

A VIEW OF MIRACLE – WITH APOLOGIES TO DAVID HUME

ELDON R. HAY

“We may conclude that the Christian religion was not only at first attended with miracles but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity; and whoever is moved by *faith* to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.”¹ I propose to employ this statement by Hume as a suitable framework for stating my own conclusions concerning the concept of miracle. It is to be noted that in so doing, I am stating my own convictions, and I make no attempt to expound Hume’s own arguments, except incidentally. At the same time, it is my conviction that this conclusion contains most insights necessary to any adequate understanding of the concept of miracle. This is not to deny that the interpretation here given is different from, if not entirely opposed to, Hume’s own views. In what follows, I repeat that I am giving my own view, and often Hume is (as Hamann says) ‘the philosopher speaking against his will.’

Having explained how I intend to use it, Hume’s conclusion may be conveniently broken into six separate statements, around which my own beliefs may be clustered and clarified. We may conclude that 1) the Christian religion was at first attended with miracles; 2) even at this day the Christian religion cannot be believed by any reasonable person without a miracle; 3) mere reason is insufficient to convince us of the veracity of the Christian religion; 4) whoever is moved by faith to assent to the Christian religion is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person; 5) this continued miracle subverts all the principles of a person’s understanding; 6) this continued miracle gives a person a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

‘We may conclude that the Christian religion was at first attended with miracles.’ By this, I mean two different things.

First of all, if miracle were to mean simply ‘an unusual event’ then Christianity was at first attended with ‘miracles’. It is quite true that

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¹Hume, David. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by C. W. Hendel. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955, x, pp. 140-41.

we do not know to-day how many of the the events traditionally called miracles actually did occur. Probably a few of them actually did happen. Perhaps many of them. Possibly all of them. Opinions here will vary. It seems quite likely that Jesus actually did some quite unusual things. Jesus was an unusual man. But there was no single activity which he performed that proved conclusively that he was unique. It is not true to say that the ancient world was full of miracle-workers, any more than it is true to say that the twentieth century is full of statesmen. Nevertheless, the number of miracle-workers in the first century was considerable, just as the number of statesmen in the twentieth century is considerable. The title 'miracle-worker' in the first century was no greater, and no lesser, claim to fame than the term 'statesman' is in the twentieth. I believe that Jesus performed some very unusual deeds. But I do not think that any single event (or the events taken together), in and by itself (or themselves) *proved* to anyone that Jesus was the Son of God, or that he was not of this world, or that in the flesh of this man dwelt the Word of God.

Secondly, if by miracle is meant 'an event in which the activity of God becomes apparent to a particular person', then Christianity was at first attended with 'miracles'. There can be no doubt that through the media of certain events, men and women were transformed, changed, converted. There can be no doubt that by means of certain happenings, individuals were convinced of the presence, compassion, forgiveness and love of God. There can be no doubt that in and through certain occurrences, individuals were convinced that they had been reformed and reshaped by the redeeming hand of a loving Heavenly Father. But now the question arises: were these certain events, in and through which men felt the activity of God the 'unusual events' referred to above? In some instances, this was undoubtedly the case. But what I wish to point out is that there is no *necessary* connection between the two. Now, as then, a person *may* become aware of the activity of God in an unusual, marvellous or extraordinary event, but that person does not *necessarily* see the activity of God in that particular event. An unusual worldly event does not, in and by itself, either prove the existence of God or point to his presence. On the other hand, a very ordinary event may point to the presence and activity of God, though again, this is not necessarily the case. The *miraculum* in miracle does not refer to its unusualness as a worldly event. The *miraculum* refers rather to the gracious activity of God towards a man who realizes that he does not deserve this act of grace and love; and moreover, this gracious love may become apparent to him in the most ordinary *or* the most extraordinary world event. As Brunner says:

"Both the 'ordinary', and the 'extraordinary' action of God is equally wonderful; for everything that God does is wonderful, for those who see that it is *God* who does it."²

We conclude that the Christian religion was at first attended with miracles; in the sense of 'unusual events' and in the sense of men becoming aware of 'the activity of God.' And it is clearly the second definition which comes closer to what I mean by miracle. The Christian faith was *at first* attended with miracles, but what about now?

