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13 Miracles in Christianity

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The testimony to miracles has never been absent from Christianity although the theological and philosophical understanding of them has varied over the centuries. Whether they have been significant or marginal to the life of the church has in part been determined by popular piety, religious aspirations and expectations, and the judgment rendered about them in teaching, preaching and theology. There is a considerable difference at these levels, for example, between a Presbyterian parish schooled in the cessationist theology of certain forms of Calvinism and that of a Pentecostal congregation whose very existence is informed by the conviction that the extraordinary events of Pentecost continue in the life of the church. Here we may distinguish between affirmations of the miraculous in the witness of Holy Scripture to which both congregations would assent, and the belief that miracles have ceased or indeed still occur. Add to this the additional challenge that with the emergence of modernity in Western culture the former would come under scrutiny as well, it becomes clear that to speak of miracles is a complicated matter for many a Christian.

An important distinction is also in order. Miracles fit into the category of the extraordinary course of religious events. How this differs from ordinary religious events is also a matter of some debate, especially if religious experiences are considered as operations of divine grace. Therefore, the healing story of Jesus and the paralytic in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 9.1–8; Mark 2.1–12; Luke 5.17–26) poses the perennial question to faith, in the words of Jesus following his declaration of the forgiveness of sins: 'Which is easier to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk"?' (Mark 2.9). Both ostensibly are works of God's grace. Or, in the language of what came to prevail in Latin Christianity, both are supernatural, although in common usage it is the healing that is considered extraordinary. Surely, it is an act of grace when God forgives sins and regenerates the sinner. Although not defined as a miracle per se

St Augustine can speak of the 'justification of the wicked [as] ... a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth'.[1]

This distinction between the ordinary workings of grace and extraordinary miracles in the Christian theological account of divine agency is important. Both faith itself and its extraordinary manifestations require an apologetic. In the case of miracles, the apologetic will be more demanding. In the ordinary life of a believer faith may be present without miracles but not without grace. That the paralytic's sins were actually forgiven is clearly a matter of faith, which the sceptic can easily dismiss. That he rose up and walked was evident to all. Even the sceptic must offer an explanation of what happened. Nevertheless, faith cannot be separated from miracles. Jesus' miracles were often a response to faith (Matt. 8.10; 9.29). Conversely, not many mighty works occurred in his hometown of Nazareth due to their lack of faith (13.58). Therefore, the witness to miracles and faith will be similar. Miracles, then, are a subset of the understanding of faith and its theological explanation of God's general and special action in the world. We may distinguish between miracles, the theology of miracles and the apologetic offered on their behalf.

THE HISTORY OF MIRACLES IN CHRISTIANITY

Patristic era

Some of the Church Fathers were rather circumspect about miracles. The main issue was how to relate the criteria of discernment to the witness of miracles. The biblical testimony already demonstrated that wonders can be performed by those who oppose God as in the case of the Egyptian magicians who could change their staffs into snakes as Aaron did (Exod. 7.10–12) at the Lord's command and the Egyptians by their magic arts. Or, that New Testament apocalyptic prophesies that false messiahs and prophets may even mislead the elect (if that were possible) through their signs and wonders (Mark 13.22). Indeed this is a dimension of the deceiving power (2 Thess. 2.11–12) that God sends in the last days and that culminates in the appearance of the two beasts who possess the authority and power of the dragon (Satan), the second of which will perform great signs to deceive the inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 13.13–14). No wonder that with reference to another group, false disciples as distinct from the antichrist, Jesus could say only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven rather than those who without this witness perform prophecies, exorcisms and mighty works in his name (Matt. 7.21–3).

Eusebius was aware of this and therefore counted it no argument in favour of the Montanists that, analogous to the witness of miracles, they could boast of many martyrs (*Church History* 5.16), a view consistent with Paul who argued that without love, tongues, prophecies, extraordinary faith, evangelical poverty and martyrdom count for nothing (1 Cor. 13.1–3). In another place, recalling such sub-apostolic fathers as Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch, he also mentions one Quadratus blessed with a prophetic gift and others who 'with the grace and cooperation of God ... even at that late date many miraculous powers of the divine Spirit worked through them, so that at the first hearing whole crowds in a body embraced with whole-hearted eagerness the worship of the universal Creator' (*Church History* 3.37). Their veracity was in evidence because of the message of faith being preached, that word of God proclaimed as a foundation by the apostles and delivered in faithful preaching and transmitted through the 'inspired gospels in writing'.

