

14. Miracles

‘God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it.’

Francis Bacon

‘There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves.’

David Home

However persuasive they may seem, arguments for the existence of God based on cosmology or suggestions of design in the natural world, are at best indirect. Some people, though, claim that God's activity can also be witnessed directly in the physical world, through miracles. All the world's major religions possess a folk lore about miracles. The Bible contains many such accounts, and even today reports of miracles are not uncommon.

In trying to assess the significance of such evidence the first problem is to decide exactly what is meant by a miracle, and there is by no means unanimous agreement on this. ‘A miracle of modern science’ conveys the impression of something unusual and spectacular, but nobody would suggest the word is being used literally in such a case. Aquinas defined a miracle as something ‘done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things.’ In modern jargon this means a violation of the laws of nature produced by God. In other words, God intervenes directly in the operation of his world and changes something by ‘breaking the rules’. If such events could be definitively verified they would indeed provide powerful evidence both for God's existence and his concern for the world.

Sometimes however a miracle is taken to imply something weaker. Many a ‘miraculous escape’ has convinced a lucky person of God's benevolence. The lone survivor of a plane crash may regard his deliverance as a miracle, even though the same event led to the pointless destruction of his fellow passengers.

This ‘guardian angel’ interpretation of extraordinary events belongs to quite a different category from the explicit violation of natural laws. Nobody suggests that surviving a plane crash must entail a suspension of the laws of physics. Such events are merely remarkable coincidences within the normal operation of physical processes. The proverbial parachutist with a malfunctioning parachute who lands in a haystack is simply lucky to have fallen where he did. No direct divine intervention seems to be

involved.

Those who choose to read divine significance into improbable coincidences and lucky escapes are simply giving a theistic interpretation of straightforward, if unusual, natural events. But however convinced the lucky person himself may be that 'the gods are smiling on him', it is hard to make an objective case for the existence of God from events of this sort. The man who wins a fortune on the football pools may reflect on the fact that, purely by the rules of the game, someone will win. And the soldiers who, claiming God's help, slaughter their adversaries in battle, might ask themselves where God was when the enemy soldiers needed him.

Believer: In my opinion, miracles are the best proof that God exists.

Sceptic: I'm not sure I know what a miracle is supposed to be.

Believer: Well, something extraordinary and unpredictable.

Sceptic: The fall of a large meteorite, or the eruption of a volcano is extraordinary and unpredictable. You aren't suggesting they are miraculous surely?

Believer: Of course not. Such phenomena are natural events. Miracles are *supernatural*.

Sceptic: What do you mean by supernatural? Isn't it just another word for miraculous? (Consults Oxford dictionary.) It says here: 'Supernatural. Outside the ordinary operation of cause and effect'. Hmm. It all depends on what you mean by 'ordinary'.

Believer: I would say ordinary meant familiar or well understood.

Sceptic: A dynamo or a radio would have been regarded as miraculous by our ancestors, who were not familiar with electromagnetism.

Believer: I agree they probably would have regarded these devices as miraculous, but erroneously, for we know they operate according to natural laws. A truly supernatural event is one whose cause cannot be found in any natural law, *known or unknown*.

Sceptic: Surely that is a useless definition? How do you know which laws might be unknown? There may be totally bizarre and unexpected laws that we may simply happen not to have stumbled across. Suppose you saw a rock float in the air. Would you regard that as a miracle?

Believer: It depends... I would have to be sure there was no illusion, or trickery.

Sceptic: But there may be natural processes that produce super illusions that nobody would suspect.

Believer: Or perhaps all our experience is an illusion and we might as well give up discussing anything?

Sceptic: O.K., let's not take that route. But you still can't be sure that some quirky magnetic or gravitational effect isn't making the rock levitate.

Believer: But it's easier to believe in God than outlandish magnetic phenomena. It's all a question of credibility.

Sceptic: Ah! So by a miracle you really mean 'something caused by God'?

Believer: Absolutely! Though he may sometimes use human intermediaries.

Sceptic: Then you cannot present miracles as evidence for God, or your argument is circular. 'Miracles prove the existence of an agency which produces miracles.' What it really boils down to, as you admitted, is belief. You have to believe in God already for miracles to have any meaning. Apparently miraculous events in themselves cannot prove the existence of God. They might be freak natural events.

Believer: I concede that levitating rocks are dubious from the miracle point of view, but consider some of the famous miracles: Jesus' feeding of the multitude, for example. You can't tell me any sort of natural law would duplicate loaves and fishes!

Sceptic: But what possible reason can you have for believing a story written hundreds of years ago by a lot of superstitious zealots with a vested interest in promoting their own brand of religion?

Believer: You are remarkably cynical. Taken in isolation, the loaves and fishes story is nothing. You have to see it in the context of the whole Bible. It was not the only miracle reported there.

Sceptic: Remind me of another.

Believer: Jesus walked on the water.

Sceptic: Levitation! I thought you'd dismissed that sort of miracle as 'dubious'.