'We conclude that *even at this day* the Christian religion cannot be believed by any reasonable person without a miracle.' Unless there is one event, or a complex of events, or a series of events in and through which one feels or sees or is convinced of the activity of God, one cannot believe in the Christian religion. I believe that this is the case. But what has this present activity of God to do with what happened in the first century? Clearly, it is not enough to be convinced that Jesus was an unusual man. It is not enough to be assured that certain men's lives were transformed in the first century. It is not enough to be certain that specific individuals long ago became aware of the activity of God. No event is a miracle for me unless in and through this event I feel the activity of God in the here and now. The only meaningful miracle is the one that takes place in the present. Of course, a particular report or passage of the Bible may be the means of mediating God's activity to a person in the here and now. The church indeed proclaims this: that the Bible can and does mediate the activity of God. When through an event or a passage of the biblical message, I become aware of the activity of God, then the Bible is the Word of God to me and for me in that moment. In the Bible we are presented with a gospel, a redemptive message, awaiting the response of the person moved by faith. But more than God's activity is mediated through the Bible: rather God's activity in *Christ* is mediated through the Bible. The Bible mediates God's activity in Christ. Preaching mediates the kerygma. The sacraments mediate the gospel. Whereas we may properly say that the Bible, the tradition, the liturgy and the worship of the church are the chief mediators of God's activity in Christ, they are not the sole mediators. Any event may mediate God's activity in Christ. For the distinctive thing about God's activity in Christ is that it occurs to-day, now, at the present time in and through the encounters, things, responsibilities, and decisions which confront one in everyday life. Christ is the ever-living, ever-present Lord of life. Thus, any event which mediates God's activity in Christ

²Brunner, Emil. *Dogmatics*. Vol. II. Translated by O. Wyon. London: Lutterworth Press, 1952, p. 160.

to me and for me at the present time is a miracle. We conclude that even at this day the Christian religion cannot be believed by any reasonable person without a miracle: that is to say, one must be convinced of God's activity in Christ in one's own life, in the here and now — else Christianity is meaningless. And this point is sharpened in the following paragraph.

'We may conclude that mere reason is insufficient to convince us of the veracity of the Christian religion.' No compilation of the facts of Christianity will itself coerce one into belief. No chronology of the lives of the saints, however glowingly presented, will itself lead to belief. No recitation of the data of the history of Christendom, however favourably presented, will itself prove God's activity. No string of arguments, however persuasively cited, will itself convince us of the presence or existence of God: Hume himself clearly saw this. "What a noble privilege is it of human reason to attain the knowledge of the supreme Being; and from the visible works of nature, be enabled to infer so sublime a principle as its supreme Creator? But turn the reverse of the medal. Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are anything but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps you will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical assertions of a being, who dignifies himself with the name rational. . . . The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject."³ And again, "look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptuous or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children."⁴ Mere reason is insufficient, in and by itself. But then, is scepticism in regard to reason equivalent to unbelief? This seems to have been Hume's position: hardened into a rather dispirited resignation. I should say rather that scepticism in regard to reason is a pre-condition

³Hume, David. *The Natural History of Religion*. Edited by H. E. Root. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956, xv, pp. 75-6.

