meanings of a divine revelation that one ought to adopt a disposition that would reflect God's intentions when God issued the revelation. For example, if God issued some part of a revelation with the intention of compassion, then it might suit the reader (or hearer) of a revelation to adopt, as best as she could, an attitude or disposition of compassion in order to get more out of the deeper meaning of the revelation. In parallel reasoning, we come to better understand a poem or song when we better dispose ourselves to the context with which the poem or song was written. For example, if one is in a state of melancholy, then a poem or song expressing a melancholic meaning might be more richly understood in that state of melancholy. Alternatively, a jubilant painting or song may, for a jubilant person, also have a richer meaning. Consequently, in order to get at the deeper meanings that Swinburne suggests, it might be worthwhile to dispose ourselves, as best as we could, to the mood reflected in the segment of the purported divine revelation (barring moods that would likely corrupt our characters). Since the divine revelation would likely be a means for God to express profound spiritual truths to us and it may not be possible to express those truths semantically, a proper disposition to a part of a divine revelation may open the reader (or hearer) to a deeper understanding of the divine revelation itself. Thus,

because a divine revelation must be consistent with the properties of God, in order to appropriately apprehend a divine revelation, one might speculate further on methods for creating an appropriate disposition toward a divine revelation in order to extract meaning on, as Swinburne called it, "deep and important matters."[117] Thus, the openness of the investigator who searches for a genuine divine revelation might benefit from approaching a segment of purported revelation with an attitude consistent with the context of the religious teaching. Thus, for future attempts to exercise methods for evaluating purported revelation, it might be worthwhile for the investigator to research not merely the content of a religious text but also the commentaries and culture within which it was said before attempting to pronounce some judgement on its intended meaning. Further research might be made in this area of the philosophy of revelation on how to fairly approach certain religions for an investigator's evaluation.

Eastern Religions

Finally, it might be objected that I have not addressed the evaluation of Eastern religions in this thesis (or other non-theistic religions). In order to answer this worry, I will offer, first, Swinburne's remarks on Eastern religions and then my own reasons for why I have not yet addressed these religions. Swinburne wrote:

> Many Eastern religions do not purport to have a revelation. The grounds for believing Buddhism are not supposed to be that the Buddhist message comes from God. Whether or not there is a God is not a central matter for Buddhism, and even if a Buddhist affirms that there is a God, the grounds for believing the Buddhist message (e.g. about the goodness of pursuing the noble eightfold path) are not that it has been revealed by God, but rather its intrinsic plausibility, and that it has been found by wise men in some sense to 'work'. The same goes for the messages of Confucianism and Taoism. Certainly Hinduism often claims that God has become incarnate on various occasions, and revealed certain things about the divine nature and the

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[117] Swinburne, *Revelation*, 109.

goodness of certain ways of conduct. But the grounds for believing those things—for instance, the *Bhagavad Gita*—are not that this is a revelation. Rather, the process of inference must go the other way round. The message seems on other grounds to be true, and that is some reason for supposing that it comes from God. My grounds for saying that the process of inference 'must' go the other way round are that Hinduism makes no detailed claim to evidence of revelation other than the content of the message, no appeal to particular historical facts concerning its promulgation which might authenticate the message. And the content of the message concerns not any particular future acts of God, but general truths of a kind on which wise human thinkers might stumble. By contrast, the three 'Abrahamic' religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) do proclaim that God has revealed certain truths.[118]

Of course, Swinburne's remarks do not disprove these other religions, but his ideas contained here and his surrounding arguments complicate what would count as evidence in favor of these other religions.

My reasons for not including methods for the evaluation of Eastern religions are threefold: first, it is not clear to me that Eastern religions demand exclusive devotion to a particular god, so some Eastern religious practices and beliefs might be compatible with Western religions depending on the exclusive nature of the Western religion. As a consequence, it is not clear that there should be methods for evaluating Eastern religious practices or beliefs that do not conflict with probable Western religions. Second, it might be possible for devotees to a particular Western religion to practice Eastern spiritual practices that increase the probability of the devotees being saved or quasi-saved—in whatever way there is salvation. So if the aim of this thesis is to consider methods for evaluating purported divine revelations for the purpose of increasing one's odds at salvation, it is not clear to me how engaging in some Eastern practices would lessen one's likelihood of being saved. Third, non-theistic religions, since they do not appeal to a supernatural person to

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[118] Ibid., 127.

function as a source of testimony for supernatural life, are burdened with having to provide empirical evidence for every unique claim of their religion to the degree that it conflicts with other religions on significant doctrines. By contrast, theistic religions, to the degree that they conflict on significant doctrines, must provide evidence that the communication is from God, and strong evidence that a particular revelation is from God is strong evidence in favor of the individual parts of the purported revelation. Thus, to the degree that non-theistic religions are incompatible with theistic religions, non-theistic religions must have strong, empirical evidence supporting their plausibility, and they must be able to better explain both the evidence in favor of a particular theistic religion and the evidence in favor of theism than theists themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the course of this thesis, I considered what would constitute a reasonable standard of salvation, what a divine revelation is and reasons to expect a divine revelation, a problem that arises in the philosophy of revelation if we do not have good methods for evaluating purported divine revelations, and methods for evaluating purported divine revelations. I further offered an example of what one sort of evaluation would look like in the context of two major ethical theories, and I also offered conclusions from Egyptologists that strike at the heart of the Mormon religion—the plausibility of their "prophet" to have communicated a divine revelation. Of course, the defense of my thesis does not rest on this attack on Mormonism since it functions merely as an example for an application of the general methods proposed and summarized in this thesis. Finally, I offered speculation on how the methods for evaluating purported divine revelation that were explored in

this thesis might aid philosophers of religion with other problems in the philosophy of religion.

These supplemental methods to Swinburne's tests were formed *a priori* on the basis of what we would expect either minimally from God (what a genuine divine revelation can and cannot do) or optimally from God (from our definition of God, we would expect more than just the minimum requirements of a revelation). An application of these methods to the major religions of the world would be a different project than the aim of this thesis—which was to argue in favor of there being methods for evaluating purported divine revelations and to offer some of these methods. Consequently, I think that Kitcher, and other atheists or agnostics who think that there are no means (or few means) by which one can assess the probability of certain religions over others, are greatly mistaken on the topic. Or, in the words of Michael Slater:

> One of the assumptions underlying Kitcher's analysis of the challenge of secularism, as we have seen, is that there are no cogent arguments or evidence for theism or other traditional forms of religious faith. And this assumption, in my view, is not only mistaken but also reveals either a fundamental lack of knowledge of the relevant arguments and evidence or simply an indifference to engaging with them in any serious way.[119]

Whether Kitcher would agree to all of the forms of evaluation in this thesis is, of course, unknown to me, but Kitcher's assertion that there are no methods for evaluating purported divine revelations such that some are more probable than others is gravely mistaken.

Finally, independent of my critique of Kitcher's arguments in Chapter III of this thesis, it is my hope that these methods for evaluating purported divine revelations will, if there exists a genuine case of divine revelation in the world today,

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[119] *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion*, 151.

assist a sincere investigator in her pursuit of a true religion. Further, even though

there is much more that can be said on this topic, I hope that these ideas will help

the sincere investigator, if there is such a thing as salvation within a true religion,

increase her odds of salvation and the avoidance of damnation or purgatory or even

the lower levels of happiness in heaven if heaven consists of levels of happiness[120]—

even if most or all human persons are saved in the end.[121]

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[120] For example, see ST I-II. Q5. A2.
[121] For example, see Kronen and Reitan's *God's Final Victory*.

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