



## **Swinburne, the Gift of Life, and the Soul**

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### **Abstract**

In his attempt, to make plausible the Christian doctrine of Atonement, Richard Swinburne faces many objections. One objection has been that no sense can be made of the belief that life is a gift. This is because humans have no responsibility to God and no subsequent need to atone to God for wrongdoing. One way out of this objection requires belief in a soul. This paper, based on descriptive analytics, **outline Swinburne's** Atonement theory to give a flavor of what depends on the belief that life is a gift from God. Then categorize and present the objections Swinburne faces. As for the objection it will focus on, and also provide its remedy and suggest that the remedy is quite digestible from an Islamic perspective.

### **Keywords**

Atonement, Christianity, Swinburne, Richard, dualism.

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## Introduction

Richard Swinburne show no qualms about the belief that life is a gift from God, describing it as a normal Christian view (Swinburne, 1989). Because humans are so utterly dependent on God for existence and sustenance, says Swinburne, it makes sense that we humans owe it to God to obey him. But, regrettably, we humans are not good at obeying God – in both subjective and objective senses. For this reason, God had to teach us how to atone to Him and to make available for us a means of reparation and atonement.

Swinburne's stance on the human moral relationship with God has faced a range of objections. One objection has called into question the idea that life is a gift from God. However, the objector concedes, admitting that the idea that life is a gift from God can be made coherent if we assume that life is a gift offered to a soul before it becomes embodied on earth.

This paper outline Swinburne's Atonement theory to give a flavor of what depends on the belief that life is a gift from God. Then categorize and present the objections Swinburne faces. As for the objection it will focus on, and also provide its remedy and suggest that the remedy is quite digestible from an Islamic perspective.

## Swinburne's Atonement Theory

One of the central doctrines of Christianity is the doctrine of the Atonement. This doctrine explains the Christian belief that humankind has been saved from the consequences of its disobedience to God by Jesus (A) reconciling man with God. Jesus is believed to have provided a mechanism for human beings to atone for their sins. Other theistic religions, such as Judaism and Islam, have not spoken of the need for an intermediary between man and God in matters of

reconciliation (atonement). According to these other religions if a person sins then they should repent to God and implore his forgiveness directly. Christianity is different because it has described an apparatus for reconciliation between man and God involving the life and death of Jesus.

In order to illustrate how Christianity differs regarding atonement we can quote from an Islamic scriptural source. It has been recorded that God spoke to the Prophet Muhammad (S) the following words:

Oh Son of Adam whatever you call upon me for and hope for, I will forgive you for what you have done, and if you approach me with sins as great as the earth, I would approach you with forgiveness no less great, so long as you did not ascribe a partner to me. And even if you have sinned so much that your sins have reached the firmaments of the sky but you asked me for forgiveness, I would forgive you.<sup>1</sup>

This sacred narration (*hadith qudsi*), not part of the Quran, can be found in both Sunni and Shi'a sources.

Given the centrality in Christianity of the view that atonement with God is required, the preaching of the Christian Gospel has traditionally begun with the preaching of a specific outlook regarding issues of human culpability in the light of moral failings. This has corresponded with a specific outlook regarding how these moral failings should be addressed (Swinburne, 1992, p. 5; Swinburne, 1989, p. 5). It is

1. This is the narration as reported by Majlisi (1983) in his *Bihar al-Anwar* (vol. 90, p. 283). The Arabic text of the narration is as follows:

وعن أبي ذر الغفاري رضي الله عنه قال : قال النبي صلى الله عليه وآله : قال الله تبارك وتعالى : يا ابن آدم ما دعوتني ورجوتني أغفر لك على ما كان فيك ، وإن أتيتني بقرار الأرض خطيئة أتيتك بقرارها مغفرة ، ما لم تشرك بي ، وإن أخطأت حتى بلغ خطاياك عنان السماء ثم استغفرتني غفرت لك .

for this reason that Swinburne begins his Christian apologetic with *Responsibility and Atonement*, which is a defence of a somewhat “liberal” version of the Christian moral outlook (Swinburne, 1989).