⁴Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by N. K. Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935, xi, pp. 259-60.

of belief. It is the experience of the shock of finitude: the recognition of, or better still, the insight into, limits — limits of both being and knowing. It is a recognition that in and by himself man cannot find God, or reason his way to him, or create him in man's own image. It is a recognition that man in himself does not know God, except God reveal himself. Man cries out for that which he cannot attain. Reason peers over her borders with sightless eyes. The thirst for God can be quenched by God alone. Yet even this thirst is a contact, even the cry of despair a communication, even the black night of scepticism a medium of God's presence. "You have to reason the faith that is incipiently in you: you can seldom be reasoned into faith, if it is not already genuinely there. 'Lord, I believe: help thou my unbelief.' You are not really asking for knowledge, but for understanding of what you already perceive and know. Hence to-day, it is not a religious *expertise* that people are really seeking, but rather an *ars spiritualis*, — a far more difficult task."⁵

"We may conclude that mere reason is insufficient to convince us of the veracity of the Christian religion." That is why I reject the attempt to accommodate God in suprapolarity (as in the view of Karl Heim)⁶ or to place him in an exalted slot on a language framework (as in Ian Ramsey's position).⁷ Terms like 'God,' 'faith,' 'miracle,' cannot be categorized and placed in a suitable niche of a *Weltanschauung*. We cannot construct a world-picture *and then* explain miracle in terms of it. At best, we can only say 'God's activity in Christ is *like* . . . ' 'A miracle works *as if* . . . ' We speak falteringly about such things, we speak by analogy only. We must resist the natural impulse and tendency to force God into a philosophical system, or to find an impervious metaphysical method by which to explain miracle. 'God acts.' 'But *exactly how* does God act?' 'I confess that I do not know *exactly how* — God's activity cannot be precisely pin-pointed in this manner — but he acts *as if* . . . ' All this analogical way of speaking does not mean that God works rationally, irrationally or non-rationally. It is a confession that such terms are not to be termed false, but rather that such terms are totally inadequate to express God's activity. It is a confession that all our categories and ways of expression can but hint at his ways; that none of them circumvent or adequately speak about his nature. Nor does this analogical way of expression mean that our response to the activity of God is an irrational or non-rational response:

⁵ McCulloch, J. "Integrity and the Parson," *The Listener*, 61 (1959), p. 336.

⁶ Cf. my "Heim and Farmer — The Concept of Miracle," *The Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. III, No. 2 (1971), pp. 30-50.

⁷ Cf. my "Ian Ramsey—A Linguist's View of Miracle," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (1972), pp. 35-47.

but it also means that if we said only that it was a rational response, we should be saying considerably less than the facts of the experience actually demand. The activity of God in Christ confronts or encounters the whole man (and not just his intellect, though this is included), releasing him from the bondage of sin, demanding and making possible a total existential response in obedience and in love.

'We may conclude that mere reason is insufficient to convince us of the veracity of the Christian religion.' It goes without saying that he who has faith in the veracity and efficacy of mere reason as an absolute will be unable to see in any event the activity of God. I should say that this is the continual temptation of the man under the influence of the scientific attitude and the scientific method: the temptation to say or to think that when one has explained an event scientifically everything meaningful has been said about that event. Thus, anything outside of a strictly scientific explanation is ruled out *a priori*. This position — the decision to regard the scientific explanation as the only meaningful one — is, of course, a philosophical, and not a scientific, position. Basically, there is no conflict between science and theology. Conflicts do arise between a scientist and a theologian when either man does not recognize the value of the other discipline and the limits of his own. The scientist has a right to demand respect for the scientific explanation of every single event. Yet the scientist will recognize that his is not the sole or ultimate explanation. If he does fail to recognize this, he ceases to be a scientist and offends the theologian. Again, the scientist, *as scientist*, cannot be expected to support, defend, follow or criticize the theologian in his interpretation; though since the scientist's own explanation is not the sole or ultimate one, he may have a varying degree of respect for the interpretation of the theologian. Therefore, the scientist may well salute the theologian's interpretation, though he cannot (as a scientist) speak of it. On the other hand, the theologian must not attempt to stay the heuristic passion of the scientist, or to mark out a realm of so-called sacred events as utterly beyond the comprehension and explanation of the scientist. This, it seems to me, is what Barth tends to do.⁸ In other words, the