The same dilemma concerning authenticity occupied the considerations of Origen (*c.* 185–254 CE) and Augustine (*c.* 354–430 CE). In his treatise *Against Celsus*, Origen replied to this pagan critic's charge that the miracles of Jesus were no different than those performed by 'dealers in magical arts'. Quite to the contrary, Origen remonstrates. Rather than performing them for show as Celsus charges, the miracles of Jesus along with his instruction induce his hearers to 'undertake the reformation of their characters' (*Against Celsus* 1.68). The same argument is made against the benefits bestowed by the legendary Greek poet and miracle worker Aristeas as compared to Jesus. In addition to the criterion of character, Origen also brings into play the doctrine of the incarnation, prophesied beforehand, and bearing fruit in communion with God by which humans who follow the precepts of Jesus are raised to the divine (3.26–8).

Augustine articulates similar concerns. Initially, he adopted what appears to be a cessationist position, namely, that miracles ceased after the establishment of Christianity or, in his words, the founding of the Catholic Church. His reasons have to do with the integrity of faith: 'lest the mind should always seek visible things, and the human race should grow cold by becoming accustomed to things which when they were novelties kindled its faith' (*True Religion* 47). Later he would partially retract this position by observing that miracles do still take place but not with the same frequency and greatness as at the beginning (*Retractions* 1.12.7; 1.13.5). In the *City of God*, Augustine enumerates many miracles of his own day, some of which he witnessed, yet insists that those in Scripture are more widely known as compared to the limited particularity of those that are contemporary (*City of God* 22.8).

The cessationist understanding was not uncommon among the Church Fathers although not necessarily a majority view. If the early Augustine was representative of the West, in the East one of no less stature than John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) articulated similar concerns. For him, one should not expect miracles for if one practises the virtues, especially love, one is not in need of signs and such signs gain nothing for the Christian where virtue is absent (*Homilies on Matthew* 44.4 (on Matt. 13.24–30)). It also comprises the integrity of faith. Quoting the risen Christ's words to Thomas – 'Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed' (John 20.29) – Chrysostom argues that the overpowering course of events that miracles generate make for an abridgement of faith (*Homily on the First Letter to the Corinthians* 6.5). Within the broader framework of the Spirit's activity and the bestowal of gifts or charisms, Chrysostom underscores the difference between the apostolic age and the church in his own day. He does not disown charisms, such as tongues and prophecy, but internalizes and spiritualizes them,[2] a view consistent with his understanding of faith. This does not discount the fact that the experience of the charisms, including miracles, decreased in the life of the church, although many Church Fathers still bear witness to them in Christian antiquity.

More to the point there is sufficient witness that miracles played a part in evangelization and missions. As Kenneth Scott Latourette has remarked: 'It was not only to miracles of moral rebirth to which Christians could point. Pagans were also attracted by the miracles of healing wrought in the name of Christ.'[3]

Additionally, one should not underestimate the role of holiness combined with spiritual power. Such power could manifest itself in conversion, healings and exorcisms, not unlike the healing of the woman with a haemorrhage where Jesus perceived power (*dunamis*) had gone out from him (Mark 5.21–34). Spiritual power was associated not only with holy men and women but also with testimonies of martyrdom, relics, icons and the intercession of the saints. Already in place by late antiquity, many of these practices would shape the development of medieval Christianity. The important point is that such spiritual power appeared greater than that embedded in the surrounding culture. The testimony of Sozomen (*c.* 435) about the conversion of his friend Alaphion is typical:

> Alaphion it appears was possessed of a devil; and neither the pagans nor the Jews could by any enchantments deliver him from this affliction, but Hilarion, by simply calling on the name of Christ, expelled the demon and Alaphion and his whole family immediately embraced the faith.
>
> (Sozomen, *Church History* 5.15.14–17)

Even as signs and wonders were factors in conversion to the faith, so too, they figured in the ongoing life of faith. This was clearly evident in the monastic culture that developed in both East and West. The same concern about discernment and authenticity weighed heavily in the religious experiences of the monks since the very nature of their calling was the pursuit of holiness. It was not uncommon for various supernatural experiences to be rejected as temptations since the devil could appear as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11.14) as is related, for example, in the following story:

> The devil appeared to a monk disguised as an angel of light and said to him, 'I am the angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you'. But the monk said, 'See if you have not been sent to someone else; I am not worthy to have an angel sent to me'. And at once the devil vanished.[4]

In this case, as with many others, humility is the true sign of monastic holiness and supernatural experiences are in service of that virtue.

