

## *Swinburne on the Resurrection*

### Negative versus Christian Ramified Natural Theology

ROBERT GREG CAVIN

*Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies  
Cypress College  
Cypress, California*

CARLOS A. COLOMBETTI

*Department of Philosophy  
Skyline College  
San Bruno, California*

---

We consider here the neglected topic of *negative* natural theology—natural theology that tends to disconfirm the tenets of Christianity—and its impact on the project of Christian ramified natural theology. We do so by critiquing what is, arguably, the most important contribution to this project, namely, Richard Swinburne’s Bayesian argument for the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus in his book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*.<sup>1</sup> We will argue that Swinburne’s pivotal premise—that God would not allow strongly deceptive evidence to exist for the Incarnation and Resurrection since doing so would make Him a deceiver or complicit in deception—is false, being refuted by key evidence from negative natural theology the argument suppresses in violation of the total evidence requirement. We will argue, further, that Swinburne’s larger argument omits other key *dominating* items of evidence of negative natural theology which seem to critically weaken the probability that Jesus is God Incarnate and rose again from the dead. Negative natural theology thus serves as a formidable obstacle to the success of Christian ramified natural theology.

---

ABSTRACT: We consider the impact of *negative* natural theology on the prospects of Christian ramified natural theology with reference to Richard Swinburne’s argument for the Incarnation and Resurrection. We argue that Swinburne’s pivotal claim—that God would not allow deceptive evidence to exist for the Incarnation and Resurrection—is refuted by key evidence from negative natural theology. We argue, further, that Swinburne’s argument omits *dominating* items of evidence of negative natural theology which seem to critically weaken the probability of the Incarnation and Resurrection. Negative natural theology thus serves as a formidable obstacle to Christian ramified natural theology.

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

### *Swinburne's Argument*

Swinburne's goal is to argue that the probability of the conjunction  $h$  of the hypothesis  $h_1$  that Jesus is God incarnate and the hypothesis  $h_2$  that he rose from the dead is very high on our background evidence  $k$  and the specific historical evidence  $e$  that Jesus alone satisfied both the prior requirements of being God incarnate (he lived a perfect life, implied his divinity, taught his atonement, and founded a church) and the posterior requirements of being God incarnate (his followers found his tomb empty, saw him risen from the dead, changed Sunday to their day of worship, and preached the Resurrection as signifying redemption for mankind). Thus, what Swinburne wants to show is that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is very high. To establish his conclusion, Swinburne combines certain other simpler probabilities using Bayes's theorem.

In contrast to skeptics (most notoriously, Hume) who limit our background evidence  $k$  to the laws of nature, Swinburne includes in this the evidence of natural theology—in particular:

the existence of a complex physical universe, the (almost invariable) conformity of material bodies to natural laws; these laws, together with the initial state of the universe, being such as to lead to the evolution of human organisms; these humans having a mental life (and so souls), and having great opportunities for helping or hurting each other and having experiences in which it seems to them that they are aware of the presence of God.<sup>2</sup>

Given these items of  $k$ , Swinburne argues that the hypothesis  $t$  that God exists (theism) has a prior probability of at least one-half on  $k$ , that is,  $P(t|k) \geq 0.5$ . He next considers the hypothesis  $c$  that God becomes incarnate among humans at some time in a divided incarnation, and considers three reasons why He might want to do this: (1) to provide a means of atonement; (2) to identify with our suffering; and (3) to show us how to live and encourage us to do so. He argues that each of these reasons makes it at least an equal best act for God to become incarnate and that the second makes it a unique best act, which, therefore, God is obligated to do.<sup>3</sup> Swinburne concludes, accordingly, that the probability that God would become incarnate given theism and our background evidence is at least one-half:  $P(c|t\&k) = 0.5$ . Combining this with the prior probability of theism yields the prior probability that a divided incarnation would occur,  $P(c|k) = 0.25$ , and the prior probability that it would not,  $P(\sim c|k) = 0.75$ .

Now  $c$  does not specify the identity of the individual in whom God becomes incarnate, and, accordingly, Swinburne considers the power of  $c$  to

2. *Ibid.*, 30.