Unlike the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Atonement has never received canonical formulation, that is, an authoritative endorsement. The doctrine of the Atonement has therefore been open to, and subsequently the subject of, much discussion. Different theorists have all been concerned to describe how exactly, in accordance with Christian belief, Jesus has affected the salvation of humankind. (Porter, 2004; Swinburne, 1989). Swinburne’s understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement reparation (McNaughton, 1992), and satisfaction-type (Porter, 2004) theory. Swinburne calls his understanding of the significance of the life and death of Jesus a sacrifice model, following Anselm and Aquinas (Swinburne, 1989).

### **Swinburne’s View of the Atonement**

According to Swinburne (1989), there exist universal moral principles which correspond to objective moral facts such as the badness of killing and the goodness of keeping promises (all things being equal). There is broad consensus among people about what the moral facts are.<sup>1</sup> Swinburne says that a person can be either objectively guilty or both subjectively and objectively guilty. Guilt arises from failure to fulfil obligations, in other words, the performance of actions contrary to universal moral principles. If somebody unwittingly does a wrong

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1. Swinburne has mentioned that the way to achieve agreement on matters of morality is appeal to intuition by way of debating practical examples. Swinburne refers his readers to the “reflective equilibrium” of John Rawls (Swinburne, 2005; Swinburne, 2004; Swinburne, 2001).

then they are objectively guilty, otherwise they are both subjectively and objectively guilty. For a wrongdoing person to perfectly remove the guilt with which he has sullied his soul, he must make atonement for his wrong act and be forgiven by his victim. Making atonement for a wrong action is a moral obligation and involves four factors: repentance, apology, reparation, and penance. Making atonement can also be thought of as reconciliation, so when a wrongdoer is seeking to be atoned with his victim he is seeking to be reconciled with his victim (for an example of Swinburne substituting talk of “atonement” with talk of “reconciliation”).

The four factors, just mentioned, are involved in making atonement contribute towards undoing the consequences of a wrongful deed. Firstly, making atonement requires repentance which is an acknowledgement of the wrong nature of the act to oneself and a resolution to amend the situation. Secondly, atonement requires an apology, that is, an expression of repentance to the victim. Thirdly, reparation is needed, in other words compensation to the victim for the harm caused to him. Fourthly, something which is costly to the wrongdoer by way of penance is needed in order for the wrongdoer to express his sorrow and to disown his wrongful act. Swinburne believes that if the wrongdoer is unable to provide the victim with reparation and penance a third party may provide it on his behalf. It is good that this be so rather than reparation and penance be waived by the victim, or neglected by the wrongdoer, so that the wrongdoing is not trivialized. In some cases, not all four factors are required for making atonement, for example there is no reparation for an insult. When the wrongdoer fulfils his acts of atonement and when the forgiveness of the victim follows, the process of atonement becomes complete and the wrongdoer’s guilt is removed. If the victim does not forgive, guilt will eventually be removed from the wrongdoer

provided that he perseveres with his sincere acts of atonement (Swinburne, 1989).

Given that there is a God humans have a duty to live good lives, says Swinburne (1989), because we are so utterly dependent on Him for our existence and sustenance and for the gift of life which He has given us. This is a point which Swinburne argues for in greater detail in the first volume of his trilogy. In the context of arguing for the coherence of theism Swinburne (Swinburne, 1993) argues that God is, of logical necessity given his other attributes, a source of moral obligation. Given that God exists wrongdoing is wrongdoing against God and therefore wrongdoing is – according to conventional usage – sin. Even if a person unintentionally commits wrong this does not detract from his guilt before God and his need to put things right by atoning (Swinburne, 1989). Swinburne says that a good God might provide men with the reparation and penance needed for them to atone. The life and death of Jesus – especially his death by crucifixion – would be an adequate reparation and penance. According to Swinburne (Swinburne, 1989), the life and death of Jesus is to be understood as an offering of a perfect life, the type of life which humans should lead. Jesus' life and death was a sacrifice to God which humans can benefit from in that it amounts to the reparation and penance needed for human atonement with God. Insofar as Jesus is God then the sacrifice must be understood as not automatically benefiting humans but rather something which humans can offer to God as reparation and penance. So, on Swinburne's account, the wrongdoer might address God with the following words:

