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A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF MIRACLES IN A SECULAR WORLD

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Catholic Understanding of Miracles in a Secular World

It is through the miraculous that humans are able to experience the direct action of the supernatural in our natural lives.¹ Because a miracle lies at the very center of the Catholic faith, you cannot be a Catholic and not believe in miracles. But this fact does not make the miraculous an easy concept to digest rationally—even for devout, faithful believers. Miracles, as events enacted through the direct action of God, are without complete explanation. Often it would seem that human reason tells us that there is an order to things and if an event or an occurrence falls outside of that order or appears to supersede that order, it is just that, an appearance. This outlook has been promulgated for centuries, beginning with the work of the philosopher David Hume who remains as one of the most influential voices in the denial of miracles. Hume will argue that miracles cannot be proven to be true and many will argue that as scientific knowledge and understanding of the world increases we will eventually find that miracles do not actually happen. But the case against miracles proposed by Hume is lacking and demonstrates a misunderstanding of the relationship that God has with His creation and a misunderstanding of the relationship between faith and reason, or faith and science. The argument from science against miracles also is flawed and demonstrates too narrow of a worldview in which natural law is the only entity to which action can conform and by which things happen—it denies any active supernatural entity. Because of all of the conflicting worldviews and outlooks on the miraculous it is important for believers to understand how to broach their understanding of the miraculous and how to defend and embrace the miraculous despite an increasingly secular worldview. This paper will investigate the main arguments in opposition to miracles and it will respond to those

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2007), 353 (Providence, RI: Providence College, 2015).

arguments while also expanding on other ideas that must be noted when thinking about miracles from a Christian perspective. Finally it will look at the miracles that have occurred and are still occurring at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France, and it will show how the process of identifying a miracle in this place demonstrates the compatibility of secular, scientific, and religious influences in identifying a miraculous event.

Opposition to Miracles

In his work *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* philosopher David Hume writes a section entitled *Of Miracles* in which he defines a miracle as “a violation of the laws of nature.”² According to Hume, there is a natural order to the world and if a miracle were to occur it would constitute a disruption to this natural order that is commonly referred to as natural law. Because of this, Hume begins his analysis of miracles from the viewpoint that they are likely not a genuine possibility. He steadfastly contends throughout his work that no matter how miraculous an event may seem, it is always more reasonable and more correct to believe that it has a natural cause since nature is what we experience on a daily basis.³

Hume makes a point early in his work to remind readers of the fallibility of reason. His main argument against the miraculous is that he sees it as being so foundationally based on human testimony which is, unarguably, prone to err.⁴ He does not deny the importance of relying on human testimony—because without it we would struggle as a society to have any form of trustworthy communication or interaction. However, he claims that because human testimony is prone to error and exaggeration, then something such as a miracle that must be related by relying

²David Hume, *On Miracles*, in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (N.p.: n.p., 1993). n. pag.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

heavily, if not completely, on this testimony cannot be believed. To make his point he says, “no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.”⁵

Hume’s denial of miracles rests heavily on the fact that he believes the only way to assess the validity of a claim is to weigh the evidence, either for or against the claim. But he still maintains his strong stance against the trustworthiness of the human reason by which this evidence is known. He says that, “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence.”⁶ That is to say that when considering whether or not to believe something, an intelligent or educated person would take all of the evidence available to them on the matter and, after contemplating it, they would decide whether or not they would find it credible. The combination of this manner of discerning credibility with his acknowledgement of the fallibility of human reason makes it rather impossible for him to ever see the miraculous. No amount of human testimony, because it is coming from a fallible source, will ever be able to debunk the truths that are known from his, or any human, experience. Unfortunately this means that miracles, since they are by definition something apart from what is normally experienced, would not ever be able to be reasonably considered according to Hume.

Living in a secular age as we now do is inherently a challenge to the miraculous. To acknowledge that miracles are real is to acknowledge that there is something beyond the immanent frame.⁷ Without a mindset toward the transcendent, miracles become incoherent and therefore it makes sense that there are so many who cannot reasonably think that miracles can happen. If one is using the common definition of a miracle as an, “intervention by a supernatural

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub., 2014), 26

force”⁸ then clearly an “exclusively humanist”⁹ worldview would, by necessity, deny its possibility. Therefore it is safe to say that those who take a humanist or naturalist stance would not find any circumstances in which they could accept that a miracle can or does occur. Therefore, the duration of this paper will speak to those within the Christian tradition, or at the very least those who acknowledge that there is an active supernatural force beyond humanity, who seek to understand how the secular worldview and the religious worldview intersect and cohere when speaking about the miraculous.

The Catholic View of Miracles

To be a Catholic one must necessarily accept the validity of the miraculous. As Lewis writes, “It [Christianity] is precisely the story of a great Miracle.”¹⁰ This includes the miracle of the Incarnation and even more importantly, the miracle of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The importance of these doctrines to the Church makes it even more crucial for those who abide by the Catholic tradition and those who lead lives of faith to be able to understand and defend their continued belief in miracles. To lose the miraculous is to forget the foundation of Christianity. This is why miracles and Christianity are so inherently intertwined, and this is why there is such a push for the defense and understanding of miracles.

