

Oxford Philosopher Offers 2007 Holmer Lecture
Dr. Richard Swinburne, Oxford University
Summary: 11/10/2006

On Friday evening, November 10, before a nearly full house of 250 people (about half of them students), Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne offered what Institute Executive Director Bob Osburn called “a tightly reasoned lecture” on the relationship between God and morality. Widely regarded among the two or three most famous Christian philosophers, Swinburne’s lecture attracted many scholars with international connections, including a multi-continental group of philosophy students studying at the Kierkegaard center in nearby St. Olaf College.

Swinburne grounded his lecture in the belief that necessary moral truths (general moral principles, such as the prohibition against cold-blooded murder) exist apart from the existence or character of God. This view, long championed by philosophers influenced by the thought of Thomas Aquinas, stands in contradistinction to the Reformed view that morality is grounded in God’s character.

The burden of Swinburne’s address was to show that there is a second category of moral truths, contingent moral truths, which are, in fact, profoundly affected by the existence and character of God. These truths are much more closely linked to the kind of daily ethical decisions which virtually all of us must make (depending upon a whole host of contingencies in our life circumstances).

Not only does the existence of God bear greatly on the content of moral truths, but the seriousness of morality is also affected by God’s existence. God’s commands introduce obligations to those for whom we feel no obligation, for example. Furthermore, some moral action seems to be motivated purely by its praiseworthiness (such as helping older people across dangerous streets), but God’s existence can make such moral actions not only praiseworthy, but also obligatory.

Thirdly, our knowledge of moral truths is apprehended not merely by reason or other methods of rational discovery (as in the case of necessary moral truths), but by revelation from God. From the Christian perspective, this revelation involves, in particular, the Bible’s teaching, but also the revelation of God through His incarnation in Jesus Christ.

As to the particular revelation from God, Professor Swinburne argued that the space-time resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s endorsement of Jesus’ particular revelation. This unique miracle is not mirrored, for example, in Islam, in that the Prophet Muhammad claimed no miracles and, furthermore, the Muslim claim about the inimitable character of the Quran is itself a claim that could never be validated in space-time history (as could the claim regarding Jesus’ resurrection).

One might ask, said Professor Swinburne, why God would add to our moral burdens, beyond necessary moral truths. In other words, wouldn’t it be sufficient to honor general

moral principles without having to “walk the extra mile” or “turn the other cheek,” to utilize language from the lips of Jesus?

There are four reasons that God would add such moral burdens: 1) To further motivate us to do what we are already obligated to do; 2) To provide detailed specifications for moral actions so that they will be coordinated; 3) To ensure the performance of moral actions that are non-obligatory but which should nevertheless be done for human welfare; and 4) To form good character, which itself then enables one, synergistically, to pursue a moral life.

Swinburne’s lecture was the 11th annual Holmer Memorial Lecture, which honors the memory of the great Christian philosopher Paul Holmer, who taught at the University of Minnesota between 1946 and 1962, before assuming the Noah Porter Chair in Philosophical Theology at Yale University until 1987. The lecture is sponsored annually by the MacLaurin Institute, which brings God into the marketplace of ideas by communicating the Christian worldview with its transforming potential.