We have made a mess of the life which you gave us, we have made no reparation of our own for our sins, nor have we helped others to make atonement for their sins. But we have been given a perfect

life, not owed to you, O God. We offer you this life instead of the life we should have led, and instead of the lives which others (in whose sins we are involved) should have led. Take its perfection instead of our imperfection. We are serious enough about our sins to repent and apologize and to offer you back an offering of this value as our reparation and penance (Swinburne, 1989).

A life not owed to God is what Jesus' life is said to be. Because Jesus supposedly is God he owes God nothing and therefore virtually all of Jesus' life was available to be given away. On the other hand, mere mortals owe God so much, specifically their existence and sustenance. The life of a mere mortal could not possibly be a valuable sacrifice. If a person sacrifices his life to God when he is already in debt to God then there would not be much left of his sacrifice to give it value (Swinburne, 1989).

As we have seen, Swinburne draws religious conclusions from secular philosophy. This is characteristic of Swinburne's apologetics because, he insists, that detailed philosophical accounts lead to stronger conclusions (Swinburne, 2005). The crucial link between secular philosophy and Christian religion in Swinburne's account of the Atonement is Swinburne's contention that reparation and penance, along with the other acts of atonement, are an important part of atonement. Insistence upon reparation and penance on philosophical grounds gives Jesus a clear role in the atonement of man with God. The acts of atonement, according to Swinburne (1989), should not be forsaken by a victim in serious cases of wrongdoing. This is in order for wrongdoing to be treated with proper gravity by both the victim and the wrongdoer. Similarly, it would not be good for God to forgive sin unconditionally and therefore, suggests Swinburne, we can expect the Atonement to be as he describes it. Swinburne's account of what is required for atonement, as presented in the previous paragraphs, aims

to avoid the condonation of wrongdoing which he thinks is implied by unconditional forgiveness, for if the victim did not insist on any acts of atonement from the wrongdoer then it would seem to Swinburne that the victim did not really think the wrongdoer did anything wrong. Forgiveness by the victim, maintains Swinburne, must be in response to something from the wrongdoer; the very least which would be required is an apology.

### **Criticisms**

The numerous criticisms of Swinburne's Atonement theory that have been made generally fall into three main groups. Firstly, there are criticisms of the underlying moral theory, for example, that there is such a thing as objective guilt. Secondly, there are criticisms of the application of the moral theory to Christianity, for example, that reparation can be made by Jesus of Nazareth on behalf of others. Thirdly, there are a few theological objections which have been made. I present these objections below, however, the objection which is the focus of this paper falls outside of these three groupings and will be discussed in the next section.

#### **There is No Such Thing as Objective Guilt**

If people can be objectively as well as subjectively guilty, as Swinburne has it, then the extent of human sin will be very great indeed and so too, therefore, will the need for an atoning savior such as Jesus of Nazareth. But Schellenberg (2002) claims that a person is only guilty if they do something wrong intentionally – this means that they set out to do something wrong and are therefore negligent or else they willfully do not take steps to avoid doing wrong and are therefore irresponsible. There is no such thing as objective guilt, says Schellenberg. Suppose that a driver injured a child through no fault of



his own. The driver may well express how sorry he is that such a thing happened, that the child has been hurt and his parents worried. However, many would surely be of the opinion that the driver only owes an apology out of good etiquette and a kind heart, but certainly not out of any guilt. Although driving over children is wrong it is only wrong if it is done intentionally, in other words there is no objective guilt incurred (for example) by the alert and conscientious driver if a child jumps out in front of him.