As Benedicta Ward has observed, various interpretations of miracles are involved, all to the benefit of faith, the two most significant being: 'either as a wonder to be marvelled at or as sign to be explored and understood'.[5] Authenticity connects the wonder with the true interiority of faith and holiness. Indeed miraculous wonders can lead to faith as in the instance of conversion but they can also lead to a more intimate union with God for those on the continuing pilgrimage of Christian life. Miracles can also be a sign of orthodoxy as the Eastern monks testified when confronted by various Christological heresies in the ancient church.

Medieval era

One must remember that from late antiquity through the medieval era the notion of miracle is not primarily an interventionist one in which God sets aside the laws of nature. In a world understood as God's creation, coming forth from the hand of God, miracles are signs of God's marvellous presence and activity. Again in Ward's words, miracles are 'not *contra naturam* but *praeter* [beyond] or *supra* [above] *naturam*'.[6] Thus the words of the eleventh-century Benedictine abbot, Desiderius of Montecassino (1058–87):

> Almighty God sometimes shows his miracles not only in great things but also in minor matters, so that the faith of believers shall be more and more increased and thus it causes all creatures to break out in

> praise of their Creator, since he is seen to have a care with fatherly piety in all those things that are granted to human endeavour.[7]

Or, those of Sicard, Bishop of Cremona (1185–1215):

> Wonderful is God who works wonderfully in all things, and more wonderfully in those beyond the course of nature ... confirming these things by miracles, that is, works unfamiliar to men, happening not contrary to nature which is always obedient to its Creator, but beyond nature, which does not usually work in such a way by its own force.[8]

This does not mean that the extraordinary was not noticed and even promoted. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary and the saints in visions and dreams, relics with curative powers, healings, and miraculous crucifixes were all reported as well as the pious sensibility that various sacramentals such as holy water and blessed candles provide spiritual and even material protection. The most famous of one of these phenomena is the story of St Francis of Assisi at the Church of San Damiano where Christ speaks to him from the cross to repair his house that has fallen into ruins. Within the framework of God's ever-present activity, the extraordinary blends with the ordinary within the world view of this era. *Miracula exteriora* and *miracula interiora* are both expected with the former in service of the latter. Authentic works of power, whether exterior or interior, are intended to increase sanctity.

Overall, the claim to the miraculous was broad, resident in the realm of popular devotional cults and piety to the elevated religious experiences of saints and mystics. St Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuits, testified in his autobiography to a number of mystical experiences, usually visionary, that were formative for his early spiritual growth. It was precisely these experiences that led him to develop his 'rules for discernment of spirits' in his *Spiritual Exercises*, a manual for retreat directors. This presumes a level of expectancy in the realm of experimental religion, and although the more common experience would be interior to the person praying, they could also be used to discern the more extraordinarily miraculous as well.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

With the advent of the Reformation a critique of the miraculous emerged from among the magisterial Protestant Reformers. Most influential was that of John Calvin (1509–1564), the Geneva Reformer. In his discussion of anointing with oil he admits that the anointing signified

for the early church the Holy Spirit and the gifts he bestowed including healing, but only as a symbol of such grace and not as its instrument. But in regard to his own day he adopted a cessationist position not dissimilar to some of the Church Fathers:

> But that gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles, which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the new preaching of the gospel marvellous forever.

And,

> The Lord is indeed present with his people in every age; and he heals their weaknesses as often as necessary, no less than of old; still he does not put forth these manifest powers, nor dispense miracles through the apostles' hands. For that was a temporary gift, and also quickly perished partly on account of men's ungratefulness.[9]

Similar sentiments had already been expressed by Martin Luther (1483–1546); not only in regard to the passing of miracles ('the days of miracles is past'),[10] but to their reconfiguration in reference to the spiritual work of God in the soul. Common to both Reformers are those words of Calvin implicating that miracles are no longer needed due to the true preaching of the gospel and according to the logic of the magisterial Reformation, the proper administration of the sacraments. Not only did this position assist the Reformers in their polemic against the Catholic Church with its so-called miraculous excesses in the arena of popular piety, but also held in check any similar tendencies in the Radical Reformation where religious enthusiasm in their judgment took root. The Reformers' criterion of discernment in meeting this challenge was not the authority of the church but the soundness of the gospel preached.

