

Miracles

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One word that often creeps into the active vocabulary of religious people is 'miracle'. Many would say that miracles occur, or that they have occurred. It is also sometimes suggested that they provide evidence for various things, notably the existence of God, or the truth of some particular religion, or the teaching of certain religious leaders. The topic of miracle has occasioned much philosophical and theological debate. But what should we say about it?

What is a Miracle?

Perhaps the obvious question to turn to at the outset is that of the nature of miracles. What are we discussing when we talk about miracles? The answer is not all that obvious, for those who refer to miracles have offered various understandings of what it is that they are talking about.

(a) Definitions of 'Miracle'

A widespread view of miracles sees them as breaks in the natural order of events in the material world. Sometimes these breaks are referred to as 'violations of natural laws', and it is often said that they are brought about by God, or by some extremely powerful being who can interfere with the normal course of nature's operation. A classic definition of 'miracle' given in these terms comes from David Hume, who wrote on miracles in Chapter X ('Of Miracles') of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. 'A miracle', says Hume, 'may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent'.¹

Similar definitions can be found in recent works by Richard Swinburne and John Mackie. According to Swinburne, a miracle is 'a violation of a law of Nature by a god, that is, a very powerful rational being who is not a material object (viz., is invisible and intangible)'.² According to Mackie, a miracle is 'a violation of a law of nature' brought about by 'divine or supernatural intervention'. 'The laws of nature', Mackie adds, 'describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings works—

when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it'.³

A related (though different) account of 'miracle' is offered by Aquinas. 'Those things must properly be called miraculous', he writes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 'which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things'. In this connection Aquinas distinguishes between three kinds of miracle. There are, he says: (1) 'events in which something is done by God which nature could never do', (2) 'events in which God does something which nature can do, but not in this order', and (3) events which occur 'when God does what is usually done by the working of nature, but without the operation of the principles of nature'.⁴ As an example of (1) Aquinas cites the case of the sun going back on its course or standing still.⁵ As an example of (2) he instances the case of someone living after death, seeing after being blind or walking after being paralysed.⁶ The idea here seems to be that some miracles are states or events which could exist in nature, but which would not exist unless produced miraculously. Finally, and by way of illustrating what he means by (3), Aquinas gives the example of someone being instantaneously cured of a disease, albeit that doctors might have been able to effect a cure given sufficient time. He seems to be saying that some miracles are quite ordinary or common states or processes, but ones brought about without the causes which usually bring them about.

Here, then, is a fairly strong understanding of miracles—as events which cannot be explained in terms intelligible to the natural scientist or observer of the regular processes of nature. But other less strong meanings have been given to 'miracle'. It has been suggested, for instance, that a miracle need only be an extraordinary coincidence of a beneficial nature interpreted religiously. One can find this understanding at work in, for example, a well-known article by R. F. Holland.⁷ Suppose a child escapes death because a series of explicable physical events cause a train driver to hit the brakes on a train bearing down on the child. Holland suggests that the delivery involved here can be regarded as miraculous from the religious point of view. In certain circumstances, he says, 'a coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle'. But, Holland adds, 'it cannot without confusion be taken as a sign of divine interference with the natural order'.⁸

(b) Comments on the Definitions

Should we accept any of the above understandings of 'miracle'? For one reason, at any rate, the answer would seem to be 'No'. That is because, as I have presented them, they lack what religious people seem to regard as an

important element. Those who believe that miracles have actually occurred normally hold that they are events of some religious significance.⁹ We may put this by saying that not just any purported divine intervention, and not just any purported violation of a natural law, would be deemed to be miraculous by those who believe in miracles. What of the notion of divine intervention, however? And what of the notion of a violation of a natural law? Are these not essential to the notion of a miracle? Here there are a number of points to be made, the first of which concerns the notion of God intervening.

It is very common to find people speaking of miracles as divine interventions. As we have seen, Mackie speaks in such terms. For him, the world has certain ways of working when left to itself, and miracles are instances of God stepping in. One might, however, wonder about the appropriateness of thinking of miracles in these terms. For should we suppose that God is literally able to intervene? To say that something has intervened on a given occasion would normally be taken to imply that the thing has moved in where it was not to be found in the first place. In this sense, I can be said to intervene in a fight when I enter the fight myself, having formerly not been part of it. Does it, however, make sense to speak of God moving in where he has not been present before? And does it make sense to think of miracles as cases of God moving in?

