

# Introduction: Life, Works and Philosophical Foundations

The central aim of this work is to provide an introductory guide to Richard Swinburne's philosophical thought – as expressed through his main philosophical writings – in a way that balances accessibility, depth and range. Thus, this work focusses on presenting Swinburne's arguments in a clear and engaging manner, making his complex ideas more accessible to a broader audience while maintaining the integrity and depth of his philosophical reasoning. By covering a wide range of Swinburne's works, from his early trilogy (*The Coherence of Theism*, *The Existence of God* and *Faith and Reason*) to his later contributions, this guide offers a comprehensive overview of his thought and its development over time. Therefore, ultimately, this work seeks to demonstrate how Swinburne establishes the rationality of theistic and Christian faith through rigorous philosophical argumentation. By exploring his defence of the coherence of theism, the existence of God and the philosophical basis for Christian doctrine, this work thus highlights the strength and persuasiveness of Swinburne's case for the reasonableness of religious belief. Moreover, by engaging with critical objections to Swinburne's work and presenting compelling responses, this guide showcases the resilience and adaptability of his philosophical framework in the face of scholarly critique. In presenting Swinburne's ideas in an accessible yet thorough manner, this work aims to equip readers with a solid understanding of his contributions to the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. This understanding will enable readers to appreciate the significance of Swinburne's work in demonstrating the compatibility of faith and reason, and its potential to provide a rational foundation for

theistic and Christian belief. Therefore, as such, this work serves as an invaluable resource for those seeking to explore the philosophical underpinnings of religious faith and to engage with one of the most influential and rigorous defenders of theism and the Christian faith in contemporary philosophy. We shall now explore Swinburne's life and works, focussing on his educational background, academic positions and major philosophical achievements.

## **The Life of Richard Swinburne**

### ***Early Life and Education***<sup>1</sup>

Richard Granville Swinburne was born on 26 December 1934 in Smethwick, a town in the metropolitan borough of Sandwell (near Birmingham) located in the West Midlands, England. He was the only child of William Henry Swinburne and his wife Gladys Edith Swinburne, née Parker. Richard's mother's family were from the Lowestoft area, with his maternal grandfather working as an optician and his paternal grandfather running an off licence in London during World War II. Richard's father worked as a schoolteacher for much of Richard's early childhood and, around 1946, he took a position as musical education advisor to Essex County Council – one of the first to hold such a role. Later in his career, William became head of the music department at a polytechnic college in Colchester. Before Richard's birth, his mother worked as a secretary and, after he went away to boarding school, she worked as a secretary again to help pay his school fees, sometimes staying in London during the week and only returning to the family home in Colchester on weekends. The Swinburne family moved from Smethwick to Colchester, where they lived until Richard was seventeen, except for two years from 1939 to 1941, when, fearing wartime bombing, the family relocated to the village of Tiptree, in the Essex countryside. Richard vividly remembers seeing the sky filled with German bombers on their way to attack London and wondering aloud to his mother whether God would allow the Germans to win the war. Though his parents were not religious, he cannot remember a time when he did not believe in God. From ages seven to ten, Richard attended a private preparatory

---

1. The detailed biographical information provided here is based on personal correspondence with Richard Swinburne and the written interviews and autobiographical information featured in the bibliography.

school affiliated to Colchester Royal Grammar School, where his father taught. His mother arranged for him to have special Greek and Latin tutoring. When he was ten, Richard spent a year confined to bed with suspected tuberculosis (as the prescribed cure for the illness at that time was extended periods of bed rest). His mother looked after him and hired tutors to help him keep up with his studies. Being an only child in a strained marriage, she focussed intensely on encouraging his academic achievement.

