



On Religions: The Problem with Conflicting Testimonies

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Abstract

Richard Swinburne's "Is There A God?" articulates an argument for God's existence with the key premise being the *principle of testimony*. The principle postulates that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences. While I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence, I argue the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God's existence through testimony. My strategy will present a scenario of religious diversity which illustrates the dynamics of conflicting testimony across disparate groups.

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RICHARD SWINBURNE'S "Is There a God?" articulate an argument for God's existence. One key premise in his argument is the *principle of testimony*, which postulates that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences. While, I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence, I argue the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God's existence through testimony. My strategy is to present a scenario of religious diversity as a defeater which illustrates how conflicting testimony across disparate religious groups challenges our *prima facie* justification for God's existence. I argue that a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached through the principle of testimony, because each religion's account of God contradicts the others' testimonies. Afterwards, I will respond to Swinburne's objection in his work "Response to My Commentators"; that there are similar "core religious elements" within each religion's conception of God. These similar core elements suggest it is not the individual conceptions that are relevant in proving God's existence, but rather their shared attributes; However, I will deny that such shared attributes of God among disparate religions give a justification for Swinburne's interpretation of a Judeo-Christian God over other competing interpretations.

To begin, I will introduce Swinburne's argument. Swinburne states that religious experiences are expected if God exists, and *millions* of people have these experiences. These experiences provide individuals with a *prima facie* justification for God's existence. Thus, Swinburne establishes God's existence through God's interactions with millions, thereby providing a *prima facie* justification for God's existence.¹

Swinburne puts forth the *principle of credulity*, which claims that one should believe what one perceives unless and until there is evidence that

1. Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 113.

suggests otherwise.² If one does not accept this principle and argues that one ought to wait for contrary evidence, then one will never hold any beliefs because perceptions can only be justified through other perceptions. So, if one does not trust the initial perception, one will not trust the contrary evidence because it too will be predicated on perceptions. Therefore, one ought to accept the principle of credulity.

Swinburne also presents the *principle of testimony*, which states that one should believe the experiences of others if oneself does not have said experiences.³ If one does not accept this principle, then one also must reject knowledge in other domains because we would be unable to verify every person's experience. However, Swinburne offers three types of evidence which can delegitimize one's perceptions:

1. The perceptions themselves are derived from altered states of being (e.g. drugs, fasting, or sleep deprivation).
2. The perceptions are physically impossible (e.g., I purport to see a dog with three heads, but that is anatomically impossible).

The origin of the perception has been caused by something other than the perception itself (e.g., I believe the dress is white and gold, but it is blue and black—it is the artificial light that has caused that initial perception, not the dress itself).

Omitting these three errors of perception, one should accept the principle of testimony. By combining both principles, Swinburne's argument limits possible skeptical objections to the denial of God's existence

According to the principle of credulity, the skeptic must provide counter-evidence *against* the existence of God if they wish to support their argument. Further, since millions of people have reported an experience with God, we must believe them under the principle of testimony, unless and until the skeptic can find counter-evidence that suggests God does

2. Swinburne, "God," 115.

3. Swinburne, "God," 116.

not exist.⁴ Therefore, according to Swinburne, the millions of religious experiences are compelling, decisive evidence for God's existence. As a final salient point before I provide my argument, Swinburne outlines and replies to four defeaters:

1. Many people do not have religious experiences.
2. Only religious people have religious experiences.
3. The religious experiences that people have conflict.
4. Religious experiences are precipitated by other factors beyond the experience itself (i.e., drugs, fasting, insomnia).⁵

For this paper, I will address his response to the third defeater. I will begin my argument by offering the following scenario pertaining to religious diversity: Suppose one corrals various proponents of the world's major religions in a room, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, to name a few. A group represents each religion, all of whom have had their own religious experiences. First, the Buddhists say they do not believe in God *per se*, but more so supernatural entities; the Christians say they believe in God, but God is manifested simultaneously via three entities (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit); the Hindus say they worship one God (Brahma) but recognize many other Gods as well; the Sikhs believe in one omnipresent God (Waheguru), alongside ten gurus; and the Muslims believe in one God (Allah). All of these groups have their own religious experiences to vouch for their perspectives.

The principle of testimony can be applied to each of these disparate groups that share divergent accounts of God. While each group has a *prima facie* justification for God, a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn about God's existence, because the conflicting religious testimonies act as a defeater.

