Reviews of *The Book of Miracles: The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam* by Kenneth L. Woodward and *God and the Sun At Fatima* by Stanley Jaki

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Books to challenge skeptics on miracles

THE BOOK OF MIRACLES: THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLE STORIES IN CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM, BUDDHISM AND ISLAM
By Kenneth L. Woodward
Simon & Schuster, 419 pages, $27.50

GOD AND THE SUN AT FATIMA
By Stanley Jaki
Real View Books, 375 pages, $19.95

By HOWARD KAINZ

Kenneth Woodward, religion editor at Newsweek magazine, advances the cause of pluralism and inclusiveness in his book on miracles. His primary focus is on “classical” miracles in the traditions of all the major religions, but the final chapter includes a brief look at several modern miracles attributed to Padre Pio, Mother Mary MacKillup, the Pentecostal Oral Roberts, the Hindu guru Mata Amritanandamayi and the Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

In order to keep his book from becoming just an eclectic collection of wondrous stories, Woodward provides extensive historical information about the religions discussed and biographical information about miracle workers. This detail, taking up more than half of the book, puts the miracles in context but also transforms the book into a rather scholarly study of comparative religions.

Woodward points out that miracles have a varying significance, depending on the religion. In the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, miracles are ways for God to give his stamp of approval to the messages conveyed by Moses, the prophets, Jesus and missionaries in early Christianity. There is also a discernible evolution -- in the Old Testament, from miracles performed directly by God to miracles performed by Moses, Joshua and the prophets with God’s power; in the New Testament from miracles performed by Jesus in his own power to miracles by apostles and saints, then by dead saints, and finally in conjunction with the relics of saints.

In Judaism after the first century of the Common Era and in Islam, miracles are accorded no official significance by religious leaders. Mohammed, for example, was diffident about miracles and claimed that his teachings did not need corroboration from miracles. Nevertheless, in both Judaism and Islam there are numerous legends of holy men curing the sick instantaneously, raising the dead, walking on water, feeding the multitudes by multiplying scarce food resources and so forth.
In the multiple branchings out of Hinduism, miracles are taken as signs of spiritual power as well as compassion for others. Miracles of gods like Krishna and holy men like Shankara and the “poet saints” consist of curing sicknesses and raising the dead. In yoga, as the ascetical/mystical offshoot of Hinduism, high states of perfection became associated with miraculous powers such as superhuman strength and the ability to levitate and traverse great distances in a moment’s time.

Buddhism disavows the importance of miracles, but many miracles were associated with the birth, life and death of Gautama Buddha. And Buddhist holy men reportedly have acquired a variety of psychic and psychokinetic powers.

In recent years, stories of the miraculous are not lacking -- including stigmatists such as the Bolivian Catalina Rivas and Mirna Nazour of Damascus in the Catholic tradition; and the miracle of the Holy Light, which reportedly takes place at the Holy Saturday Orthodox liturgies in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. But prima facie the solar phenomena that took place in Fatima, Portugal, on Oct. 13, 1917, have the greatest claim to miraculousness.

The basic facts have been frequently cited in books and articles on Fatima: The three child visionaries, Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta, predicted three months beforehand that at noon Oct. 17, the Virgin Mary would perform a sign that would prove that her messages of prayer and penance were authentic. This prediction was repeated several times and publicized, and drew a crowd of believers and unbelievers conservatively estimated at 50,000 from all over Portugal and elsewhere. The skeptical editor of the local secular newspaper O Seculo editorialized with patronizing comments about the credulousness of the people gathering for the miracle.

The children arrived at the place of apparitions, the Cova da Iria. It was a cloudy, rainy day. Some onlookers observed puffs of smoke, like incense, just above the children. Noon passed, and at about 1:30 p.m. the visionaries told the crowd to put down their umbrellas, take off their hats and look upward. Suddenly the rain stopped, and the clouds seemed to part, leaving a slight film of clouds before the sun. There was a sudden change of temperature. A silvery disk appeared that could be watched without discomfort. It began spinning around a center like a fire wheel, emitting rays of various colors of the rainbow. The phenomenon stopped and started three times, lasting about 10 minutes altogether. Reflections of colors were seen all over the people and on the ground. The editor of O Seculo, present with some other members of the press, wrote next day, “Before their dazzled eyes, the sun trembled, the sun made unusual and brusque movements, defying all the laws of the cosmos, and according to the typical expression of the peasants, ‘the sun danced.’ ”

Benedictine Fr. Stanley Jaki is a physicist, theologian and author of more than 40 books. He traveled to Portugal where he interviewed all available witnesses, and examined extant records, including official depositions. The book is unavoidably repetitious with about 100 witnesses giving largely similar accounts.

Jaki is critical of ecclesiastical authorities for failure to adequately investigate. He is also critical of some theological and scientific interpretations. His own observations include the following:
The time of the phenomenon was 1:30 by military time (since Portugal was at war) but noon by solar time. The prediction of the exact time of an event unforeseen by meteorologists is a miracle, even if the phenomenon was natural.

What seems to have happened is that the filmy clouds in front of the sun formed a lens (for which there have been precedents), with refractions of light causing all the colors of the rainbow? (Possibly the change of diameter in the lens could lead to the appearance of the sun getting larger and closer.)

Jaki believes that God would use natural physical developments for miracles. His final conclusion is that the event at Fatima is arguably the most important event of the 20th century -- a providential sign for a century that was to witness so many incredible acts of inhumanity and immorality.

Both books challenge skeptical Westerners to reconsider some cherished prejudices about the miraculous.

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