Yet the testimony of miracles did not entirely cease among the diverse and splintered Protestant movement. Connections of piety and expectation to pre-Reformation sensibilities were not entirely erased despite the 'stripping of the altars'. Traces of continuity between radical Reformers and medieval heretical sects such as the 'Spiritual Franciscans' has been noted by many. It was the appeal to the experience of the Holy Spirit by the 'spiritualist' wing of the Radical Reformation, as distinct from the Anabaptist wing, that set the context for religious enthusiasm and the possibility of miracles.

However, signs and wonders were not entirely absent in the Reformed stream of the magisterial Reformation, specifically, among some Puritans in England. An emphasis on interior miracles (mystical

and spiritual) as taught, for example, in Luther's delineation of 'works which are done with the power of God ... In the first place, Christians have the Gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament',[11] could be correlated with a Calvinist emphasis on divine providence. This nurtured a testimony to the miraculous (physical and exterior) or, at least, to wonders and marvels (*miranda*); the latter suggesting the discernment by faith of the works of God. Alexandra Walsham comments: 'such occurrences only appeared miraculous in the eye of the beholder: their actual natural causes remained cloaked and hidden from the view of imperfect human beings'.[12] The Puritan divine William Ames (1576–1633) understood that when God works in his extraordinary providence, it is above 'the usual and appointed order'. In an interesting turn of phrase Ames elaborates: that '[w]hatever is effected is, by metonymy of the effect, called a miracle'.[13] Such events included preservation in disasters, deliverance from dangers (the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada!), recovery from illness and other apparent supernatural occurrences; a host of events that could be classified if not miraculous outright then as 'special and extraordinary providences'. Additionally, the resurgence of the enthusiastic impulse, seldom absent from the Christian story, focused attention on miracles as the object of more direct witness wherever it flourished.

The Counter-Reformation Catholic Church did not neglect the promotion of the miraculous. It continued throughout the Baroque period and into the modern era appearing in a variety of forms. Not that the ecclesiastical hierarchy always and immediately assented to these events. The healing cult that built up after the apparition of Mary at Lourdes, France in the mid-nineteenth century is one example of a cautious hierarchy gradually affirming the supernatural events that took place – it took four years. Also, a close guard was kept up against those heterodox groups within the church that did not measure up to either doctrinal orthodoxy or pastoral supervision. An exemplary case was that of the Jansenists in France in the seventeenth century.

Hyper-Augustinian in their theology, the Jansenists also laid claim to numerous miraculous occurrences. This is quite instructive considering that their conflict with church authorities and religious orders that opposed them such as the Jesuits had more to do with the theology of grace they espoused than it did with the miraculous that neither the church nor the Jesuits were in principle opposed to. It was not so much a question of exterior versus interior life, but how supernatural grace is operative in the interior life to which miracles may or may not be of assistance. One thing miracles could not resolve, however, was the

orthodoxy of their doctrine, at least from the perspective of the church's magisterium.

On the Protestant side a contemporary, although very different, movement was that of the Quakers, the Society of Friends. As its nomenclature suggests, they earned their name from the physical manifestations that attended their religious experience. George Fox (1624–91), their main founder, was known not only for his religious enthusiasm and his willingness to suffer for it but for his miracles as well. His lost 'Book of Miracles' (only reconstructed in the twentieth century from his writings) records 150 miracles of which healings constitute the majority.[14] Although not the first, for example Montanism, early Quakerism was a charismatic movement, a distinction that renders an account of religious experience that is somewhat different than that espoused by traditional mysticism.

Recall the thesis that miracles in Christian theology are best understood within the pneumatological and charismatic framework of the Christian life. The work of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and the gifts the Spirit bestows (charisms or *charismata*) constitute the larger framework within which the working of miracles takes place. Healing is one of these charismatic manifestations. Contrast this with infused contemplation characteristic of classical mysticism. While both entail an experiential immediacy in relation to the divine, classical mysticism focuses on the union with God associated with progress in holiness. Charismatic gifts, in contrast, are directed to the edification of others. In this regard early Quakerism was an experiential religious movement with charismatic manifestations before settling into more sober forms of Quaker silence and expectant waiting.