It will make sense to speak and think in such ways if we take God to be basically a kind of observer in relation to the world, and if we think of the world as able to carry on independently of him. On such a view, sometimes referred to as 'Deism', there is no intrinsic problem with the notion of God intervening (though classical deists were not, in fact, supporters of belief in miracles as divine interventions).¹⁰ But matters are different if, along with orthodox Christianity, for example, we hold that the world is always totally dependent on God for its existence. If that is the case, then God is always present to his creatures as their sustainer or preserver. He is 'omnipresent' or 'ubiquitous', and it will therefore make sense to deny that he can, strictly speaking, intervene. It will also make sense to deny that miracles should be thought of as cases of divine intervention. As Alvin Plantinga puts it, commenting on Mackie's definition of 'miracle', 'on the theistic conception the world is never "left to itself" but is always (at the least) conserved in being by God'.¹¹ Hence, for example, it is no part of Aquinas's concept of 'miracle' that miracles are cases of divine intervention. In his thinking, God, as creator and sustainer, is always present to everything. And for this reason, he maintains, God is as present in what is not miraculous as he is in the miraculous. Miracles, for Aquinas, do not occur because of an extra wonder ingredient (i.e. God). They occur because something is *not* present (i.e. a created cause or a collection of created causes). For this reason, he

argues, miracles can only be brought about by God.

On the other hand, however, the notion of a violation of a natural law is, surely, in some sense part of what we might call 'the traditional notion of the miraculous'.¹² As we have seen, R.F. Holland finds it in order for events which have perfectly ordinary explanations to be called 'miracles'. And there seems no overriding reason for dismissing this use of 'miracle' unequivocally. But it is not the use of 'miracle' which has been most to the forefront throughout the many centuries in which people have spoken and debated of miracles. Much more prevalent has been the view that miracles are events which strictly admit of nothing that we could possibly call a scientific explanation. Generally speaking, the assumption has been that things in the world have certain properties and ways of working which cannot produce events which have been called miracles. Generally speaking, the assumption has been that miracles are events which do not accord with what writers like Swinburne and Mackie mean by 'laws of nature'—i.e. theories stating how certain things in the world regularly operate in certain conditions, theories, furthermore, which may be reasonably used in predicting how certain things in the world will operate in certain conditions in the future. It is because miracles have been regularly understood in this sense that they have been thought of as brought about by God, or by some other agent not part of the material world.

It ought, perhaps, to be noted that some writers have denied that what I am calling the traditional understanding of the miraculous is properly traditional. For, so it has been argued, my 'traditional understanding of the miraculous' is not to be found in the Bible. Hence, for example, we find the following observations in a book by Samuel M. Thompson:

The notion of *miracle* as something which happens in nature and is contrary to the laws of nature is a curiously confused concept. In the first place, no such conception can be found in the Biblical sources of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, for those sources did not have the conception of natural law. To call an event a *miracle* is to call it a 'marvel', and to say that it evokes wonder and awe. It is to say that the event is inexplicable apart from its supernatural significance. Even if direct intervention by God occurs in nature only ignorance can make it appear capricious. Whatever it is, it has its explanation and it fits the rational order of being. If we cannot account for it in terms of the natural order it is because the natural order is not the whole of the rational order of being. We have to assume that complete knowledge would show us the complete harmony of divine and natural causation in every event.¹³

But, considered as an interpretation of biblical texts, this view is somewhat implausible. It is correct to say that in English translations of the Bible, 'miracle' is sometimes used to refer only to an event which the author

regards as somehow significant, or as somehow pointing beyond itself. It is also correct to say that biblical authors never speak of 'natural laws', and that some of them (e.g. the author of the Fourth Gospel) do not regard the significance of miracles as exhausted by the observation that they are events which are contrary to what modern authors mean by 'natural laws'. According to the New Testament scholar R.H. Fuller, the Bible 'knows nothing of nature as a closed system of law. Indeed the very word "nature" is unbiblical'.¹⁴ But it is surely going too far to suggest that, in the sense of 'natural law' noted above, biblical authors have no notion of natural law, and that they have no notion of miracles as violations of natural laws. As writers like Swinburne and Mackie understand it, the following events, if they occurred, would be violations of natural laws:

Levitation, resurrection from the dead in full health of a man whose heart has not been beating for twenty four hours and who was dead also by other currently used criteria; water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a man getting better from polio in a minute.¹⁵