Suppose further that someone is forced to walk a tightrope and told that if they fall they would pay a heavy fine. Being forced to walk the tightrope is wrong and being fined for doing something almost inevitable is even more wrong. Similarly, if God forces us to live and then punishes us for the wrong we almost inevitably do we would have to make negative conclusions about God's goodness. Perhaps we can say that God makes up the rules and can force us to live – that is, to walk a tightrope – but it would be rather unkind of God to punish us should we slip and fall. So, perhaps there is no guilt for failing to do something that we could not do and therefore perhaps there should be no need for atonement in such a circumstance.

Swinburne (Swinburne, 1989) recognizes that there is a difference between subjective and objective guilt. On Swinburne's account and using the analogy I have coined, a person who unintentionally falls from a tightrope nevertheless fails even if to a lesser degree than had they jumped from the tightrope. In life we have the responsibility not to cause harm to others. If something happens that means that we do cause harm to others unintentionally then this is still a failing. Swinburne (Swinburne, 2002) gives an example of a debtor who – through no fault of his own – fails to repay his creditors. In such a case the debtor and creditor do not just forget about the debt. The failing of the

debtor to repay his debt is, according to Swinburne, analogous to the failing of an objective wrongdoer.

Swinburne, in response to Schellenberg, cites two philosophers “very far from the Christian tradition” (Schellenberg, 2002) in support. However, I suspect that many people will not be able to give credence to the claim that a person is culpable for objective wrongdoing. This is especially given that Swinburne (Swinburne, 1989) claims that actions are judged by intention; how can it be that a person acquires guilt (which suggests fault and moral impurity) from a wrong action they did not intend to do?

The goodness which belongs to one who forwards the good for the reason that it is good, surely belongs also to one who tries to forward the good, but fails due to circumstances beyond his control. For the agent’s intentional contribution is the same in both cases. The most he can do intentionally is to try; the rest is not up to him. He who tries but fails to rescue his dying companion, or who sends a large cheque to Oxfam which is lost in the post, has just as much value in respect of his intentional contribution to what is done as one who succeeds (Swinburne, 1989).

Given the foregoing statement by Swinburne, should he not concede? If somebody intends to do good but in fact does bad for circumstances beyond his control, then surely he “has just as much value in respect of his intentional contribution to what is done as one who succeeds” (Swinburne, 1989).

### **Reparation is not Necessary for Atonement with God**

I have already mentioned that Swinburne stresses the importance of reparation in bringing about atonement but offering reparation for atonement is only appropriate when we hurt somebody. However,

God cannot be hurt, as Schellenberg (Schellenberg, 2002) says and McNaughton (McNaughton, 1992) recognizes. From this consideration we must conclude that if God cannot be harmed then there is nothing to be compensated for. All that would be needed for atonement with God, contrary to Swinburne's account, is repentance and apology. If God has created the world to be the way, it is then He will expect us to make mistakes and He cannot be injured by them. After all, our mistakes are a direct result of how God created the world, there is little blame on us for them let alone objective guilt. Besides, reparation is not the only way to show sincere remorse and can even be offered grudgingly or insincerely, "I'll put things right if it will shut you up", one might say. It would be much better reparation to God if a person was to change his life for the better, thinks Schellenberg.

Although, according to Swinburne (2002), God may not have been physically or psychologically hurt it remains the case that his plan for creation has been disrupted by the moral failings of humans. Moreover, says Swinburne, if somebody has been wronged reparation is owed to them whether they are upset or not.

### **One Reparation is Enough**

Given the assumption of the existence of God in the picture of morality that Swinburne has painted, a wrongdoer needs to atone to both the victim and to God. For example, if I steal someone's property I have to make it up to them and make it up to God as well. As we have seen this, according to Swinburne, is a moral obligation and is required for genuine forgiveness of sin. However, some may hold that if somebody wrongs another then they must make reparation to them alone. There is no need for separate reparation to God. If one has wronged God by way of wronging another then surely, as

Schellenberg (2002) points out, they must seek to make things right via the same route that things were made wrong. So, to atone to God one must right what was wronged and nothing more. Certainly there would be no need for Jesus to sacrifice himself. So, as an additional example, if a child hurts another child then it will be sufficient for the child to make things right with the other child; the separate atonement is not needed for the parent of the injured child even though the parent may have been hurt as well as a result of the pain of his child.