Other movements emerged with various degrees of religious enthusiasm coincident with expectations of the miraculous. All of them to one extent or the other were familiar with the power of God descending upon their adherents accomplishing any number of works of grace from conversion and repentance to assurance of salvation, and prophecy and healing in some quarters. Among these were the French Prophets of Cevennes and the Camisards, seventeenth-century groups connected with the Huguenots, and the Convulsionaries of St Medard with Jansenist roots in the eighteenth century. Also in the eighteenth century the German Moravians and the English Methodists expected the power of God to effect graced transformations among its members, with the former more quietist than the latter. But it is the spiritual descendants of the Anglican priest John Wesley (1703–91), whose heart was 'strangely warmed' under Moravian influence in 1738, who prepared

the way for a more robust emergence of the supernatural and the miraculous. Wesley himself, the founder of the Methodists, took issue with cessationism and witnessed 'several things' that he judged could not 'be accounted for by the ordinary course of natural causes, and which I therefore believe ought to be "ascribed to the extraordinary interposition of God". If any man can choose to style them *miracles*, I reclaim not.'[15]

The significance of Wesley and the Methodists was not just that they were at the fountainhead of the 'revivalism' that would greatly influence Evangelical Protestantism. The First Great Awakening in North America and subsequent awakenings were all heavily experiential with the power of God evident in physical manifestations as well as in interior conversion. By the early nineteenth century, this pattern of revivals was systematized in the evangelistic work of Charles Finney (1792–1875). The relevant influence of these movements was that expectation of the power of God or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were integrated into the Christian doctrinal schema. The power of God, or a baptism with the Holy Spirit, was taught as a second work of grace after the first work of conversion and regeneration. This second work was identified initially as a work of sanctification, to free the believer from the power of sin in one's life. The Wesleyan emphasis on 'entire sanctification' was the predominant one, but non-Wesleyan versions also appeared which spanned denominational boundaries among Anglo-Saxon Protestants. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the 'Holiness Movement' was in full force out of which (along with other movements) the expectation of divine healing also emerged. This set the stage for the advent of an explicit signs and wonders movement with the birth of Pentecostalism at the turn of the twentieth century.

Modern era

It was the proto-Pentecostal movement of the Irvingites in England that signalled the two-fold emphasis on the gift of tongues (*glossolalia*) and prophecy as signs of God's power. Edward Irving (1792–1834), a Presbyterian pastor, encouraged both baptism with the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts in the new church he founded, the Catholic Apostolic Church. Likewise, John Alexander Dowie (1847–1907), founder of the Christian Catholic Church, conducted a healing ministry and founded an intentional Christian community at Zion City, north of Chicago. Both of these signs of the Spirit – 'inspired speaking' and healing – came together along with the doctrine of Spirit baptism, a subsequent work of grace following conversion that empowered the Christian for

witness and mission, as the signature elements of the Pentecostal movement. Combined with strong eschatological sensibilities, the belief in an imminent second coming of Christ, early Pentecostals understood their movement as the restoration of signs and wonders in the Last Days before the coming of the Lord.

Although there are many aspects to Pentecostalism and while it cannot be considered the exclusive provenance of Christian expectation for the supernatural and miraculous, its explicit signification of signs and wonders as evidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit elevated both the visibility and status of miracles. More importantly Pentecostalism has been the direct or indirect source of numerous offshoots and charismatic movements within global Christianity in the twentieth century and beyond, all of which retain a normative belief in signs and wonders. Classical Pentecostal churches, those denominations established after an initial phase of revival in the first quarter of the twentieth century, have influenced the healings revivals of the 1950s, the charismatic movements within the historic churches of the 1960s and 1970s, the third wave of Evangelical neo-charismatics of the 1980s, various and sundry independent neo-Pentecostal churches worldwide, and non-white Indigenous Churches. Even more dramatically, the miraculous has been the explicit subject of healing ministries throughout the history of Pentecostalism. Healing evangelists developed international reputations as signs and wonders accompanied their preaching, and as many flocked to their campaigns specifically to find healing for their maladies. Such figures as Aimee Semple McPherson, William Branham, Oral Roberts, Kathryn Kuhlman, T. L. Osborn, John Wimber, Francis McNutt and Reinhard Bonnke are among those notaries who possessed these healing gifts and that identifies a type of religious figure that still distinguishes the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

In addition to being the fastest growing sector of Christianity, Pentecostal and charismatic movements, which have occurred in nearly all Christian communions, have reintroduced into the realm of the normal Christian life and lay Christian spirituality a dynamic sense of divine presence and action. This is not confined to the interior work of grace, although the pursuit of holiness and the close association with perfectionist tendencies in the Holiness Movement are still very much a part of Pentecostal and charismatic intentionality. The latter does not necessarily resolve all the excesses within the various movements, especially where signs and wonders function not so much as a sign of the gospel as they do of a consumerist prosperity incentive.