With the increasingly secular worldview that is being experienced in today’s society, it is becoming evermore difficult to appreciate the gravity of the miraculous and this is a dangerous trend for believers. This is interesting because despite a loss of understanding of the magnitude

⁸Christopher J. Cunningham, *Miracles and the Supernatural in Popular Secular Film: A Narrative Analysis of The Green Mile, Bruce Almighty, and Phenomenon* (PhD diss., Regent University, 2008).

⁹Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 26.

¹⁰Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 360.

of miracles, the word ‘miracle’ is still very present in the common vernacular. One will often hear good news, or unexpected good luck referred to casually by a person as a ‘miracle’ in their life. This is interesting because when this word is used in this way, it is always in reference to something good. This indicates something important. Take for example a non-believer who experiences a health crisis in which they are suddenly struck with late-stage cancer; this unexpected turn of events in their life would never be deemed a miracle. However, if that same person, still a non-believer, were to suddenly go into remission it is very likely that they would refer to this event as a miraculous one. Though in their view they may only be using this word to indicate that something unanticipated happened, it is very telling that only the positive unexpected events in life are referred to as miracles, not negative ones. Even without conscious acknowledgement by the population, we seem to have some inherent understanding that a ‘miracle’ confers something unexpected and, more importantly, something good into our life. Theologically this makes perfect sense since a miracle is understood as a direct intervention in the world by God and God is good.¹¹ When God acts directly in the world, as He does when He brings about a miracle, it is always to bring about a good in accord with His divine plan. Thus, even though the secular world tries to ignore it, God’s action in the world through miracles is embedded even within our simplest experiences and interpretations of the world.

Though God is the First Cause behind any action that occurs, it is also possible for Him to act without the use of an instrumental cause.¹² This is to say that God, as the First Cause, brings about every action that occurs in the world, but in most cases God works through material things of the world that are the instrumental objects by which He causes a result. This is important because this implies that in normal actions, the first causality of God works in

¹¹ Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 354

¹²Nicanor Austriaco, OP, “Are Miracles Reasonable?”, from Faith and Science Colloquium

accordance with the nature of the instrumental cause that carries out His action.¹³ In contrast, when God performs a miracle, He is acting directly in the world, not through an instrumental cause. This is important because it does not mean that God is *breaking* the laws of nature when a miracle is performed, but rather, since an instrumental cause is not used, the action itself happens completely outside of the laws of nature¹⁴ and therefore does not conform to them at the moment of the action.

Author CS Lewis also explains that miracles are not in contradiction with nature for another reason. Lewis defines a miracle as, “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.”¹⁵ Though this is not a precise theological definition, it is useful here because it addresses the miraculous as something that indicates the action of a supernatural force. Lewis writes that, “The divine act of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.”¹⁶ This is very interesting. This nuance to the miraculous indicates that when a miracle occurs, the intervention of the divine happens and once that event occurs, the laws of nature resume. This means that when a miraculous event happens, it is absorbed into nature and this allows the result to follow according to the laws of nature which we know and live by on a daily basis.

As aforementioned, David Hume writes that a miracle is a “violation of the laws of nature.”¹⁷ This is not valid for a variety of reasons, but there is also another problem with this statement. Hume, along with other opponents of miracles seems to be under a false impression of the causality of events in the world and the relationship of action in the world to natural law. As

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 305.

¹⁶ Ibid., 353.

¹⁷ Hume, *On Miracles*.

CS Lewis says, “we are in the habit of talking as if they [natural laws] caused events to happen; but they have never caused any event at all.”¹⁸ This is crucially important. It is true that most events or occurrences will conform to natural law but this does not mean that natural law is what is causing them. This is an essential distinction. Take for example a speed limit. By judicial law, a speed limit tells a driver how fast they may drive their car on a particular stretch of road. This law informs the driver what they are expected to do but by no means does the posted speed limit *cause* the driver to drive at the specific speed. In a similar way the laws of nature inform how things and beings within nature should act and what they should do, but the laws themselves do not cause the action itself.

There is an interesting popular article where the author writes that, “A true miracle would be straightforward.”¹⁹ This is such a telling standpoint and it reflects the popular present-day worldview that makes the miraculous such a difficult concept to accept or embrace. This secular world wants things to be simple, straightforward, and easily explained in clear terms in order to prove the things that we think or claim to know. This statement shows that often people think that a miracle is used by God to ‘prove’ His existence in the world. Though miracles are often retroactively pointed to by apologists “as divine confirmation”²⁰ for the teachings of the Catholic Church, it would be incorrect to claim that they are enacted by God only with the aim of proving His existence or action. The Catholic Church views miracles as, “something altogether wondrous, i.e., having its cause hidden absolutely and from everyone.”²¹ And as Aquinas goes

¹⁸ Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 353.

¹⁹“*Lourdes - The Miracles of Healing Are Dubious,*” from *Lourdes - the Miracles of Healing Are Dubious* (N.p., n.d), accessed 4 May 2015.