Believer: For a rock yes, for Jesus, no.

Sceptic: Why not?

Believer: Because Jesus was the Son of God and so possessed supernatural powers.

Sceptic: But you're begging the question again. I don't believe Jesus had supernatural powers. If he did walk on water I would rather suppose it to have been a freak natural event. However, I don't believe the story anyway. Why should I?

Believer: The Bible has been a source of inspiration to millions. Don't dismiss it lightly.

Sceptic: So have the works of Karl Marx. I wouldn't believe any account of his about miracles either.

Believer: You may refuse to accept the word of the Bible, but you can't dismiss the claims of hundreds of people who have experienced miracles even in recent years.

Sceptic: People claim all sorts of things: meetings with aliens, teleportations, clairvoyance. Only a fool or a madman would listen to such nonsense.

Believer: I concede that many wild and fanciful claims are made, but the evidence for faith healing is compelling. Think of Lourdes.

Sceptic: Psychosomatic! Let me quote you: 'It's all a question of credibility.' I agree. Surely it's easier to believe in a few freak medical events than to invoke a Deity?

Believer: You can't debunk all miracles as psychosomatic. What does that term mean anyway? It's just a euphemism for 'medically inexplicable'. Why should so many people be so convinced by miracles if they were just natural freaks?

Sceptic: It's all a hang-over from the age of magic. Before the rise of science, or the great world religions, primitive peoples believed that almost anything which happened was caused by magic — the action of some minor god or demon. As science explained more and more, and religion groped towards the idea of one God, so the magical explanations became moribund. But a vestige lives on.

Believer: You're not suggesting that Lourdes pilgrims are demon worshippers!

Sceptic: Not overtly. But their belief in faith healing differs very little, maybe not at all, from the beliefs concerning African witch-doctors, or spirit contacts, for example. Atavistic superstitions from the age of magic have simply been institutionalized by the great religions. Talk of miracles is just sanitized magic-mongering.

Believer: There are powers of good and evil. They manifest themselves in many ways.

Sceptic: And do you take evil supernatural events as evidence for God too? Does he also wield evil powers?

Believer: The relation between good and evil is a delicate theological subject. There are many shades of opinion about your questions. Man's wickedness can act as a channel for evil, whatever its ultimate origin.

Sceptic: So you would not necessarily make God responsible for the so-called occult powers, if they exist?

Believer: Not necessarily, no.

Sceptic: So there are at least two types of supernatural events, then: those that originate with God — what you have called miracles — and the nasty ones — the black arts, shall we say — the origin of which is controversial. Then there would be the neutral ones, I suppose. Like psychokinesis and precognition? It all sounds a bit complicated to me. I'd rather believe that all these topics are just primitive fantasies, a relic of the age of magic, a vestige of polytheism. Your belief in miracles is just the respectable end of a spectrum of neurotic primeval superstitions, and quite unworthy of a God of the majesty and power that you describe.

Believer: It seems to me to be not at all unreasonable to suppose that supernatural powers exist, and can be manipulated in a variety of ways, for good or evil. Faith healing is the good side.

Sceptic: And provides evidence for God?

Believer: I believe so.

Sceptic: What about the failures, the unfortunate ones who don't respond to the healing? Doesn't God care about them? Or does his power waver occasionally?

Believer: God moves in mysterious ways, but his power is absolute.

Sceptic: That's just a platitudinous way of saying you don't know. And if God's power is absolute why does he need miracles anyway?

Believer: I don't understand.

Sceptic: An omnipotent God, who rules the entire universe, and who can make anything

happen, has no need of miracles. If he wants to avoid somebody dying of cancer he could prevent them contracting the disease in the first place. In fact, I would regard a miracle as evidence that any God had lost control of the world, and was clumsily trying to patch up the damage. What is the point of God doing all these miracles?

Believer: Through miracles, God demonstrates his divine power.

Sceptic: But why. is he so obscure about it? Why does he not write a clear proclamation in the sky, or turn the moon tartan, or something else utterly incontrovertible? Better still, why not avert some major natural disaster, or prevent the spread of devastating epidemics? However wonderful a few cures at Lourdes may be, the stock of human misery is enormous. I repeat, the miracles you describe seem unworthy of an omnipotent God. Levitation, multiplying fishes — they have the air of a cosmic conjuring act. Surely they are just products of puerile human imagination?

Believer: Perhaps God *is* averting disasters all the time.

Sceptic: That's no reply! Anyone could claim the same. Suppose I say that by pronouncing an incantation each morning I prevent world war, and cite as evidence the fact that world war has indeed not broken out? In fact a group of UFO buffs claim just that.

Believer: Christians believe that God continually holds the world in being, so in a sense everything that happens is a miracle, and all this talk of distinction between natural and supernatural is actually a red herring.

Sceptic: Now you're shifting ground. You seem to be saying God *is* nature.

Believer: I'm saying that God causes everything in the natural world, though not necessarily in the temporal sense. He doesn't just set the whole thing going and then sit back. God is outside the world, and *above* the laws of nature, sustaining all of existence.