Nevertheless, Pentecostals have cultivated discernment and pastoral judgment to identify and wean out excess and error. Needless to say, Pentecostal and Charismatic theologians have been quick to refute cessationist theological positions. One such theologian, Jon Ruthven, has argued, for example, that the eschatological dimensions of pneumatology, the Holy Spirit's work as a harbinger of the kingdom of God to come, is inimical to cessationism. As expected, what is at stake is the underlying theology of miracles, to which we now turn.

THEOLOGY OF MIRACLES

The understanding of miracles has traditionally had two foci. The first has been the causal explanation of miracles relative to theological accounts of divine agency and providence. The second has to do with the apologetic dimension both in defending the authenticity and integrity of miracles and how they function as credible signs of the faith. The latter has been of particular concern to Western Christianity as it passed through the European Enlightenment and into modernity. The first, even in the pre-scientific age, required considerable theological and philosophical examination in order to render a coherent account of the relationship between the action of God and the doctrine of creation. We begin with this first concern.

Miracles and divine agency

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) best captures a mature account of how God acts in miracles. Drawing on definitions set forth by St Augustine he expands on them and counters objections. One definition is as follows:

> Where God does anything against that order of nature which we know and are accustomed to observe, we call it a miracle.
> (*Against Faustus* 26.3)

Interestingly, in his explication Thomas does not elaborate on how God works against nature but simply identifies God as the cause of miracles that are performed outside causes accessible to human knowledge. Thomas further argues that miracles surpass the powers of nature, happen outside the natural course of things, and are above nature 'not only by reason of the substance of the thing done, but also on account of the manner and order in which it is done' (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 105, a. 7). Presupposed in these comments is an entire metaphysics of

creation in which Thomas articulates the relation between God and the created order in terms of causality.

Creation is dependent on God as its first cause. The primary divine causality of creation does not, however, eliminate secondary created causes as instrumental in the existence and conservation of created reality. All created things participate in the divine act of existence for their very being. In the course of the usual ordering and operations of creation the latter is still dependent on God for its own act of existence in which God is present and active in creation as its principal cause. Thus God acts through intermediate or secondary causes, that is, created causalities, without ever denying that God is always the first cause. In this respect divine agency is interior to the workings of creation. This, in fact, allows created entities to actualize other created realities by their participation in God's act of being. It also refers to the traditional Thomistic axiom that only for God are essence and existence identical. Created entities indeed have their act of being (*esse*) but they are not their own act of being.

Because creation is subject to God as its creator and participates in God's act of being it is possible to affirm that in the case of miracles divine agency can function in such a manner that God can do something outside, beyond or above the created order. God can so act that 'by producing the effects of secondary causes without them, or by producing certain effects to which secondary causes do not extend', a miracle can occur (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 105, a. 6). Since all created things by virtue of their participated act of being exist in a state of obediential potency to God, when God acts miraculously the divine agency surpasses but does not violate the created order. As Thomas explains, it indeed exceeds the hope of nature but not the hope of grace (Ia, q. 105, a. 7). Therefore, the classical Thomistic axiom that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' (Ia, q. 1, a. 8), informs the understanding of miracles as well as ordinary acts of grace.

Needless to say, this explanation of miracles in concert with a metaphysical explanation of the doctrine of creation did not always prevail in the history of Christian thought. The impact of the Enlightenment challenged the Christian witness to miracles, both those recorded in Sacred Scripture and to contemporary testimony as well. Initially, Enlightenment sensibilities favoured natural religion over revealed religion and thus measured the biblical witness by what was considered possible according to the new scientific world view. These were important developments and evoked debate and significant theological and philosophical responses covered elsewhere in this book.

Our concern is to trace the variety of theological understanding of miracles that informs the life of the church. Our concentration will not be on the credibility of miracles in the Bible, which entails not only the theological understanding of miracles but questions of literary genre, historical-critical method, apologetics, the doctrine of revelation, and the authority and inspiration of Scripture. In other words, a vast array of issues emerged from the Enlightenment and what followed in its wake, especially the critical awareness of historical consciousness and its application to the ancient texts of the Christian Scriptures.