⁸Cf. Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. III/1. Translated by J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey and H. Knight. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958, pp. 78-9. "History subsequent to creation has a creaturely element, i.e., a similarity and relationship with other creaturely occurrences. This relationship may be anything but obvious. It may be easily and almost completely obscured. This is particularly the case where history assumes the character of miracle. It is most apparent at the centre of the history of the covenant of grace—in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What does it really mean to see and grasp a real miracle? What does it mean to perceive and establish a resurrection from the dead? In this case the historical element in the event seems almost to have disappeared and the 'non-historical' to have taken the upper hand. Even the human account of it, the description of the event, seems necessarily to have burst through the framework of historical relation. And this is what actually takes place."

theologian will respect the scientist's explanation, although he will also insist that it is not the sole or ultimate explanation.

'We may conclude that mere reason is insufficient to convince us of the veracity of the Christian religion.' A miracle mediates the divine mystery, which is ultimately beyond the range of human comprehension. It is impossible, therefore, to explain miracle — as God's act — on a par with worldly acts. It is therefore false to say that God's activity is *against nature* (as in the contranatural position),⁹ *beyond our present knowledge of nature* (as in the preternatural view),¹⁰ *above nature* (as in the supernatural position).¹¹ As I see it, all attempts to explain God's activity in worldly terms (whether against nature, beyond nature or above nature) are not really explanations: largely because such attempts are not speaking about God at all. We can only say that God's activity transcends the activity of this world, confess that 'activity' and 'transcends' are only analogous ways of expression. And if we go on further to discuss God's activity, we must freely and fully recognize that we speak only by analogy: and that our best analogies are inaccurate. We must hold a tremendous 'as if' over all our pronouncements about God's activity. That is the fault of the views of Heim and Ramsey: God is categorized. Thus all the faults of traditional supranatural theology tend to be repeated, save that these faults are dressed in modern verbiage. In short, I do not think that miracle can be 'explained' at all, our comprehension is inadequate to enable us to pin-point God's activity in a manner acceptable to 'mere reason,' there must be the essential catalyst and ingredient of faith.

We cannot 'explain' or 'define' a miracle — since such an event mediates mystery, since faith is necessary, since it (the term miracle) seeks to give expression to the activity of God. No more can one 'explain' how the events of two thousand years ago become now the media of God's present act. The extentionalist theologians have failed, on the whole, to explain the relationship between past events and present miracles. Bultmann does not 'explain' how the *Mirakeln Jesu* become the *Wunder Christi*, he does not explain how the Jesus of his-

⁹The contranatural view: the essence of miracle is that it is unlawful and inexplicable. Being contrary to or against nature, a miracle cannot be subsumed under a law of nature at the time at which it happens or at any other time. Cf. my "A Contranatural View of Miracle," *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, XIII (1964), pp. 266-80.

¹⁰The preternatural view: the essence of miracle is that it is inexplicable at the time at which it occurs. Being beyond what is known of nature, it is at the time of its happening inexplicable, but it need not remain so. Cf. my "A Preternatural View of Miracle", *Colloquim: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review*, III (1969), pp. 223-28.

¹¹The supernatural view: the essence of miracle cannot adequately be understood without due consideration to the person of Jesus Christ. The divinity of Jesus makes miracle intrinsic and necessary. Cf. my "The Supernatural View of Miracle", *The Journal of Religious Studies*, IV (1972), pp. 33-52.

tory becomes the Christ of faith.¹² Macquarrie's analysis suffers from the same lack of precision in his discussion of the connection between the objective-historical and existential-historical elements of Christianity.¹³ In each case there is an uncomfortable hiatus of explanation. We must now ask the question: Is this hiatus a lack of clear thinking on the part of the existentialists? Is this hiatus a failure to follow arguments to their logical conclusions? Or Is this seeming lack of clarity demanded by the facts of the case before the Christian? Is this hiatus essential to an adequate statement of the faith? For myself, I feel that the latter alternative is the case. For we cannot explain in any other than analogous terms how God works: how the Jesus of history is also the ever-living Lord. Any attempt to 'explain' how past events become present miracles cannot satisfy the claims of 'mere reason.' It would be folly to think that any attempt could do so: the folly, incidentally, that traditional theology tries to commit.