Sceptic: It seems to me we have a semantic quibble here. Nature has a beautiful set of laws and the universe runs along a pathway of evolution mapped out by those laws. You describe exactly the same thing in theistic terms by talk of 'upholding'. Your God is only a mode of speaking, surely? What does it mean to say God upholds the universe? How is that different from simply saying that the universe continues to exist?

Believer: You cannot be content with the bald fact that the universe exists. It must have an *explanation*. I believe God is that explanation, and his power is employed at every moment sustaining the miracle of existence. In most cases he does this in an orderly way — what you would call the laws of physics — but from time to time he departs from this order and produces dramatic events as warnings or signs to human beings, or to assist the faithful, such as when he parted the Red Sea for the Hebrews.

Sceptic: What I find hard to understand is why you think that this supernatural miracle-

worker is the *same* as the being who created the universe, who answers prayers, who invented the laws of physics, who will sit in judgement and so on. Why can't all these individuals be different supernatural agents? I should have thought that with so many miracles apparently supporting many different and conflicting religions, a believer in miracles would be obliged to concede the existence of a whole host of supernatural beings in competition.

Believer: One God is simpler than many.

Sceptic: I still don't see how so-called miraculous events, however remarkable, can be regarded as evidence of God's existence. It seems to me you are simply exploiting the fairy godmother instinct we all have, turning 'Lady Luck' into a real being and calling her God. How can you take these 'miracles' seriously?

Believer: I don't find anything incredible in God, who is creator of all, manipulating material objects. Compared to the miracle of his universe, what is so remarkable about God parting the Red Sea?

Sceptic: But you are still basing your argument on the assumption that God exists. I agree that if a God of the sort you describe — infinite, omnipotent, benevolent, omniscient, and so on — does exist, the Red Sea would be a triviality for him. But how do we know he does exist?

Believer: It's all a question of faith.

Sceptic: Precisely!

This inconclusive dialogue I hope brings out the essence of the conflict between science and religion when it comes to supernatural matters. The religious person, who is comfortable with the notion of God's activity and sees God's work all around him every day, finds nothing incongruous about miraculous events because they are simply another facet of God's action in the world. In contrast the scientist, who prefers to think of the world as operating according to natural laws, would regard a miracle as 'misbehaviour', a pathological event which mars the elegance and beauty of nature. Miracles are something that most scientists would rather do without.

The evidence for miracles is, of course, highly controversial. If they were to be accepted solely on the basis of existing testimony, there would be no good reason not to accept a host of other claims (UFOs, ghosts, spoon-bending, mind-reading, for instance) that seem equally well attested. But even if a scientist is persuaded to accept miracles, there can be no real dividing line between the miraculous and what is now known as the paranormal.

There is a huge and rising interest in paranormal phenomena, from metal-bending to ESP. Very few paranormalists imbue their subject with theological connotations. The phenomena, even in cases of healing, are regarded as 'Godless miracles'. The primitive beliefs and hysteria which accompany many excursions into the paranormal serve to degrade religion. A well-known Sunday newspaper supplement once compared Jesus Christ with Uri Geller. Unfortunately, many reported miracles do have the flavour of music-hall stunts. St. Joseph of Cupertino, for example, is said to have so embarrassed

his holy brothers by his tendency to float in the air at worship that he was confined to his cell for the purpose of mass!

It is interesting to note that many of the symbols of alleged supernatural religious events have reappeared among the modern UFO cults. Take, for example, the stories of witnesses who claim to have been abruptly cured of some long-standing medical complaint after an encounter with UFO occupants, or occasionally by merely sighting a UFO itself.

Levitation also plays a prominent part. Speeding serenely and silently through the sky, the ephemeral flying saucers are powered, we are assured, not with the aid of crude rockets or brute force motors, but by neutralization of the Earth's gravity. Sometimes the ufonauts themselves float about weightless at ground level.

Clearly, aerial phenomena, levitation and healing powers are deep-rooted in the human psyche. In the age of magic they were prominent and overt. With the development of organized religion, they became refined and submerged, but the strong primeval element has never been far below the surface. Now, with the decline of organized religion, they have re-surfaced again in technological guise, employing the language of spacecraft and pseudoscience, of mysterious force fields and mind over matter – a polyglot synthesis of primitive superstition and space-age physics.

Miracles have always constituted the showbizz end of religion, and stood uneasily beside the other alleged paranormal phenomena, much of which, like diabolism, seems most unsavoury. The believer has the doubly-difficult job of first persuading the sceptic that the phenomena really occur, which is a daunting task given the dubious nature of most testimonies, and then convincing him that miracles are in any direct way connected with God. This means either accepting all supernatural events (even the unpleasant ones) as the work of God, or somehow establishing a clear distinction between God's miracles and the rest. And in an age when ESP is as familiar as ABC, most of those who are convinced of miracles would rather put their money on mind-power than God-power.