More relevant to the theological understanding of miracles was the emergence of a new world view in which the relationship between the supernatural, understood as the divine agency in grace, and the natural or the order of creation were driven apart. If the laws of nature no longer reflected a participation in the divine act of being and the action of God that is concurrent with creaturely agency, then miracles could be understood as a violation of what God or nature constituted as the order of creation, for example Baruch Spinoza (1632–77). Or, miracles were simply irrelevant to reason's grasp of moral and religious truth. Granted that this did not all happen at once; there were laudable attempts at identifying the continuities between faith and reason, between natural religion and revealed religion in the work of, for example, John Locke (1632–1704) and Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752). However, after the assaults of David Hume (1711–66) on the credibility of miracles and testimony to them, and the delimitation of speculative reason by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the realm of nature no longer required active divine agency. Likewise, the theology of miracles could not be (in this view) expounded with any degree of reasonableness that did not violate nature and its rational workings.

One important theological response was to reduce the scope of miracles not only in their quantity – perhaps not every wondrous event recorded in Scripture is a miracle – but in their theological import as well. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) exemplified this strategy. Within a Newtonian scientific world view of mechanistic cause and effect as background, Schleiermacher, a one-time pietist elevated by romanticism, sought a continuity of nature and grace in which the distinction between natural and supernatural disappears. Within this hermeneutic all is miracle without distinguishing particular events as supernatural in origin for, as he stated in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 'Every finite thing, however, is a sign of the Infinite ... Miracle is simply the religious name for event.'[16] Schleiermacher tried simultaneously to preserve both the scientific account of nature and an omnipresent divine agency. The miraculous then may be reduced to religious feeling, the greatest of which is the feeling of redemption in Christ. In this respect the metaphysical account of miracles has been deferred to the significance of religious feeling and consciousness. This was quite in harmony with a strong tradition that emphasized the *miracula interiora*, almost to the exclusion or insignificance of the *miracula exteriora* apart from interior faith.

Miracles and apologetic witness

In the face of emerging modernity, however, not all were willing to sacrifice the *miracula exteriora* as a point of Christian apologetics regarding the integrity of Scripture and for some the continued present possibility of miracles. One could easily defend the authenticity of biblical miracles – that they are historical and supernatural acts of God – and remain a cessationist. Benjamin Warfield (1851–1921) of Princeton Seminary typified this approach thus mounting polemics against both modernist tendencies in theology and religious enthusiasm among Protestant evangelicals. His definition of miracle is noteworthy for the ground it seeks to defend as the basis of Christian apologetics:

> A miracle then is specifically an effect in the external world, produced by the immediate efficiency of God. Its *differentiae* are: (1) that it occurs in the external world, and thus is objectively real and not merely a mental phenomenon; and (2) that its cause is a new super-natural force, intruded into the complex of nature, and not a natural force under whatever wise and powerful manipulation.[17]

On both counts this differs from Schleiermacher. In terms of manifestation, miracles are exterior and the distinction between natural and supernatural is preserved.

Such intra-theological debates would continue and the subject of miracles became part of a larger landscape of issues that divided modernists and theological conservatives with some of these battles being waged at levels of ecclesiastical leadership and doctrinal orthodoxy. The First Vatican Council (1869–70) in its dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* affirmed that 'God willed that external proofs of His revelation, viz. divine facts, especially miracles and prophecies, should be joined to the interior helps of the Holy Spirit' in order to demonstrate that the obedience of faith is in harmony with reason (Chapter 3) and it precluded in the canons (no. 3) any denial of miracles or that they 'can never be recognized with certainty'. Catholic and Protestant apologetic versions of the *miracula exteriora* were thus advanced with the

theology of miracles still being debated into the twentieth century. Two representative versions of these theologies, while by no means comprehensive, illustrate the issues that are at stake.

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), Anglican layman and apologist, on the one hand, recognized the necessity of coming to terms with the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. Naturalism, a term that excludes God and the supernatural – 'nothing can come into Nature from the outside because there is nothing outside to come into, Nature being everything'[18] – is indicative of the present world view characteristic of modernity. The first task, therefore, is to make the case for supernaturalism, for that which is beyond nature, 'exists on its own, and has produced the framework of space and time and the procession of systematically connected events which fill them', that is, Nature.[19] It is an attempt to recapture the metaphysical ground for miracles defined as 'an interference with Nature by supernatural power'.[20] The case he argued appealed to 'Reason' as that aspect of creaturely existence that is supernatural, meaning that it is derived from 'an eternal, self-existent, rational Being, whom we call God', thereby establishing each mind as 'an offshoot, or spearhead, or incursion of that Supernatural reality into Nature'.[21] It is an argument for supernatural theism exemplified in the grand miracle of the Incarnation. Nature itself is open to supernatural divine agency because God is its creator.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965), on the other hand, and in ways reminiscent of Schleiermacher, sought to move beyond what he termed 'naturalism and supranaturalism'. Naturalism cannot account for the infinite distance between 'finite things and their infinite ground'.[22] Supranaturalism, on the other hand, reduces God to a being among other beings even if the highest being. Rather, he argues, the finite world points beyond itself to its self-transcendent ground, namely, God who stands against the world and for it. Miracles then are those sign-events, unusual and astonishing, that point to the mystery of being and are received in ecstatic experience. In an intriguing turn of phrase, Tillich states 'that ecstasy is the miracle of the mind, and that miracle is the ecstasy of reality'.[23] Tillich's attempted 'third way' was intended to avoid separation between the finite and the infinite, and to retain the sign value of miracles as constitutive of their meaning and explanation. Miracles are possible because the very ground of creation manifests in finite realities its self-transcendence in the infinite.