Yet this is exactly the sort of event typically cited in the Bible (or, at least, the New Testament) as miraculous. And, though biblical authors do not indulge in the sort of qualification present in the list just given, any reader of their texts ought to be able to see that they often seem to presuppose something like it when they talk of the miraculous. In many cases, at any rate, they presume that miracles are events which cannot be brought about by the physical powers of objects in the world. Such a presupposition seems, for example, evident in the remark ascribed to the man in St John's Gospel who is said to have his sight restored by Jesus.¹⁶

Is it Reasonable to Believe in Miracles? Hume's Account

It should by now be apparent to the reader that people have disagreed about the meaning of 'miracle'.¹⁷ But they have disagreed even more concerning the reasonableness of believing in the occurrence of miracles. For the most part, the disagreement has been over the occurrence of miracles in the sense of 'miracle' present in the work of authors like Mackie, Swinburne, and Aquinas. So it is now appropriate for us to consider what might be said about the reasonableness or otherwise of believing in the occurrence of miracles in this sense. The most famous and most discussed treatment of the matter is the text of Hume mentioned above. So we can begin by looking at what that has to say.¹⁸

What is Hume seeking to show in 'Of Miracles'? His readers have

often been uncertain about the precise nature of his position. And that is not surprising, for his remarks seem to pull in different directions. Sometimes he seems clearly to be asserting that miracles are flatly impossible. At one point, for instance, he refers to reports of miracles performed at the tomb of the Abbé Paris. Of these he observes:

And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation.¹⁹

At another point in his discussion Hume imagines all historians reporting that Queen Elizabeth I, having died and been buried, rose to life again. Of this possibility he says:

I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real ... The knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.²⁰

In other parts of his text, however, Hume seems to go back on this (apparently) emphatic denial that miracles are possible. Towards the end of the second part of 'Of Miracles' he writes:

I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I own, that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony ...²¹

And elsewhere he seems to be making a weaker claim than the one which emerges in his remarks on the Abbé Paris and Queen Elizabeth. He seems to be saying, not that miracles are flatly impossible, and not that there might not be testimony which would entitle us to believe in their occurrence, but that we need to proceed with caution in this area since there are general reasons for doubting that reports concerning miracles really are trustworthy.

Yet though he does indeed seem to say this, he also seems to want to press a stronger conclusion, though one which is weaker than the claim that miracles are impossible. This is that we could never be justified in believing on the basis of testimony that any miracles have occurred. A key passage here occurs in Part I of 'Of Miracles', where Hume offers what he evidently regards as a fundamental principle. He writes:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. Why is it more than probable, that all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water; unless it be, that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a violation of these laws, or in other words, a miracle to prevent them?²²

Hume allows that many witnesses may testify that a miraculous event has occurred. But, he adds,

no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us assurance to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.²³

Here, the suggestion seems to be that reports of miracles are intrinsically such that we *always* have more reason to reject them than to accept them. The argument seems to be like that propounded by Mackie when he observes that, when someone reports the occurrence of a miracle,

this event must, by the miracle advocate's own admission, be contrary to a genuine, not merely a supposed law of nature, and therefore maximally improbable. It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to overcome ... Where there is some plausible testimony about the occurrence of what would appear to be a miracle, those who accept this as a miracle have the double burden of showing both that the event took place and that it violated the laws of nature. But it will be very hard to sustain this double burden. For whatever tends to show that it would have been a violation of a natural law tends for that very reason to make it most unlikely that it actually happened.²⁴

In Hume's words: 'Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature ... There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation'.²⁵ Miracles, Hume seems to be saying, are 'events' which we have overwhelming reason to believe to be impossible on the basis of experience.²⁶

How Cogent are Hume's Conclusions?

Which of the conclusions noted above should actually be attributed to Hume? It may be that all of them can be attributed to him and that, as R.M. Burns suggests, 'the solution [to the apparent divergencies in 'Of Miracles'] lies in the recognition that ... incompatible strains of argument lie in the text side by side'.²⁷ But warrant for attributing the above mentioned conclusions to Hume can be found in what he writes. So let us now consider each of them in turn, starting with the conclusion that miracles are strictly impossible

(a) Are Miracles Impossible?

In one sense of 'impossible' it can surely be said that miracles are not impossible. For suppose we have in mind the sense of 'impossible' where it means 'logically impossible', and where it is assertions or statements which are said to be this. To say that an assertion or a statement is logically impossible is to say that it is contradictory, or that it entails what is contradictory. And, in this sense of 'impossible', it is hard to see that miracles are impossible. We may doubt the truth of a statement like 'Jesus gave sight to a man born blind'. But the statement does not seem logically impossible. It is hardly on a level with, for example, 'It's true that Jesus was a man, and it's not the case that Jesus was a man'.