### **The Life and Death of Jesus is not a Reparation**

Schellenberg (2002) believes that it would be better to offer reparation to God by working acts of righteousness rather than plead the sacrifice of another which is what Swinburne's Atonement theory enjoins upon us. The latter takes much less effort and would therefore suggest that the sacrifice of Jesus would not be much of a reparation for sin. Yes, says McNaughton (McNaughton, 1992), the sacrifice of Jesus is costly but it is not the wrongdoer who has to pay for it. Yes, McNaughton adds, the sacrifice of Jesus may indeed humble the sinner and force the sinner to take his sin seriously and to lead a good life but this is not enough because leading a good life is already a part of genuine repentance so cannot be offered as reparation (contrary to the suggestion of Schellenberg) – as Swinburne (Swinburne, 1989) himself seems to believe. The sinner leading a reformed life of goodness is part and parcel of the sinner being repentant and apologetic and hence something the sinner should be doing anyway regardless of Jesus' sacrifice.

Swinburne (1989) admits that God could forgive without the need for reparation and penance. Swinburne also admits that even if God were not to waive his right for reparation and penance he could

have accepted a different type of reparation other than the life and death of Jesus. This is especially given that reparation to God does not have to be equivalent to the extent of human sin (Schellenberg, 2002).

There follows from these considerations an objection: a good God could not have tolerated seeing His son suffer if He did not have to, hence Swinburne's account of the Atonement is untenable (unless Swinburne admits God is not good). Quinn (1994) does not believe that this objection is insuperable but it does appear to show, he thinks, that Swinburne's understanding of the Atonement is morally counterintuitive.

The former is an objection which Porter (2004) also makes. Given that even on Swinburne's view God could forgive a sinner without reparation, if God did insist upon reparation then reparation other than the sacrifice of Jesus could be morally acceptable. Porter asks why was the life of Jesus not enough as reparation? Why was his terrible crucifixion also needed? Porter says that "it is implausible to think that a good God would require such an event for forgiveness". Swinburne (Swinburne, 2007; Swinburne, 1989) appears to assume that Jesus voluntarily proceeded to his crucifixion but a voluntary sacrifice of life is not morally valuable unless it is for a good reason. However, it seems that on Swinburne's account there is no good reason independent of revelation for Jesus' harsh death. If Jesus did not have to sacrifice his life, then his sacrifice can only be interpreted as either foolish or suicidal. These are things that Swinburne would not want his Atonement theory to attest to.

We have seen that Swinburne believes that because of human inability to sufficiently compensate God for sin God became incarnate in Jesus and sacrificed Himself so that humans could in fact sufficiently compensate God for sin by pleading this sacrifice. McNaughton

(McNaughton, 1992) asks why God insists upon reparation for human sin given that He knows that humans cannot provide it. If God did not insist on reparation (compensation) then the costly sacrifice of Jesus would not have been required. If God did not insist on reparation, then it would have meant that Jesus would not have had to undergo the great troubles of his life and death. Although insisting on reparation may help the wrongdoer to take his wrongdoing seriously, unless he provides the reparation himself it is all too easy to offer.