Despite their different tacks both of these approaches see the necessity of a speculative/constructive account of the God–world relation in order to retain the theological credibility of miracles. Both avoid the

sharp language of contradiction between miracles and the natural order. And both, in very different ways, also agree that miracles are such because of what they signify. Although there are many other recent explications of miracles these two are illustrative of two fruitful accounts from different sides of the theological spectrum.

To return to Thomas Aquinas, the ontological aspect ('something that transcends the powers of nature') and the intentional aspect (what they signify) of miracles are determinative for their authenticity as portents and wonders in human religious experience.[24] This psychological aspect of miracles bespeaks the veridicality of miracles only if the first two conditions are fulfilled. In sum, this becomes a matter of faith and discernment, whether it is applied in the canonization process of the Roman Curia of the Catholic Church (for which evidence of miracles is required), or a Pentecostal assembly's receptivity to the ministry of a healing evangelist. To some degree miracles in the life of the Christian Church will continue to echo the gospel accounts that many follow Jesus because they saw the signs he did (John 6.2) while the risen Lord also commends those 'who have not seen and yet believe' (20.29).

Notes

1 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 72.3 (*Patrologia latina*, Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1844–64), vol. xxxv, col. 1823), quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1994), 537.

2 Kilian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994), 291.

3 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), vol. 1, 107.

4 Cited by Benedicta Ward, 'Monks and Miracle', in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, ed. John C. Cavadini, Notre Dame Studies in Theology 3 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 130, and in *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: Apophthegmata Patrum, from the Anonymous Series*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Oxford: SLG, 1975), 50 (no. 178).

5 Ward, 'Monks and Miracle', 128.

6 *Ibid.*, 133.

7 *Patrologia latina*, Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1844–64), vol. CXLIX, cols. 0997D–8A; trans. G. A. Loud, 'Monastic Miracles in Southern Italy c. 1040–1140', in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church: Papers Read at the 2003 Summer Meeting and the 2004 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Kate Cooper

and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell Press for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2005), 109.

8 Daniele Piazzi, *Omobono di Cremona: Biografie dal XIII al XVI secolo: edizione, traduzione e commento* (Cremona: Diocesi di Cremona, 1991), 36–7, trans. Brenda Bolton, 'Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Supporting the Faith in Medieval Rome', in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles*, ed. Cooper and Gregory, 162.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. II, 1467 (4.19.18–19).

10 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St Louis: Concordia, 1955), vol. XXIV, 79.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Alexander Walsham, 'Miracles in Post-Reformation England', in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles*, ed. Cooper and Gregory, 285.

13 William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, IX, 11–12, in William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. and trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968), 108.

14 Rosemary Moore, 'Late Seventeenth-Century Quakerism and the Miraculous: A New Look at George Fox's "Book of Miracles"', in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles*, ed. Cooper and Gregory, 335–44.

15 John Wesley, second letter to Dr Church, 17 June 1746, *The Works of John Wesley: Third Edition, Complete and Unabridged*, vol. VIII: *Addresses, Essays, Letters* (1872) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 414–81 (460).

16 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper, 1958), 88.

17 Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The Question of Miracle', *The Bible Student* (March 1903), 121–6, reprinted in John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), vol. II, 167–204 (170).

18 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 21.

19 *Ibid.*, 20.

20 *Ibid.*, 15.

21 *Ibid.*, 37.

22 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–63), vol. II, 7.

23 *Ibid.*, vol. I, 117.

24 Rene Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 269; *Summa Theologiae*, IIA IIAE, q 178, a.1.

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