But to say that miracles are impossible is more naturally understood as saying that, independently of questions of logical possibility, miracles just cannot happen. But why should we say this? At one point in 'Of Miracles' Hume gives the following answer:

Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die of a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must therefore be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise that event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.²⁸

Hume seems to think that the impossibility of miracles is somehow shown by the fact that their occurrence would amount to the occurrence of what has been regularly observed not to occur, or that it would amount to the occurrence of an event which experience suggests to be impossible. But that

can hardly be a reason for holding that miracles cannot occur. For events may come to pass which differ from what has happened in the past, and which conflict with what we think possible on the basis of experience. We might say (though rather oddly) that, until someone walked on the moon, people were regularly observed not to walk on the moon. But someone did walk on the moon. And people, in time, have come to do what earlier generations would rightly have taken to be impossible on the basis of their experience. This point is well brought out against Hume by J. C. A. Gaskin:

Consider an example. Hume could have said (with complete justification) that it was physically impossible, according to the best laws of nature at his disposal, for a man in England to be able to talk to and see a man who is at the same time in America. Now if he had taken this to mean 'it could not happen that ...' then we would simply retort it *has* happened. In short, if we are to employ the notion of physical impossibility, the most this can mean is that: within 'our' experience of the world the event has not happened, nor are we able to conceive how it could happen, nor could it possibly happen if the laws of nature have in fact the form and content which we attribute to them.²⁹

As others have observed, Hume's reasoning concerning the impossibility of miracles also has the unhappy implication that we can never revise our views concerning laws of nature in the light of observed exceptions to what we have taken to be laws. As C.D. Broad argues:

Clearly many propositions have been accounted laws of nature because of an invariable experience in their favour, then exceptions have been observed, and finally these propositions have ceased to be regarded as laws of nature. But the first reported exception was, to anyone who had not personally observed it, in precisely the same position as a story of a miracle, if Hume he right.³⁰

One might, however, maintain that there is another reason for holding that miracles are impossible—a reason which gets its force from the idea that miracles are violations of natural laws. For what if there are no natural laws? Then there are no natural laws to be violated. And if a miracle is a violation of a natural law, it would seem *to be* something which *is not* and, for this reason, it would seem to be something impossible.

But, if we are talking about what it is and is not reasonable to believe, such a line of argument is open to objection. Certainly, what we expect to be the case may fail to be the case; it is not, perhaps, absurd to suggest that the water put over flame in an ordinary kitchen may one day turn to ice instead of heating up, and this in spite of what we have so far observed. But we should hardly be reasonable in acting on such a principle. We should normally be inclined to say that it is the mark of a reasonable person to act

otherwise. Such action certainly seems to square with reasoning that is of fundamental importance in scientific inquiry. Fundamental to such inquiry is the principle that the course of nature continues uniformly the same, and that, if events of type A regularly follow events of type B in one set of circumstances, then other events of type A can be held to follow other events of type B in more or less identical circumstances, unless there is some relevant difference that can itself be understood in terms of some covering law. We can express this point by saying that there is no obvious reason why we should rationally refuse to talk about laws of nature. To say that there are laws of nature is to say that reality is intelligible in the sense that the behaviour of physical things can be predicted. Things behave in regular ways and it is possible to frame scientific explanations and expectations. It may be held that the behaviour of many things is extremely irregular. One might appeal here to quantum physics and its talk about the random motions of fundamental particles. But at the macroscopic level it still seems that we can reasonably talk about laws. It still seems that we can talk the language of statistics and probability. We can say that when human beings suffer massive heart attacks they can reasonably be expected to die. We can say that when you boil an egg for half an hour you can reasonably expect to get a hard-boiled egg.

But perhaps it should now be suggested that, even if there are grounds for supposing that miracles are not impossible, there are reasons for denying that any have occurred. And we may now ask how we should respond to this suggestion. Should we, for example, say that we could never be warranted in believing reports of miracles?

(b) Miracles and Testimony

In addition to his suggestion (to which I shall return presently) that the evidence against miracles having occurred must always be held to outweigh any claim to the effect that they have occurred, Hume makes four points designed, as he puts it, to show that 'there never was a miraculous event established'.³¹

The first is that no reported miracle comes with the testimony of enough people who can be regarded as sufficiently intelligent, learned, reputable, and so on to justify us in believing reports of miracles.

