

THE ETERNITY OF GOD

Comparative Study of Bernard Lonergan, S.J. and Richard Swinburne

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Is God timeless? That's one of the most interesting questions of the philosophy of religion. Because of the many issues involved, it is a real challenge for every scholar involved in the field. In this book, only two major authors are explored, but their systems are compared on several different levels.

Abstract

Bernard Lonergan argues that God should be postulated in an explanatory context as absolutely timeless, because the most perfect understanding cannot exist as a sequence of acts. Different acts imply some unexplained facts, and thus limitations on the intelligibility of the primary being. If the primary being were not completely intelligible, the divine understanding would be restricted. Furthermore, given Lonergan's concept of time, it is logically contradictory to postulate God as existing in time.

Richard Swinburne argues that God should be postulated as temporal (everlasting), because such a theistic explanation is meaningful, coherent, and it has greater explanatory power in comparison with other theistic theories. Swinburne is not able to see any meaning in the concept of a timeless God, and he argues that explanations using analogies with a temporal 'instant' or a kind of timeless 'duration' or 'period' are incoherent.

Even though Lonergan's concept of God as unrestricted act of understanding seems to be meaningful, his affirmation of the timelessness of God does not seem to be sufficiently well justified for two main reasons. First, on Swinburne's definition of time,

the temporal existence of a perfect being does not seem to imply any unintelligible imperfection. The temporal nature of God can be explained by the divine choice to create temporal being, and his choice can be explained by good reasons for creating the universe. Second, Lonergan refuses Swinburne's time as an illusion, but it is only with Swinburne's concept of time that Lonergan's God can really be said to be 'time-less.' Since the evidence of cosmic background radiation show that there is a preferred reference frame, all the temporal intervals could be synchronized in a temporal divine understanding. Swinburne's explanation of the relation between an everlasting God and temporal creatures seems to display more explanatory power, and it makes the conception of God conceivable in ordinary language. Based on Swinburne's criteria of explanatory power and simplicity as evidence of truth, Swinburne's theory is more probably true.