To sum up, if on Swinburne's account atonement can be achieved without the sacrifice of Jesus then the sacrifice of Jesus becomes pointless. But changing the focus of attention we can note that McNaughton (McNaughton, 1992) tries to make sense of Swinburne's claim that God has given mankind the life of Jesus to offer back to God in atonement. The claim seems strange to McNaughton because the life of Jesus is neither money nor property that can be transacted. Even if the life of Jesus could be made available to sinners as reparation to God in the way Swinburne describes, how can it be offered more than once? Similarly, how can a cheque to pay for a broken window be made available to pay for all broken windows again and again? McNaughton mentions a private response to these points in which Swinburne makes sense of the life of Jesus being a reparation which sinners can offer to God. In summary, Swinburne says that the reparation which a sinner offers to God when pleading the sacrifice of Jesus is the furtherance of God's plans for mankind. This includes men living morally good lives, seeking atonement with God, and not letting Jesus' sacrifice go to waste. (If a sinner did not plead Jesus' sacrifice then the sacrifice would have been in vain.) So, McNaughton concedes, there would appear to be a way in which the life of Jesus can be offered to God. However, McNaughton does not

think this offer can count as reparation because it involves a vicious circularity.

It is circular, claims McNaughton, for God's forgiveness to depend on reparation when the reparation involves God's forgiveness. The reparation, on Swinburne's account, involves God's forgiveness because God's plans for mankind include that they should atone for their sins and be accordingly forgiven. It makes no sense to seek the forgiveness of God for hindering His wish that man should be forgiven by offering a sacrifice which is only beneficial if men are forgiven. Furthermore, the aim of the sacrifice of Jesus was for men to be forgiven and it is only a beneficial sacrifice if men are forgiven. It follows that it would also be circular if this sacrifice was offered as reparation seeking forgiveness.

### **Only a Wrongdoer Can Make Reparation**

According to Swinburne (1989) nobody can atone for the sins of another but there are special cases where the wrongdoer can be helped to atone. For example, if the wrongdoer has no means to make reparation himself a third party – or even the victim – could provide the wrongdoer with the required means. McNaughton (1992) disagrees. He maintains that only the wrongdoer can make reparation for himself and nobody else can do it for him. If a third party or the victim provides reparation to the wrongdoer for him to offer in atonement to the victim, then this does not count. The wrongdoer associating himself with the reparation provided by another is not the same as the wrongdoer making reparation. The only way a wrongdoer could offer reparation to the victim with the help of somebody else, maintains McNaughton, is if the item used as reparation was gifted to the wrongdoer with no conditions attached. If the wrongdoer, then chose

of his own volition to use his gift for reparation it would be acceptable as reparation from the wrongdoer to the victim.

### **Life is Not a Gift**

Aspenson's (1996) contention is that little sense can be made of Swinburne's idea that life is a gift from God. As a result of this Swinburne has not shown why humans have a duty to obey God. Perceiving life as a gift from God is a normal Christian view, as Swinburne (Swinburne, 1989) notes. In the cases where it does make sense to think of life as a gift then, according to Aspenson, still no duty to obey God arises. So, as Aspenson sees it Swinburne's view of the Atonement is inconsistent.

A gift is something which is given to someone, but to whom would a human life be given to? Clearly, life could not be given to somebody before they are alive. Neither could life be given for the first time to somebody after they are alive unless life is something given to a soul before it is embodied. In this case we would have to expect that the soul before it is made 'alive' is competent enough to accept the supposed gift of life and the responsibilities involved. If the soul has no such competency, then there is no duty on the part of the ensuing person toward God.

Perhaps it is the sustenance which God provides to humans which is properly described as a gift. However, if this were so it would be a moral duty of God to provide sustenance to that which He created, unless the choice to be created was ours. It would certainly not be the case that a duty was owed to God.

Perhaps by "gift" is meant the type of endowment with which institutions are founded. This type of gift is logically impossible to decline and therefore gives rise to no obligation toward the benefactor by the one receiving the gift.



So, the only way in which it makes sense to speak of the gift of life giving rise to duties is when life is earthly embodiment given by God to a soul competent enough to accept the gift and the risk of undergoing various evils.<sup>1</sup> This is problematic for Swinburne because it seems that in his view the aim of earthly life is ideally for a person to undergo a process of character training. On successful formation of a good character the soul becomes suitable for residing in heaven. (Swinburne, 2005; Swinburne, 1989) But if the soul was already mature enough to accept the gift of life then it would seem that there would be no point of living, on Swinburne's account.