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; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time,

attesting facts performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable.³²

The second point is that people are naturally prone to look for marvels and wonders, and that this must be taken as giving us grounds for being sceptical of reported miracles. We may, says Hume,

observe in human nature a principle which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance, which we might, from human testimony, have, in any kind of prodigy ... The passion of *surprise* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.³³

In this connection Hume adds that religious people are particularly untrustworthy. 'A religionist', he says, 'may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: he may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause'.³⁴ Religious people, Hume says, are subject to vanity, self-interest, and impudence.³⁵ He also points out that

The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind.³⁶

Thirdly, Hume claims that 'It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations'.³⁷

Hume's final point is rather more complicated. Basically he is arguing in this way. If Fred, Bill, and John testify that there is a kangaroo in the bathroom, and if Mabel, Mary, and Catherine testify that there is no kangaroo in the bathroom, then the testimonies cancel each other out, and neither should be accepted. In the case of miracles, different religions report different miracles. These reports must be viewed as contradicting each other. Therefore, if any religious person testifies to the occurrence of a miracle within his or her religious tradition, the testimony can safely be ignored since there are plenty of other reports of the occurrence of miracles within different religious traditions, and the two sets of reports cancel each

other out. In Hume's own words:

To make this the better understood, let us consider that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary, and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established.³⁹

These arguments, however, are surely very problematic. Hume says that history does not provide testimony to the miraculous from 'a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning as to secure us against all delusion in themselves'. But how many men constitute a sufficient number? And what counts as good sense, education, and learning? Hume does not explain. Later on in his text he accuses people of being swayed by their love of the wonderful. But he does not show that they must always be so swayed, or that they must always be swayed in a way which would render their testimony suspect. No doubt many people are swayed by a love of the wonderful. And love of the wonderful may be the main source of many reported miracles. But is it absolutely evident that everybody who has reported the occurrence of a miracle has been thus swayed? And is there really good evidence that religious people cannot distinguish truth from error in the case of the marvellous, or that they are always governed by their concern to back the religious cause?

It is exceedingly difficult to answer such questions. So much depends on taking particular cases and examining them in considerable detail. I think it can be said, however, that Hume is rather premature in supposing that the observations which he makes are sufficient to justify us in concluding that we can always disregard testimony to the effect that a miracle has occurred. One also needs to note that, in his consideration of testimony, there are things which Hume might have noted, but does not. He seems, for example, to have forgotten about the possibility of corroborating what someone claims to have occurred. But past events sometimes leave physical traces which survive into the present.³⁹ It may thus be urged against Hume that it is conceivable that some reported miracle can be reasonably believed to have occurred because of what can be gleaned from some physical data in the present. Even in default of such data, and unless one is determined to insist that nobody can be taken as a reliable witness of what actually occurs, it can be said that there is no reason why the existence of laws of nature should force us to conclude that somebody who reports the violation of a natural

law must be misreporting. One may grant that particular instances need to be examined very carefully indeed, and in reading Hume's discussion of miracles one can see exactly why. But how can one rule out in advance the possibility of rationally concluding that a report of a violation of a natural law is an accurate description of what occurred?

An objector might reply that there still remains the point about reports of miracles made from different religions. But here again Hume seems to be moving too fast. In his own day it was widely assumed that the reported miracles in the New Testament established the truth of Christianity and the absolute falsehood of all other religions. But why should we assume that if we have reports of miracles from, for example, a Christian and a Hindu, both reports cannot be accepted as reports of miracles which actually occurred? Hume seems to assume some such principle as: 'If a Christian miracle occurs, that is evidence against the truth of Hinduism. And if a Hindu miracle occurs, that is evidence against the truth of Christianity'. But this principle does not seem necessarily true. As Swinburne argues, 'evidence for a miracle "wrought in one religion" is only evidence against the occurrence of a miracle "wrought in another religion" if the two miracles, if they occurred, would be evidence for propositions of the two religious systems incompatible with each other'.⁴⁰ We may grant that Hume has established the conclusion that 'when two religions claim mutually exclusive revelations, it is not possible for both of them to be well evidenced by the way they report their associated miracles'.⁴¹ But to have established that conclusion is not the same as establishing that all reports of miracles are undermined by the fact that different religions report different miracles.