'We may conclude that whoever is moved by faith to assent to the Christian religion is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person.' The phrase 'whoever is moved by faith' points to the fact that the insight which enables a man to recognize in an event the activity of God, is a gift from God himself. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 16.17) were the words of Jesus to Peter when this apostle recognized Jesus as the Christ. To be moved by faith to assent to the Christian religion is to be given grace to believe, and this grace is imparted by the Heavenly Father. Barth shares with Bultmann this clear emphasis upon the fact that true faith is a God-given insight: that in this sense genuine faith is theological, rather than psychological, in character. Moreover, this 'assent' is not the mere determination to accept in an uncritical fashion a corpus of Christian doctrine: which seems to have been Hume's interpretation of the verb 'to assent.' 'To assent' as here interpreted, means rather a total existential response on the part of man to the unmerited gift of God in Christ Jesus. No argument or metaphysic can conjure up this gift of grace. It is given only to him who despairs of getting it himself, it is granted only to him who knows that he cannot seek God out, but throws himself unreservedly on the mercy of God.

Yet if one 'assents' to the Christian religion, is one conscious of a continued miracle in his own person? As we have seen, the ability to assent is given by God himself. In other words, the faith to assent to

¹²Cf. Bultmann, R. *Faith and Understanding*. Vol. I. Translated by L. P. Smith. New York: Harper and Row, 1969, p. 260. "As deeds of a man in the past they [the miracles of Jesus] do not *directly* concern us. Seen as such they are not works of the Christ, if we understand by the work of Christ the work of salvation." (Italics mine.)

¹³Macquarrie, J. *An Existentialist Theology*. London: S.C.M. Press, 1955.

the Christian religion demands in itself a miracle. Is one miracle enough to sustain one in the Christian religion? Can one live the Christian life on the basis of one experience of the activity of God? I should say that one miracle is clearly insufficient; though the first time one consciously experiences God's activity may be not only dramatic, but formative and to some extent determinative in all those which follow. One miracle does not suffice for the person living the Christian way: he must despair over and over again of his own abilities and virtues, throw himself on the mercy of God, and so be open to God's gracious activity. But is a miracle the only form of God's activity? What about prayer, providence and other forms of revelation? Not too much is gained by trying to draw a sharp and rigid line separating miracle from other forms of Christian experience, though the differentiation between miracle and other aspects of Christian revelation as given and expounded by Farmer, seems to me to be both scholarly and profound. He points out that when in any event or complex of events, one is aware of the compassion and grace of God's activity in Christ, then that is a miracle for that particular person. The more immediate the presence of God is felt to be, the more likely is the Christian to employ and use the miracle.¹⁴ Beyond that it is probably unnecessary to proceed: the essence of miracle runs through all forms of revelation.

Hume's phrase 'in his own person' points out two further elements necessary in any adequate statement of the concept of miracle. First, a miracle is an event in and through which a particular person becomes aware of the activity of God in Christ. At best, any event can only mediate God's activity. Without a particular person to become aware of God's activity in and through an event, miracle is a meaningless term. In a miracle, a *particular person* sees the activity of God in Christ. In a miracle, a particular person becomes aware that God is entering into *his own personal* situation. An event is not a miracle *for me* unless I am *personally* aware of God's gracious activity in Christ. Secondly, although in a miracle a particular person becomes aware of God's activity, this miracle is not received exclusively for that person's own individual benefit. But rather, God's gift in Christ is to be shared with those in the situation of faith. And the experience is to be used in speaking to those outside the situation of faith; that they too, by faith, may experience the gift of God. We may conclude that whoever is moved by faith to assent to the Christian religion is aware that if he is to continually see God's activity in Christ, he must despair over

¹⁴Farmer, H. H. *The World and God*. London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1935, p. 118. The more intensely personal and individual the succour of God is felt to be, the more appropriate and inevitable the word miracle becomes on the religious man's lips."

and over again of his own abilities and achievements, and so open himself to that activity of God's in Christ Jesus.