3. *Ibid.*, 34: "an omnipotent and perfectly good God will inevitably do any act that is a unique best act, and that will include fulfilling all his obligations." Note that we have removed the spaces Swinburne places around "&" in his probability formulae.

explain the evidence  $f$  that is identical in content to  $e$  except for stating that an *unnamed* prophet (rather than specifically Jesus) satisfied both the prior and posterior requirements of being God incarnate, that is,  $P(f|c\&k)$ . He argues that, while this is somewhat low, it is not too low, and so he assigns it a value of about 0.1, that is,  $P(f|c\&k) = 0.1$ . Swinburne argues, in contrast, that the alternatives to  $c$  encompassed within  $\sim c$ —the theft, swoon, hallucination, and impostor theories—fail to provide as nearly a strong explanation of the facts of  $f$ , in particular, the empty tomb and postmortem appearances. Accordingly, he assigns the explanatory power of  $\sim c$  a value that is one hundred times lower, that is,  $P(f|\sim c\&k) = 0.001$ . Combining these probabilities yields the result that the probability of a divided incarnation on our background evidence and the more specific historical evidence of  $f$  is approximately 0.97, that is,  $P(c|f\&k) \approx 0.97$ . Swinburne observes in this connection that, since  $e$  differs from  $f$  in only specifying the identity (Jesus) of the unnamed prophet in the latter, it cannot make any difference to the value of  $P(c|f\&k)$  to substitute  $e$  for  $f$  and, thus, he concludes that  $P(c|e\&k) \approx 0.97$ .

Swinburne turns, finally, to the probability that is his ultimate concern, namely,  $P(h|e\&k)$ . He argues that this cannot differ very greatly from  $P(c|e\&k)$  since, otherwise, this would constitute a grand deception by God regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection:

[G]iven ( $e\&k$ ) and  $c$  (that God did or will become incarnate in the sort of way specified which makes probable the occurrence of a super-miracle culminating his life), it would be immensely improbable that the Incarnation took place or will take place in any prophet except Jesus [ $c\&\sim h_1$ ], or that it was culminated in any other way than by the Resurrection [ $\sim h_2$ ]. We cannot seriously suppose that although God plans to become incarnate in order to live the sort of life which, as far as our evidence shows, Jesus did, and which would be culminated by the sort of super-miracle which, as far as our evidence shows, was the life of Jesus, yet it was not in Jesus but in some other prophet that God will become incarnate. That indeed would be a grand deception by God. So,  $P(h|e\&k)$  will not be very different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ .<sup>4</sup>

Given, then, that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is not very different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ , Swinburne finally concludes that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is approximately 0.97. For Swinburne, consequently, our total evidence  $e$  and  $k$  strongly supports the conclusion that Jesus is God incarnate and rose from the dead.

### *Critique of Swinburne: Negative Natural Theology and Divine Permission of Grand Deception*

Swinburne's argument for the Resurrection depends crucially upon its final section, which, as we have just seen, attempts to establish the interme-

4. *Ibid.*, 214.

diate conclusion that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is not very different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ . It is with his argument for this intermediate conclusion that we are here concerned. Now, according to Swinburne, the Resurrection (if it occurred) would be a super-miracle—a violation of the laws of nature that could not occur unless God or one of his agents brought it about. He argues in the above passage, accordingly, that, if, despite the seemingly strong evidence that Jesus alone satisfied the prior and posterior requirements for being God incarnate, it were actually improbable that Jesus is the incarnation of God and rose from the dead, then it would follow that either God himself deceived Jesus's followers—and through them, ultimately humanity—by bringing about this false evidence, or else permitted some lesser agent, for example, some devil, to perpetrate the deception. In the case of the Resurrection, in particular, God would, thus, Himself have directly caused or at least not prevented the secret removal of Jesus's body from the tomb and false appearances of "the risen Jesus" to his followers. But, according to Swinburne, this is something that God as a perfectly good being is quite unable to do:

Clearly, the obvious good purpose to bring about evidence that the posterior requirement [of a super-miracle, such as the Resurrection] had been satisfied in connection with a prophet for whom the prior requirements [of, for example, a sinless life] had been satisfied would be to show that [God] had put his signature on the life of that prophet and so declared him to be God Incarnate. If he brings this about when the prophet is not God Incarnate, God would be deceiving us (or agreeing to a deception by some devil on a matter of vast importance for the human race). It would be like leaving someone's fingerprints at the murder scene when they had not committed the murder, or spreading a rumour that someone had won a presidential election and therefore had the right to give orders to soldiers to kill, when that person had not won the election. God would not thus deceive (or permit such a massive deception) and so we can reasonably conclude that, if there is a God, this evidence is not misleading.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Swinburne concludes that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is approximately equal to  $P(c|e\&k)$ . We can summarize Swinburne's argument as follows:

- (S1) If  $P(h|e\&k)$  were very different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ , then God would either be perpetrating or else permitting grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection.
- (S2) But God would neither perpetrate nor permit grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection.
- (S3) Therefore,  $P(h|e\&k)$  is not very different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ .

---

5. *Ibid.*, 64.

As this restatement makes clear, the crucial move in Swinburne's argument is his supposition that God, being perfectly good, can neither perpetrate nor permit grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection.

Swinburne's argument for S3, while valid, is unsound. The problem here is that S2 is patently false. For, while it is true that God Himself could never perpetrate a grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection, the claim that He would not permit other agents—some devil, or, more significantly, human agents—to bring this about either *intentionally* (for example, through fraud or hoax) or *unintentionally* through *self-deception* (for example, hallucinations) is clearly false. This is shown by an incontestable item of our background information that Swinburne overlooks. But let us first look briefly at two prefatory considerations.

The falsehood of S2 arises, ultimately, from the problem of evil. Swinburne, like other theists, readily concedes that God permits the beings He has created (for example, people and devils) to cause evil—indeed, evil that is sometimes horrendous (for example, the Holocaust). This, of course, is stock-in-trade of theodicies and defenses against the theological problem of evil (for example, the free will defense and soul-making theodicy). However, an enormous quantity of this evil consists in *deception*—which is but one species of the larger genus of evil that includes everything from the scams of dishonest televangelists preying upon the elderly to Japan tricking the United States just prior to bombing Pearl Harbor. Swinburne, accordingly, must concede that God permits other beings to directly cause the evil of deception—even, specifically, the evil of *deception regarding religion*. And, while the scams of televangelists are intentional, much deception in religion is unwitting self-deception, for example, the ancient Babylonians were self-deceived regarding the existence of the gods they worshipped, and adherents of religions that practiced human sacrifice were similarly self-deceived.

But, of course, the problem of religious deception as a specific instance of the more general problem of evil is insufficient thus far to establish that God could actually permit misleading evidence leading to grand deception regarding, specifically, the Incarnation and Resurrection. That He could, however, is already clear from a second consideration—the Christian scriptures themselves and, in particular, the teaching attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. For in “the little apocalypse” of the Gospel of Mark (13:21–23), Jesus is presented as saying: “And then if any one says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand.” What this passage shows is that the author of the Gospel of Mark, and, perhaps, Jesus himself, possessed a concept of God that was fully compatible with the thesis that God could (and, indeed, would) permit massive deception regarding the true identity of the Messiah—and this, specifically, through the misleading

evidence of the signs and wonders of false prophets and messiahs that could even lead the elect astray. But a God who would allow the world and even the elect to be deceived by the signs and wonders of false Christs and prophets could certainly also allow the world and even Christians to be deceived by *false evidence* regarding the *Incarnation* and *Resurrection*. Of course, Swinburne might protest that the evangelist's concept of God in Mark 13:21–23 is not the same as the one that he presupposes in his argument. Yet it is the evangelist's concept that has always been standard within Christianity, whereas Swinburne's concept is the one that is idiosyncratic—violating the rule of common usage. Thus, what we can see on the basis of the problem of religious deception and the teaching attributed to Jesus by the Gospels is that, even though Swinburne's argument for S3 is valid, S2 is false, and, therefore, the argument is unsound. There is a third consideration, however, that establishes this conclusively, and to this we now turn.

There is an incontestable item of our background evidence overlooked by Swinburne that shows that his premise that God would neither perpetrate nor permit others to perpetrate a grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection is false. For it is an undeniable fact that massive religious deception exists in the world regarding, specifically, the Incarnation and the Resurrection. There are, currently, some 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Jews and Muslims, and 1.1 billion atheists, agnostics, and secularists living today. And, while Christians hold tenaciously to the Incarnation and Resurrection as the central tenets of their faith, Jews and Muslims with equal vehemence deny these, as do atheists, agnostics, and secularists. And, of course, each group has its own particular reasons and justification for either belief or disbelief. Yet, the opposing beliefs of each of these groups regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection are either true or false. And, thus, accordingly, it is either the 2.1 billion Christians who are the ones who have the truth or it is the 1.5 billion Jews and Muslims and 1.1 billion atheists, agnostics, and secularists who do. But, either way, the adherents of at least one of these groups are deceived and hold their false beliefs on the basis of deceptive reasons. In some cases this deception is intentional, although in most it is probably unwitting and self-inflicted. And the problem for Swinburne is that the extent of this deception, unwitting or otherwise, is global—indeed, truly *grand*. Nonetheless, God, if He exists, has not prevented this grand deception but has permitted it to occur—since, clearly, whatever God prevents does not occur. Thus, it is clear that God, if He exists, has permitted massive deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection. Accordingly, premise S2 of Swinburne's argument for S3 is false and the argument is thus unsound.