At this point, however, Hume might appeal to the argument which I said I would return to above. For let us suppose that we might well defend reporters of miracles from charges of dishonesty and the like. Let us also suppose that miracles reported from one religion might not be thought to undermine the truth of another religion. Is it not still the case that, because of what a miracle is supposed to be, we have overwhelming reason for withholding assent to any reported miracle? Do we not have enormous evidence for the fact that certain laws of nature hold? And must not this evidence always outweigh any claim to the effect that, on some occasion or other, something has happened which conflicts with a law of nature? Is it not simply the case that, as Mackie puts it, miracles are 'maximally improbable' on the basis of our experience?

Those who wish to say 'Yes' to such questions have on their side the fact that experience and testimony seem strongly to suggest that laws of nature normally do operate, and that events which people take to be miracles are few and far between (if they occur at all). One might also observe that, when presented with a report that such and such has happened,

it often seems reasonable to assess the report in the light of what we know to have regularly happened. When it was reported in August 1991 that all sorts of dramatic changes were occurring in the Soviet Union, Western reporters and politicians were constantly cautious in believing the reports. And most people in the West agreed that they were right in being cautious. Why? Because of what had been happening in the Soviet Union for many years previously.

On the other hand, however, our own regular experience does not show that we can never be reasonable in believing a report which goes clean against it. Hume and Mackie are saying that the testimony of others should not be admitted if it conflicts with what seems probable or possible to us. But that would make it unreasonable to accept testimony which we plainly would be prepared to accept. As Thomas Sherlock (one of Hume's eighteenth century predecessors writing on miracles) says, if we accept what Hume argues, we should agree that, for instance, 'a man who lives in a warm climate, and never saw ice, ought on no evidence to believe that rivers freeze and grow hard ... for it is improbable, contrary to the usual course of nature and impossible according to his notion of things'. Yet would we be prepared to say that such a man would be unreasonable in accepting our testimony that rivers, indeed, can be solid? As Sherlock goes on to suggest, it seems wrong 'to make one man's ability in discerning, and his veracity in reporting plain facts, depend on the skill or ignorance of the hearers'.⁴²

Hume might reply that it just is the case that laws of nature are never violated. But that would be to beg the question. He might say that our evidence always shows that a violation of a natural law is absolutely improbable on the basis of our evidence. But what are we to take as 'our evidence'? What people say is often taken as evidence, and, indeed, we believe much more on the basis of what people say than we do on the basis of what we have seen or discovered for ourselves. Also to be noted at this point is that what is contrary to a law of nature might actually be *more probable than not* with respect to our evidence. For, as Plantinga observes:

Suppose (as has been the case for various groups of people at various times in the past) we knew nothing about whales except what can be garnered by rather distant visual observation. Now it might be a law of nature that whales have some property P (mammalian construction, for example) that can be detected only by close examination; but it might also be the case that we know that most things that look and behave more or less like whales do not have this property P. Then the proposition *S is a whale and does not have P* could very well be more probable than not with respect to our evidence, even though it is contrary to a law of nature.⁴³

For reasons such as these, we may take leave to doubt that Hume has shown that it is always unreasonable to accept a report that a miracle has occurred. And, to move beyond Hume's immediate concern with testimony, it is worth adding that people might be justified in supposing that a miracle has occurred on the basis of what they observe for themselves. For suppose we actually do observe an event which we have reason to suppose to be quite at odds with what can be brought about in terms of natural laws. Suppose, for example, that we witness one of the occurrences in the list given earlier: 'levitation, resurrection from the dead in full health of a man whose heart has not been beating for twenty four hours and who was dead also by other currently used criteria; water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a man getting better from polio in a minute'. We might seek to explain what we observe by bringing it under some other well-established law. And in default of any such known law we might just refuse to accept that there has been a violation of a law of nature. We might say that there is some law in operation but that we are so far ignorant of it. But it is not inconceivable that such a way of proceeding could land us in more difficulties than we would solve. Suppose that the above mentioned events occur and are monitored by strict scientific methods. If we now say that they can be explained in terms of some law of nature, we will evidently have to show that they are further instances of some previously noted phenomenon, and that they are understandable on that basis. But we may not be able to do this. If we want to deny that any natural law has been violated in this case, we will therefore have to revise our theories about natural laws. The trouble now is that it might be enormously expensive (intellectually, not financially) to do so. We might have to agree, for example, that in accordance with perfectly natural laws it is more than conceivable that victims of polio should recover in a minute. And such a position might play havoc with a vast amount of scientific theory. In such circumstances it might, in fact, be more economical and more reasonable to accept that a law of nature has been violated. But if this is correct, it follows that a law of nature can reasonably be said to have been violated, and that it is wrong to say that nobody can have reason for supposing that miracles have occurred.