To better illustrate my point, take Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity

4. Swinburne, "God," 116.

5. Swinburne, "God," 116–118.

as an example. They are fundamentally incompatible, given that Islam argues that there is one God, Buddhism says there is no God, and Christianity espouses the trinity. However, God cannot simultaneously be nothing, one entity, and multiple entities, let alone the other contradictory accounts of God from other religions. Nonetheless, each religious group has a *prima facie* justification for their own conception of God under the principle of testimony. While Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have *prima facie* justification for each of their respective accounts of God, in totality, a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached because each religion's account of God contradicts one another. So, religious diversity acts as a defeater for justifying God's existence. Therefore, I accept the principle of testimony and agree that people's experiences give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence; however, I argue that the diversity of religious testimony acts as a defeater, so one does not have justification for God's existence.

An objection to my defeater is Swinburne's point that specific religions' conception of God are not relevant, but rather common traits that are present within each religions' conception of God are what matters.⁶ Swinburne points to the shared belief across contrasting religious experiences that a higher power exists beyond the self. Unfortunately, Swinburne himself does not provide additional details, but Caroline Franks Davis elaborates on his rebuttal with a list of common components inherent in virtually every religion's conception of God:

1. The physical world is not the ultimate reality.
2. There is a "true self" that extends to a different reality.
3. The ultimate reality is ethereal.
4. The aforementioned reality can manifest as a heavenly entity (or holy power) that individuals can have a personal relationship with.
5. The volume and intensity of religious experiences are indicative

6. Swinburne, "God," 120.

of one's relationship with the holy power.

6. A relationship with the higher power grants one liberation and access to the "true self".⁷

One might say that my defeater seems to be moot because religious diversity is irrelevant, given that there are these aforementioned features present in seemingly all religions' conception of God (i.e. the religious "core").

I will offer a two-part response: A statement on religious agreement and a reply to Swinburne's comments on religious diversity in his "Response to My Commentators." First, the idea that there is a "core" set of features inherent in every religions' conception of God ignores the diametrically opposed positions in each religions' conception of God altogether. For example, Hindus recognize numerous Gods, while Muslims stringently support only one. However much of a "core" there is among disparate religious groups, their shared attributes cannot bridge these irreconcilable gaps that explicitly contradict one another. Assuming there is a "core" of religious experience, it is seemingly insufficient in overcoming the inconsistent conception of God across various religions.

Second, Swinburne himself seems to acknowledge that there are notable differences that undermine the religious "core," with Christianity as an outlier. Case in point, in Swinburne's "Response to My Commentators," he writes the following:

"I do not need to make a detailed investigation if I can show that none of those [other] religions [besides Christianity] even claim for themselves characteristics to be expected a priori of a true religion and claimed by Christianity, and that there is enough evidence that Christianity does have these characteristics. For then I will be in a position to argue that there are reasons adequate to show that the Christian religion is more likely to be

7. Caroline Franks David, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 191.

true than [the other religions] are."⁸

Swinburne separates Christianity as considerably different from other religions' accounts of God, even stating it as being more likely true than its contemporaries by virtue of offering an a priori explanation. In doing so, Swinburne recognizes that other religions' conceptions of God do have significant differences that make them distinct, otherwise he would not point to the specific features of Christianity. However, this appears to weaken his original assertion that there is a "core" of religiosity, given that Christianity potentially supersedes the truthfulness of other religions' conceptions of God and possesses characteristics that are markedly different.

To summarize my position, I accepted the *principle of testimony* and agree that people's experiences can give them a *prima facie* justification for God's existence; however, I argued the diversity of conflicting religious testimony acts as a defeater to Swinburne's argument. One does not have, all things considered, justification for God. My strategy was to present a scenario of religious diversity as a defeater which illustrates how conflicting testimony across disparate religious groups challenges our *prima facie* justification for God's existence. I argued that a decisive conclusion for God's existence cannot be reached through the principle of testimony, because each religion's account of God contradicts the other's testimonies. Afterwards, I responded to Swinburne's objection in his work "Response to My Commentators"; that there are similar "core religious elements" within each religion's conception of God and the shared attributes among these religious elements are relevant in proving God's existence. I denied that such shared attributes of God among disparate religions give a justification for Swinburne's interpretation of a Judeo-Christian God over other competing interpretations.

8. Richard Swinburne, "Response to My Commentators," *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002): 310-31.

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