'We may conclude that this continued miracle subverts all the principles of a person's understanding.' This is undoubtedly the 'hardest' of all Hume's conclusions concerning the concept of miracle. Yet properly understood, it enshrines a basic insight into this same concept. On the one hand, the traditional view of miracle (whether that be contranatural, preternatural or supernatural) attempts to expound this insight by saying that an extraordinary event which has no apparent natural cause must be attributed — by default, as it were — to the causality of God. Such a view has some very obvious flaws from logical, scientific and theological standpoints. On the other hand, Heim attempts to expound this insight by saying that the existence of suprapolarity subverts the principles of a person's understanding. But this is a *Weltanschauung*, in terms of which miracle can be understood. Ramsey's approach suffers from the same basic fault. It is Bultmann¹⁵ and Tillich¹⁶ who expound this Humian insight in a meaningful and acceptable way. The exposition goes something like this. In ordinary everyday affairs, I look upon this world as mine, the sphere of my achievements, the realm in which I am creator and king. And because this is a godless attitude, this world becomes consequently the scene of anxiety, fear and hatred. In a miracle this ordinary everyday relationship is transcended: I am no longer the centre and soul of this sphere; God is recognized as creator, upon whom I throw myself, from whom I receive freedom from this world, and my sinful past, to whom I now owe the glad obedience of love. Consequently, in that moment I am truly free, free to be myself, free to love. *In this sense*, we may conclude that a miracle subverts all the principles of a person's understanding. So explained, the interpretation of the word 'subverts' could be much better rendered by the word 'transcends.' A miracle does not demand (as Hume seems to have thought and Barth seems to imply) a *sacrificium intellectus*. Rather, as we have already noted, worldly relationships are transcended, though not destroyed, in the experience of miracle.

'We may conclude that this continued miracle gives a person a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.' A man without the insight into God's activity — that is to say, a miracle — sees this world as his own. He sees it as the sphere for his conquests and his achievements. Though this attitude is quite necessary in many of man's activities, it is not an ultimate attitude: and it

¹⁵Cf. my "Bultmann's View of Miracle," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XXIV (1972), pp. 286-300.

¹⁶Cf. my "Tillich's View of Miracle," *The Modern Churchman*, XV (1972), pp. 246-257.

is clearly not the one to adopt towards God. Moreover, the constant pursuit of this worldly attitude leads one into unhappiness: the more one gets the more one wants, the more man accomplishes, the more he runs away from his true existence. Only when he despairs of being himself, thrusts himself utterly upon God, can God speak to him. In a miracle, man recognizes that this is not *his* world — the sphere of his own achievements, however good — but *God's* world, the sphere of obedience, the realm of love. Such a man is forgiven, healed, redeemed. A miracle, as God's activity in Christ, always contains this redemptive element. Man's past no longer shrouds him as guilt, but is forgiven and truly past: hence man is now free, free to be himself, free to love. The other is no longer my adversary, but a man for whom Christ died. The world has ceased to be mine, and is now the sphere of joyous obedience to the Heavenly Father. For this reason, one cannot speak about a genuine miracle without at the same time speaking about oneself: one is now a new creature in Christ, the old Adam and the old reign has passed away. One is empowered to live, to be free, to *be* in a genuine way. *In this sense*, a miracle gives a person a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. Man now lives in the world, but he is not of it. God is the most real being of all. One lives in the light of things invisible. In a miracle — an event in which God's activity is apparent to faith-filled persons — we are certain that nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8.39).

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