After his recovery, Richard boarded at a preparatory school in Felixstowe for one and a half years. In 1946, he won a scholarship to Charterhouse, a top English public school (in Britain ‘private school’), which he attended until 1952. Richard’s mother was very happy about him being awarded this place, given her belief about the importance of a public school education for progressing efficiently through life. At Charterhouse, Richard continued his study of Greek and Latin, but was unable to fully participate in sports due to his health. He was confirmed in the Church of England at age sixteen. However, he largely kept his religious devotion private, not participating in school Christian groups. The school holidays were a particularly lonely time for Richard, as he returned to an empty home, with his mother working (in her previously held role as a secretary) and his father busy with musical activities, and an unhappy marriage. To keep occupied, Richard read extensively, kept scrapbooks of current events and went on outings with his mother. However, he had few friends and little family social life during those periods. That is, Richard’s transition to boarding school led to a disconnection from his earlier school friends and left him without close friendships during school holidays at home. Moreover, due to his suspected tuberculosis, he was unable to participate fully in the school’s sporting activities, which caused some of his peers to regard him as a “weed”.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, most of his contemporaries at Charterhouse came from relatively affluent families, whereas Richard’s background was more modest. These factors contributed to his feeling somewhat isolated during his time at the school. After finishing at Charterhouse, Richard completed two years of National Service from 1952 to 1954. He was able to spend most of that time intensively studying Russian language rather than military training. This allowed him to engage in deep intellectual

---

2. For Richard’s specific referencing of this comment, see Baker-Hytch M. An interview with Richard Swinburne. *Religious Studies*. 2024: p.1.

conversations about philosophy, religion and politics with the other academically inclined young men in the Russian course.

In 1954, Richard began his studies at Oxford University. He had won an open scholarship to study Classics at Exeter College, but decided to switch to Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE). Studying PPE with a focus on philosophy would provide a broad base of knowledge of the modern world before he began training for his chosen vocation as an Anglican priest. However, Richard was disappointed that his philosophy tutor was absent during his first year, requiring him to focus on politics and economics rather than philosophy. He was also dismayed to find that Oxford philosophy at that time was dominated by ordinary-language philosophy, which focussed on analysing the use of language rather than addressing substantive questions. That is, the prevailing ordinary-language philosophy dismissed topics such as metaphysics and religion as little more than an antique speech-act game. It also largely ignored science, an area that intrigued Richard. The notable exception was Friedrich Waismann, a former member of the Vienna Circle and Oxford's lecturer in the philosophy of science. Waismann's lectures, particularly on space, time, and their connection to relativity theory, were the most inspiring Richard attended. These topics not only captured his intellectual curiosity but also seemed relevant to his hope of connecting philosophy to religion. On his own, Richard became convinced that modern science posed challenges to Christian belief that needed serious philosophical engagement – although the Church itself seemed complacent. He was especially concerned with the apparent conflict between science and human free will. Nevertheless, Richard performed very well academically, earning a first-class degree in PPE in 1957 after vigorously defending his exam results in his viva voce. He was accepted for ordination training in the Church of England but decided to stay on at Oxford to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy before embarking on an ecclesiastical career. This is that, during this time, Richard had begun to feel a calling to become a priest and hoped that philosophy might prove useful in addressing questions of religion.

From 1957 to 1959, Richard undertook a Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree, a two-year graduate programme that served as the main preparation for an academic career in philosophy. Supervised by Professor H.H. Price, Richard wrote his thesis on the relationship between different branches of science, focussing on the hierarchy between physics, chemistry, biology and psychology. This choice

of topic reflected his recognition that he needed to seriously study science in order to address its challenges to theology. He also undertook a philosophical study of the rationality of religious belief. During his BPhil, Richard lived in St Stephen's House, an Anglo-Catholic seminary, where he also did theological study and spiritual formation in preparation for ordination. However, he delayed taking holy orders in order to finish his philosophical studies properly. From 1959 to 1961, he held a prestigious junior research fellowship at St John's College, Oxford. In 1960, Richard married Monica Holmstrom, a fellow Oxford student and devout Anglican. That year he also completed the Oxford postgraduate diploma in theology and passed his General Ordination Examination, formally qualifying him for the priesthood. Nevertheless, he received permission to delay his ordination in order to continue his studies in the philosophy of science.

### ***Early Career: Leeds, Hull and Keele***

In 1961, Richard took up a research fellowship at the University of Leeds. This position finally gave him the opportunity systematically to study the natural sciences alongside the philosophy of science. With the historians of science, Jerry Ravetz and Donald Cardwell, Richard studied key developments in physics and biology, including hands-on laboratory work. He came to believe that the criteria used to judge scientific theories, such as a theory's simplicity and ability to make testable predictions, could also be used to evaluate the probability of theism as an explanatory hypothesis. However, Richard's academic progress put a strain on his young family. His wife Monica was isolated at home while he worked. She had given up her own teaching career to raise their two daughters, born in 1961 and 1962. The Swinburnes lived a long way away from the university in Leeds but had little money for furnishings or social activities. Though Richard's flexible schedule allowed him to help with childcare (as Richard and Monica had two children together: Caroline and Nicola), Monica felt lonely and distant from his intellectual world.