What do Miracles Prove?

The upshot of our discussion would, therefore, seem to be somewhat mixed. We may suppose that violation of natural laws are logically possible, and that they may well be able to occur in spite of the fact that there are laws of nature which generally hold. We may also suppose that one might

reasonably believe in the occurrence of a violation of a natural law on the basis of testimony, or on the basis of what one witnesses for oneself. But we may also concede that, where we are dealing with testimony, we will have to proceed carefully and with respect to specific reports before we can reach conclusions of any value.

But let us now suppose that we can be absolutely sure than violations of natural law have occurred. Let us suppose that we can be sure that some past events are reasonably and properly taken to be violations of natural laws. What can we conclude on the basis of that fact? Can we, for example, conclude that there is a God? Or can we, perhaps, conclude that some world religion is the true religion?

As we have seen, 'miracle' has been defined so as to include the idea that miracles are brought about by God. But could they only be brought about by God? Much here depends on whether or not one thinks there could be a God. But supposing that there could be a God, and that there is a God. Does it follow that miracles must be brought about by God?

Swinburne suggests that there could well be circumstances that made it reasonable to say that some violation of a natural law is brought about by something like a human agent or agents. Let E be a violation of a natural law. Then:

suppose that E occurs in ways and circumstances otherwise strongly analogous to those in which occur events brought about intentionally by human agents, and that other violations occur in such circumstances. We would then be justified in claiming that E and other such violations are, like effects of human actions, brought about by agents, but agents unlike men in not being material objects. This inference would be justified because, if an analogy between effects is strong enough, we are always justified in postulating slight difference in causes to account for slight difference in effects.⁴⁴

But would a non-material agent bringing about effects intentionally have to be divine? Plenty of people, after all, have thought that miracles can be brought about by 'demons', 'spirits', 'saints' and other agents who are not what many of those who believe in God would think of as divine.

It might be argued that only God stands outside the universe as its maker and sustainer. And, if we think that a miracle is a violation of a natural law, we might, therefore, suggest that only God can bring such a thing about. If God is no part of the universe, he will not be subject to the constraints of natural laws. But then one might wonder whether there might not be agents of some kind (angels? Satan?) who, though they are not divine, also have the power to bring about effects which can count as violations of natural laws. We might not suppose that there are any such

agents. But how are we to rule them out? Perhaps the most we can do here is appeal to a principle of economy. One might, that is to say, argue along the lines: Given that there is a God, given that God can be the source of events called miracles, and given that we have no other reason to postulate non-divine agents as sources of such events, we should ascribe them to God. Aquinas argues that only God can work miracles since a miracle is 'an event that happens outside the ordinary processes of the *whole* of created nature' and since anything other than God works according to its created nature.⁴⁵ And if we define 'miracle' as Aquinas does, his conclusion seems inescapable. But not everyone has defined 'miracle' in this way. Not even all Roman Catholics have done so. According to Pope Benedict XIV, for instance, something is a miracle if its production exceeds 'the power of visible and corporeal nature only'.⁴⁶

What of the suggestion that miracles might prove some religion to be the true religion? That miracles do exactly this has indeed been argued. A classic text can be found in Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), according to whom 'The Christian religion is positively and directly proved, to be actually and immediately sent to us from God, by the many infallible signs and miracles, which the author of it worked publicly as the evidence of his Divine Commission'.⁴⁷ One might also note Canon 4 of Vatican I's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* in which we read:

If anyone says that all miracles are impossible, and that therefore all reports of them, even those contained in sacred scripture, are to be set aside as fables or myths; or that miracles can never be known with certainty, nor can the divine origin of the christian religion be proved from them: let him be anathema.⁴⁸

But should it really be said that a miracle can strictly *prove* that some religion or other is the true one, or (to make the question a weaker one) that some religion is true?

It is, perhaps, significant that the foundation documents of Christianity do not seem to think so (regardless of what has been argued by subsequent Christians). In St Mark's Gospel, Jesus declares that false prophets can work miracles in order to deceive.⁴⁹ And in all the synoptic gospels he refuses to work 'signs' in order to prove his divine mission.⁵⁰ One might, however, argue that miracles, if they occurred, could lend support to some religious tradition or to some religious belief. If you call on me to show that you have my support, and if I do something in response to your request, others will have reason to suppose that I support you. By the same token, if, for example, people call on God to express support for the religious beliefs which they teach by effecting what is miraculous, and if that is what is effected, it would be a very thoroughgoing sceptic who would say that no miracle can lend any credence to any religious position.

