Sincere Unbelieving Christians? **[1]**

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This weekend I listened to an episode entitled "What is faith? [2]" from the Say Hello to my Little Friend *[3]* podcast which is presented by doctor Glenn Peoples and which I have gotten into over the last few months. The episode deals with definitions and requirements for faith, and I thought that it was very good. I also thought that some of the things which it touched upon could be related to my previous post [4] on open-minded non-Christians who can find the idea of embracing Christianity a bit daunting.

In particular, the following quote from professor Richard Swinburne jumped out at me:

> "It is not necessary, in order to pursue the goals of a theistic religion, to believe that there is a God rather than no God: only to believe that it is more probable that the goals of religion will be attained by acting on the assumption that there is a God of a certain kind, than by acting on any incompatible assumption of a rival creed. This will constitute putting one's trust in God. I give an analogy to show how someone may put his trust in something which, on balance, he does not believe to exist. A man in prison may be told that he will be rescued by 'the Big Chief' from the outer yard of the prison, if he can get there at night. On balance, the prisoner does not believe this rumour: he does not think that there is such a Big Chief. But the rumour has some plausibility, and the prisoner has no other hope of escaping. He believes that it is far more probable that he will attain his goal of escaping by acting on the assumption that the Big Chief exists, than by acting on any other assumption. So he steals a file, files away at the bar of his cell, and squeezes through the cell window to get into the outer yard of the prison. He is liable to be punished when all of this is discovered, unless by then he has succeeded in escaping. The prisoner is not inappropriately described as 'putting his trust in the Big Chief'. Of course, if we pursue the Christian way, while believing that it is more probable than not that there is no God, our prayer will implicitly have a tentative character: 'Oh God, forgive me' will implicitly be short for 'Oh God, if you exist, forgive me'. Some philosophers consider that kind of prayer absurd. I do not find this kind of prayer in the least absurd. It was the kind of prayer uttered by the father who asked Jesus to cure his paralytic son, 'If You are able to do anything'. Jesus indeed asked for more, in the way of something like trust, but was satisfied by the father's tentative 'I believe! Help my unbelief!" Surely a good God respects honesty. Weak belief, however, inevitably makes it harder to pursue the Christian way than does stronger belief. For the stronger the belief, the more probable, the believer believes, the pursuit of the Christian way will attain its goal. The stronger a person's belief in the Christian creeds, the stronger would need to be any purpose to pursue rival goals provided by temptations in order to deter him from pursuing the Christian way. Strong belief is a great help, but weak belief, plus total dedication, will enable us to pursue the Christian way and develop that character which will fit us for heaven. I find it implausible to suppose that a good God will refuse heaven to anyone with the right character whose creedal beliefs, though not through his own fault, were weak." — Richard Swinburne

I found this very thought-provoking and will have to mull it over a bit more. It certainly has put Pascal's Wager [5] into a new light for me. If what was said here is true, then we should show even more patience and care to non-Christians who sincerely want to believe. Ideally we would want them to come to strong faith, but perhaps the way there is through weak faith, and they should not be "bullied" into needing strong faith before they are accepted into a church (community).

Peoples makes some good points around this quote, especially regarding "faith" and "hope". I encourage you to listen to the full episode.

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