It is important to see that this problem is not limited to disagreements between Christians and non-Christians. Christianity itself is fragmented into factions split over opposing theological doctrines that have been maintained with such assurance that Christians have killed their “heretical” brethren by

the hundreds of thousands. Ironically, division among Christians arises, in particular, in regard to the Incarnation and Resurrection themselves. For the sake of brevity here, we shall only consider the latter. To the “right” of Swinburne, on the one hand, is ultra-conservative apologist Norman Geisler, who, together with a sizable number of like-minded Christians, insists that orthodoxy requires belief that the body of the risen Jesus is, not only “a physical, material organism, just like any other human body,” thus, being “visible and tangible, and extended in space” and “capable of assimilating physical food,” but, indeed, contains “most, if not all, of the material particles in His pre-resurrection body.”<sup>6</sup> In opposition to this view stands highly influential theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who, appealing to skeptical German New Testament criticism, maintains that the resurrection body of Jesus is not “a physical body but a spiritual body,” “like the angels in heaven,” bearing “no substantial or structural continuity” with Jesus’s premortem body and, thus, “something which normally cannot be experienced directly and, therefore, must be described by a metaphor, in analogy to our rising from sleep daily.”<sup>7</sup> More radical yet, finally, and diametrically opposed in viewpoint to both Geisler and Pannenberg, as well as Swinburne, is the highly influential New Testament scholar and member of the *Jesus Seminar*, Marcus J. Borg, who, while affirming the historicity of the Resurrection, insists that “[w]hether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant” so that, correlatively, “it is irrelevant whether or not the tomb was empty.”<sup>8</sup> Now, of course, only one of these views can be right—and all of them might be wrong. But they are sufficient to demonstrate that there is radical and widespread disagreement even among sincere and devout Christians themselves regarding the Resurrection—and, most significantly, regarding the very *meaning* of the term “resurrection.” Indeed, Christians holding or approximating Geisler’s view are forced to deny that the adherents of the views of Pannenberg and Borg (and, perhaps Swinburne) really believe in the Resurrection at all. Thus, once again, it is clear that, God, if He exists, has allowed millions of Christians (let alone non-Christians) to be deceived regarding the Resurrection. Consequently, premise S2 of Swinburne’s argument for S3 is false and the argument is thus unsound.

There is an equivalent and more formal way of stating our criticism: Swinburne’s reliance on the false premise S2 in his sub-argument is equivalent to his violation of the total information requirement in his larger argument. Thus, consider the following information we will call *d*:

---

6. Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 25, 122–3, 186–7, 201, and 204.

7. Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?,” *Dialog* 4 (1965): 128–9, 130, 132, 135.

8. Marcus J. Borg, “The Truth of Easter,” in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 131.

Massive deception exists regarding the Incarnation and the Resurrection in that at least one third of the world's population falsely believes that these occurred (namely, 2.1 billion Christians) or falsely believes that they did not (namely, 2.6 billion non-Christians).

Swinburne's reliance on S2 forces him to omit  $d$  as an item from the evidence of natural theology  $k$ . Yet  $d$  must be included in  $k$  because it is *bona fide* information about a *natural* fact that in conjunction with  $t$  tells us something profoundly interesting about God through the *via negativa*, that is,  $t \& d$  entails contrary to S2:

God does *not prevent* it from being the case that  $d$ , that is, God *permits* it to be the case that massive deception exists regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection in that at least one third of the world's population falsely believes that these occurred (namely, 2.1 billion Christians) or falsely believes that they did not (namely, 2.6 billion non-Christians).

For *God prevents it from being the case that  $d$  entails  $\sim d$  and thus  $\sim(t \& d)$  so that, equivalently,  $t \& d$  entails *God does not prevent it from being the case that  $d$* . However, if God permits massive deception regarding the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, then, necessarily, either He Himself perpetrates this deception or else He permits other agents to intentionally perpetrate it (for example, through fraud and hoax) or unintentionally bring it about (for example, through unwitting self-deception and subsequent proselytization). Since it is a conceptual consequence of  $t$  that God, being perfectly good, cannot Himself perpetrate massive deception, it follows that  $t \& d$  entails more particularly:*

God permits other agents (for example, devils or humans) to intentionally perpetrate or unintentionally bring about grand deception upon at least one third of humanity regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection.