In the end, though, we are dealing here with possibilities only. It is concrete details of particular supposed miracles that are needed for matters to be usefully taken further.

- 1 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn., Oxford, 1975, p.115.
- 2 'Miracles', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968), reprinted in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected readings* (2nd edn., London and New York, 1973).
- 3 *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), pp.19 f.
- 4 *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 101, 2–4.
- 5 Cf. *Isaiah* 38:7 f. and *Joshua* 10:12–14.
- 6 *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 101, 3.
- 7 'The Miraculous', in D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford, 1967), reprinted in Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles* (London and New York, 1989).
- 8 Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles*, p. 53 ff.
- 9 Holland is evidently thinking of the mother in the story as viewing the deliverance of her child as something in line with the Christian belief that God can deliver people in difficulty. So my comments might not apply to his notion of miracle as coincidence.
- 10 See R.M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanville to David Hume* (London and Toronto, 1981), pp.70 ff.
- 11 'Is Theism Really a Miracle?', *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), p. 111.
- 12 One might prefer to speak in this connection of 'exceptions' rather than violations, for to call miracles violations of natural law might be taken to imply that when a miracle occurs some natural law ceases to operate throughout the world. Cf. Richard L. Purtill, 'Miracles: What if they Happened?' in Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles*, pp.194 f.
- 13 *A Modern Philosophy of Religion* (Chicago, 1955), pp.454 f.
- 14 *Interpreting the Miracles* (London, 1966), pp.8 f.
- 15 Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles*, p.84.
- 16 *John* 9:32 f.
- 17 In *The Quest for Eternity* (Harmondsworth, 1984, p.137), J.C.A. Gaskin offers a nice definition of 'miracle' which seems to take account of much of the diversity to which I have referred: '*Miracle*: an event of religious significance, brought about by God or a god or by some other visible or invisible rational agent with sufficient power, *either* in violation of the laws of nature (the "violation concept") *or* as a striking coincidence within the laws of nature (the "coincidence concept")'.
- 18 Notice, however, that all the points about miracles argued by Hume can be found in the work of writers working before the publication of 'Of Miracles'. This fact is ably demonstrated by R.M. Burns, op.cit.
- 19 *Enquiry*, p.125.
- 20 *Enquiry*, p.128.

- 21 *Enquiry*, p.127.
- 22 *Enquiry*, pp.114 f.
- 23 *Enquiry*, pp.115 f.
- 24 *The Miracle of Theism*, pp. 25 ff.
- 25 *Enquiry*, p.115.
- 26 For an earlier statement of this argument, see Thomas Sherlock, *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection* (1st edn., 1729, 8th edn., London, 1736), p.58.
- 27 *The Great Debate on Miracles*, p.143.
- 28 *Enquiry*, p.115.
- 29 *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (2nd edn., London, 1988), pp.163 ff.

- 30 'Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 17 (1916–17), pp.77–94.
- 31 *Enquiry*, p.116.
- 32 *Enquiry*, pp.116 f.
- 33 *Enquiry*, p.117.
- 34 *Enquiry*, pp.117 f.
- 35 *Enquiry*, p.118.
- 36 *Enquiry*, p. 118.
- 37 *Enquiry*, p. 119.
- 38 *Enquiry*, pp. 121 f.
- 39 Cf. Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles*, pp.134 ff.
- 40 *The Concept of Miracle* (London, 1970), p.60.
- 41 J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p.142.
- 42 *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection* pp.58 ff.
- 43 'Is Theism Really a Miracle?', *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1966), pp.112 f.
- 44 *The Concept of Miracle*, p.57.
- 45 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 110, 4.
- 46 *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione*, iv: *de Miraculis* (1738).
- 47 *1705 Boyle Lectures* (7th edn., London, 1727, I), p.383.
- 48 Norman P. Tanner S.J. (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London and Washington, 1990), vol.II, p.810. I am told, however, that 'proved' in this text need mean no more than 'supported by reason'. Clarke, also, seems to say that the miracles of Christianity are less than one might expect from his use of 'proved'. See *Boyle Lectures* I, p.156.
- 49 Mark 13:22 f.
- 50 *Matthew* 4:6; 12:38–41; *Mark* 8:11–13; 15:31–32; *Luke* 4:23.