In 1963, Richard obtained a permanent position as lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Hull, where he taught until 1972. During his early years there, the Swinburnes continued to live modestly. At first, they lived in a small house and lacked a car and telephone – and, though the Church of England still expected him to be ordained and serve as a priest-scholar, he reluctantly concluded

that his family situation and demanding academic research made that impossible. This is that, outside of practical considerations, Richard initially felt a calling to become a priest, but his focus gradually shifted toward academic scholarship. He realised, over an extended period of time, the importance of providing a rational defense of religion, especially in an era when the dominant theological perspective held that “religion is entirely a matter of faith; you enter into religion, and you mustn’t expect arguments, because that is demeaning to God”. Richard found this approach insufficient for engaging the educated world, which demanded a more rigorous response. Believing he could make a greater impact as an academic philosopher, he pursued this path to help offer the intellectual defense he saw as essential. So, at Hull, Richard was able to develop his ideas about the philosophy of religion in conversation with his colleague Christopher Williams, a Roman Catholic philosopher who had had to leave the Benedictine order when he developed polio, and was thereafter confined to a wheelchair. Richard also got to know well the atheist philosopher J.L. Mackie, who was of great help to him by reading the manuscript of his two main first books on philosophy of science. The first of these was *Space and Time* (1968). In it, he used methods drawn from the analysis of scientific concepts to examine the philosophical foundations of space-time physics and cosmology. Though still a technical work, the book’s publication established Richard as a young philosopher of science unusually open to religious questions. (Richard’s personal relationship with Mackie deepened during this period, as Mackie, who had been appointed as the first Professor of Philosophy at the nearby University of York, frequently visited Hull with his colleague to attend fortnightly seminars and guest lectures. Their intellectual exchange was particularly fruitful in the areas of space, time, and confirmation theory, with Mackie providing valuable feedback on Richard’s draft manuscripts. Their first public debate on the existence of God took place at Hull, marking the beginning of a long-standing philosophical dialogue. Even after both had moved on – Richard to Keele and Mackie to Oxford – their intellectual engagement continued. When Richard delivered his Wilde Lectures on the existence of God at Oxford in 1976, Mackie attended all eight lectures of the first series. Later, Mackie’s *The Miracle of Theism* would serve as a response to Richard’s *The Existence of God*. Despite their opposing

views,<sup>3</sup> Mackie particularly valued Richard's rational approach to religious philosophy, which stood in contrast to the contemporary theological tendency to treat religion as an isolated language game).

In 1969-70, Richard was able to take a sabbatical as Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Maryland near Washington DC, which gave him the chance to visit other American universities. On returning to Hull, Richard published his second book, *An Introduction to Confirmation Theory* (1973), which developed a probabilistic model of scientific reasoning and which allowed him subsequently to apply this to the question of the probability of theism. Based on the strength of this work, he was promoted to a senior lectureship in philosophy at Hull.

### ***Mid-Career: Professorship at Keele***

In 1972, Richard was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University of Keele, a position he held until 1984. Founded in 1949 as a pioneering experiment in interdisciplinary education, Keele required all undergraduates to take a common foundation year and live on its residential campus. Richard shared Keele's vision of integrating the sciences and humanities. In keeping with Keele's ethos, he and his family initially lived on campus, though they later bought their own house nearby.

As head of department, Richard had to devote more time to teaching and administration than at Hull. Nevertheless, he took advantage of the freedom offered by his chair to write three major works developing a systematic philosophy of religion. In *The Existence of God* (1979), Richard built on the logical analysis of theism he had begun in *The Coherence of Theism* (1977) by arguing that the theistic hypothesis had greater probability than its alternatives as an ultimate explanation for the existence and nature of the universe. While drawing some criticism from more positivistic philosophers, the work established Richard alongside Alvin Plantinga as a leading exponent of the rationality of religious belief. While Plantinga argued that religious belief could be a 'basic belief' which did not need any further justification - termed the thesis of 'Reformed Epistemology', Richard argued that such justification is available as the most probable explanation of the most general features of the universe.

---

3. Mackie, J.L. *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.