Let us call this implication  $p$ . Now it is easy to see that  $e \& k \& c$  and  $e \& k \& c \& p$  are logically equivalent. For, clearly,  $e \& k \& c \& p$  entails  $e \& k \& c$ . But  $e \& k \& c$  entails  $e \& k \& c \& p$  as well. This is because  $e \& k \& c$  entails  $t \& d$ —since  $c$  (the statement of the generic incarnation) entails  $t$  (theism) and  $d$  (stating a *relevant natural* fact) must be included in  $k$ —and  $t \& d$ , in turn, entails  $p$ . Thus, it is clear that  $e \& k \& c$  and  $e \& k \& c \& p$  are logically equivalent. But it immediately follows (by the logical equivalence rule) that  $P(c|e \& k)$  and  $P(c \& p|e \& k)$  are equal. In other words, the probability on  $e \& k$  that there should be a divided incarnation is equal to the probability on  $e \& k$  that there should be a divided incarnation and that God should permit other agents to intentionally or unintentionally deceive at least one third of the world's population regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection. And what this means, of course, is that, even on the assumption that  $P(c|e \& k)$  is 0.97, it is still unwar-

ranted to hold, as Swinburne concludes, that  $P(h|e\&k)$  cannot be too much different from  $P(c|e\&k)$ . For the latter, as just shown, is equal to  $P(c\&p|e\&k)$ , and this is surely *much* different from  $P(h|e\&k)$ .

The problem with Swinburne's argument is that it violates the total evidence requirement. Swinburne identifies  $k$  as "the evidence of natural theology" but fails to include in it the equally relevant evidence of *negative* natural theology (NNT). We have seen already that Swinburne ignores  $d$  which, together with  $t$ , leads to  $p$ —the information that God allows grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection. But Swinburne also omits other important items of NNT from  $k$ , the most important of these being that corpses have an exceptionally strong tendency to undergo the complete course of postmortem decomposition—information that together with  $t$  implies that God has an exceptionally weak tendency to raise corpses from the dead. Let us call this implication  $w$ . Thus, to be accurate,  $k$  in Swinburne's argument comprises *only* the evidence of *positive* natural theology (PNT), that is, only those items of natural theology that tend to confirm the tenets of Christianity, and, in particular, the Incarnation and Resurrection. Conversely, Swinburne places items in  $e$  that are not, or, at least, that he has not shown to be, genuine, *bona fide*, items of evidence—in particular, the sinlessness of Jesus. And this is a serious problem. For it is a natural fact that human beings have an extraordinarily strong tendency to moral imperfection, and yet the New Testament evidence for the sinlessness of Jesus is late and paltry (John 8:46 and 2 Cor. 5:21) and is countered by equally strong New Testament counterevidence (Mark 1:4, 9 and Mark 10:18). Thus Swinburne is unjustified in including the moral perfection of Jesus in  $e$ . When this is removed from  $e$  and the aforementioned items of NNT are added to  $k$ , it becomes clear that  $P(h|e\&k)$  must be significantly less than  $P(c|e\&k)$  on Swinburne's original formulation of  $e$  and  $k$ . For  $k$  in conjunction with  $t$  now implies both that God has an exceptionally weak tendency to raise corpses from the dead ( $w$ ) and that He permits grand deception regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus ( $p$ ). Moreover,  $t$ , which includes the moral perfection of God, would seem to imply that, when God is faced with the choice of allowing grand deception regarding one or the other of two widespread opposing beliefs, the deception He allows is the one that involves the deception of the least people. Call this implication  $l$ . Now it is clear, by an argument parallel to that given for  $p$  above, that  $P(c|e\&k) = P(c\&w\&p\&l|e\&k)$ . But  $w$ ,  $p$ , and  $l$ , even when combined with  $c$ , *dominate* the (alleged) evidence of the empty tomb and postmortem appearances of the risen Jesus in  $e$ . Indeed, given that God has a weak tendency to raise the dead and would allow only the lesser of two opposing deceptions regarding the Incarnation and Resurrection, it would seem that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is extremely low, thus making the probability of the *future* incarnation of some *coming* prophet very high—as well as the disjunction of the (so-called) naturalistic alternatives to  $h_2$ . Nonetheless, we shall be con-

tent here with the far weaker conclusion that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is no greater than 0.5. Either way, the disjunction of the “naturalistic” alternatives occupies at least half of the relevant, that is,  $c\&w\&p\&l$ , probability space on  $e\&k$ . What we can thus see is that, if the evidence of negative natural theology is included in  $k$ , then S2 is false and  $P(h|e\&k)$  will not have Swinburne’s high value.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, if  $k$  is limited to the evidence of positive natural theology, then  $P(h|e\&k)$  may well be approximately 0.97, but then, as we have seen, Swinburne’s argument violates the total evidence requirement.