### **The Atonement is Multifaceted**

There are many different accounts of how the life and death of Jesus can provide atonement between mankind and God. Some accounts stress only one aspect of the life and death of Jesus, for example, that it was a sacrifice. Some accounts allow for various understandings of the life and death of Jesus. Swinburne's account of the Atonement falls into the former category, it is what Quinn (Quinn, 1994) calls "monistic". This is because Swinburne only allows rival understandings of the Atonement to have metaphorical meaning. Accordingly, Quinn finds Swinburne's Atonement theory unsatisfactory.

### **Salvation is Not the Result of Effort**

Brümmer (1992) assesses the implications for the doctrine of Atonement given different models for the relationship between God and humans. We have seen that Swinburne views the relationship

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1. This would appear to be like the Islamic view which results from the covenant between God and mankind mentioned in various places in the Quran.

between God and humans to be based on duties and obligations. Brümmer calls this type of relationship a contractual relationship. According to Brümmer a contractual relationship implies merit for the person who achieves salvation. This is because atonement between God and a sinner is achieved through the sinner's effort for offering reparation. However, Brümmer (1992) points out that the idea of salvation being earned is against Christian scripture: "For it is by his grace you are saved, through trusting him; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of." (Ephesians, pp. 2, 8-9).

### **The Relationship Between God and Humans is Loving**

Swinburne (1989) criticises an understanding of the Atonement which rivals his own understanding for being too "mechanical". Swinburne maintains that reconciliation is intimate and personal. Brümmer notes that a model of the Atonement which involves obligations and duties is also rather impersonal. If the relationship between God and man is a loving relationship then talk of obligations is out of place, says Brümmer (1992). This seems reasonable, after all rights and obligations are rarely mentioned – if at all – in relationships involving love such as parent-child relationships and married relationships.

### **Life is Not a Gift**

Although the objection I would now like to discuss, and which I the focus of this paper, has been made directly to Swinburne it would seem it could apply to many Atonement theories. Aspenon's (1996) contention is that little sense can be made the Christian idea that life is a gift from God, and idea which Swinburne (1989) describes as normal.

As a result of this Swinburne has not shown why humans have a duty to obey God. In the cases where it does make sense to think of life as a gift then, according to Aspenson, still no duty to obey God arises. So, as Aspenson sees it Swinburne's view of the Atonement is untenable.

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Perhaps it is the sustenance which God provides to humans which is properly described as a gift. However, if this were so it would be a moral duty of God to provide sustenance to that which He created, unless the choice to be created was ours. It would certainly not be the case that a duty was owed to God.

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Interestingly, the Quran seems to point us towards the idea of people existing as souls before they became embodied as humans.

And [remember] when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their backs, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, [saying]: ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes, verily. We testify.’ [That was] lest ye should say at the Day of Resurrection: O! of this we were unaware (Holy Quran, al-A'raf, 172).

The view that there was a primordial state before human life on earth has not met with universal acceptance among Muslims. However, the idea can be found among Sunnis and has been defended by the celebrated Shi‘a exegete, Muhammad Husayn Tabataba‘i, in his commentary of the above verse in *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran*,

### Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to draw attention to an objection to Swinburne’s Atonement theory. The objection can be rebutted by appeal to the concept of the ‘soul’. The idea is that if life is earthly embodiment offered by God to a soul mature enough to recognize the implications, and if the gift is accepted willingly and happily, then humans do indeed owe obedience to God. It follows that, if life is a gift in this way, that human sin requires atoning to God.

Although Muslims believe that a human can be reconciled to God without offering reparation to Him and although life has not been described as a ‘gift’, the idea of a primordial soul will still have currency. This is because, if for no other reason, that Muslims will still want to argue that humans do owe obedience to God. It would be methodologically unsound to offer Islamic solution to Christian problems, and vice versa, but in the spirit of dialogue I highlighted an area where both traditions have something in common.

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\* Quran

\*\* Ephesians

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