Swinburne might reply that self-deception regarding the Resurrection by the earliest Christians, namely, the disciples, even if God would have allowed it, is highly improbable on  $e$ , and thus still try to claim that  $P(h|e\&k)$  is approximately equal to  $P(c|e\&k)$ . Such a reply, however, would again be unwarranted. The problem lies in the items Swinburne places in  $e$ . Swinburne argues for the reliability of the New Testament Easter traditions,<sup>10</sup> and then, on this basis, presses such supernatural details as that the risen Jesus vanished and passed through doors.<sup>11</sup> Yet, ironically, the argument he gives for the historicity of the items he places in  $e$  is not itself Bayesian—as it surely needs to be—and, quite apart from this, is all too brief and fails to adequately address numerous critical issues raised by contemporary New Testament scholars, including those who are conservative.<sup>12</sup> He simply has not shown that the New Testament Easter traditions are sufficiently reliable to serve in  $e$  as *bona fide* evidence that can be used to decide between the competing naturalistic and supernatural alternative explanations. To do this, such issues need to be resolved as the historicity of Jesus’s assurance to the disciples that they would see him risen after he died, their resultant state of mind after the crucifixion (despair versus hope), where and when the postmortem appearances of the risen Jesus occurred (in and near Jerusalem on the first Easter Sunday versus in Galilee several months later), and so on. Unfortunately, the issue of which New Testament Easter traditions constitute *bona fide* evidence remains to this day hotly contested among New Testament scholars. Apart from a resolution of such issues, however, there seems to be no way to determine which hypothesis—naturalistic or supernatural—is the most probable and, thus, no way to rule out self-deception (for example, group hallucinations) on the part of the disciples, as Swinburne wishes to do.

---

9. We have argued in “The Explanatory Paucity of the Resurrection Theory” (unpublished manuscript under editorial review) that there are insuperable obstacles involved in trying to show (weakly) that  $P(e|h_2) > P(e|\sim h_2)$ .

10. Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, chapter 4, “The Historical Sources.”

11. *Ibid.*, 176.

12. See, e.g., the argument of R. T. France against the historicity of the words attributed to the risen Jesus by the evangelist in Matt. 28:19b in “The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus” in *History, Faith, and Criticism*, ed. Colin Brown (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976).

---

## *Conclusion*

We have seen that Swinburne's argument for the Incarnation and Resurrection, and more broadly the project of Christian ramified natural theology, is seriously undermined by the failure to satisfy the requirement of total evidence. Indeed, when *all* of the available evidence that is relevant to these core Christian doctrines is fully incorporated into  $k$  and  $e$  (that is, not illegitimately suppressed and not supplemented with false or speculative assumptions), this evidence fails to confirm—and may *strongly disconfirm*—those doctrines. We have also seen, more specifically, that Swinburne's crucial sub-argument violates the total information requirement by relying on the false premise S2. The skeptic can now grant, as we have done here, that Swinburne's "core" argument that  $P(c|e\&k)$  is approximately equal to 0.97 is correct. Yet this too can be challenged on the basis of negative natural theology—though we must defer this challenge here. Christian ramified natural theology, as exemplified by Swinburne's argument, has tended to ignore or suppress *negative* natural theology, that is, the part of natural theology that tends to *disconfirm* the tenets of Christianity. Two items of specifically *negative* natural theology stand out: (1) the fact that massive theological deception regarding the core doctrines of Christianity has been allowed by God to thrive, and (2) the fact, regarding the specific doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus, that God has an extraordinarily weak tendency to raise the dead. Thus it is not improbable—and may be highly probable—that the (alleged) evidence for the Incarnation and Resurrection is false or misleading, since this evidence is overwhelmed by the much weightier evidence of negative natural theology. We conclude, then, that the prospects for a successful Christian ramified natural theology appear quite dim.<sup>13</sup>

---

13. The authors wish to thank Cypress College and the North Orange County Community College District and Skyline College and the San Mateo Community College District for generous research sabbaticals that made the writing of this article possible.