²⁰Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub., 1984), 4.

²¹*Ibid.*, 12.

on to clarify, “This cause is God.”²² God does enact miracles, but the motivation for this action is not to *prove* His existence, but rather to show His love. As Georges Bertrin goes on to distinguish, “God does not allow Himself to be bound down by conditions. He works miracles and how He wills.”²³ A miracle does not happen because we will it to or want it to, a miracle happens when and how God determines it to happen. If a miracle were done with the intention of proving God’s existence, then perhaps it could be argued that such an occurrence would be straightforward. But since a miracle is intended “to show that God is acting,”²⁴ there is nothing to say that it need be simple and straightforward.

Though an exclusively humanist worldview is not compatible with the understanding of miracles, it is important to still take the time to understand the natural world because “we need to know something about what normally occurs in the world to recognize when something marvelous happens”²⁵ If nature is taken to be the totality of all reality, then miracles become impossible to recognize and understand.²⁶ Therefore we as believers must be able to understand nature because it must necessarily be a part of our understanding of miracles. Science and miracles therefore are not exclusive and they are not incompatible. In fact, when the possibility of both is affirmed, they provide a richer and more marvelous picture of reality.”²⁷ In other words, instead of standing in opposition, scientific understanding and miracles work together to give insight to the same truth that is being revealed to the world by God. This means that as

²²Ibid.

²³Georges Bertrin and Agnes Mary Rowland Gibbs, *Lourdes; a History of Its Apparitions and Cures* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1908),

²⁴R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, "Defining Miracles," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 64.

²⁵Thomas Davenport, OP, “Science and Miracles,” from *Dominicana RSS* (Province of Saint Joseph, 28 April 2015), accessed 30 April 2015.

²⁶Lewis, 354.

²⁷ Davenport, “Science and Miracles”

science moves forward and as more is understood about the natural world, it is actually helping miracles to be recognized and understood more fully.²⁸

A Case Study on Miracles: The Miracles at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes

The rational acknowledgement of miracles is very difficult in this secular world. However, miracles are still occurring with relative frequency. For example there have been sixty-nine miracles recorded as having occurred at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France.²⁹ In this place in 1858 the Virgin Mary, calling herself the Immaculate Conception, appeared eighteen times to a young girl named Bernadette Soubirous.³⁰ This is an interesting case because the apparitions in and of themselves were miraculous by nature, and following the original apparitions a shrine was built to the Virgin Mary in the same place. This shrine has been credited as the location where a variety of miracles—ranging from miracles of physical cures to those of spiritual and emotional healing—have occurred in the years subsequent.³¹ The specific details of the miracles that have occurred at Lourdes in combination with the fact that there is an intensive procedure for the declaration of a cure as miraculous help to build the case for the cohesion of science and faith in regards to miracles.

The protocol for the declaration of miracles at Lourdes gives some insight into the manner in which faith and reason are cohesive, or at least compatible, in the recognition of a miracle. The first step in declaring an event miraculous at Lourdes is for the person who was cured to place a petition explaining their circumstances before the cure and the cure itself.³²

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Wil Gesler, "Lourdes: Healing in a Place of Pilgrimage," in *Health & Place* 2.2 (1996),

³⁰Ibid.,

³¹Ibid.,

³²"Recognition of a Miracle," from *Recognition of a Miracle* (N.p., n.d), accessed 4 April 2015.

After the petition has been made and a file has been opened, the International Medical Committee specialists (based in Lourdes itself) will inform the local bishop of the person who received the miracle.³³ The cure must then be determined to move from “unexpected” to “confirmed.”³⁴ This means that first the circumstances must indicate that something unanticipated happened to the person making the petition and that following that, this unforeseen circumstance was not a fleeting one, but that it persisted and was confirmed by other medical authorities.³⁵ In other words, for the cure to be miraculous there must be proof of the previous condition followed by proof of restoration to health. Finally, the cure must be designated as having “exceptional character”³⁶ meaning that the source of the healing has not been explained medically. Once again, as a testimony to the collaboration between faith and reason in this situation, any movement forward in this process requires the input of medical professionals as well as personal witness and validation by the local bishop of the recipient of the miracle.

The declaration of a miracle at Lourdes is not always a smooth process and it is one often marked by division. This division is specifically “along religious lines”³⁷ and it involves members of the medical community as well as religious persons. Again, though this can be viewed as an impediment to the acknowledgement of miracles as they occur at Lourdes, in a sense this can also be seen as something of an affirmation of the miraculous to opponents who want to discredit the miracles that are occurring there. If every person was blown away by personal testimony and instantly believed the story of the miracle, there would be something questionable in the situation—this is reflective of the argument that Hume makes against

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jason Szabo, “Seeing Is Believing? The Form and Substance of French Medical Debates over Lourdes,” in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76.2 (2002),

miracles. However, because there is dispute, it calls for greater investigation and stronger support for the case before a curing can be called miraculous. This is where faith and reason together come into play. Faith is the basis on which the event is first recognized as a miracle, and since faith and reason do not contradict each other when addressing truth, once the initial recognition of the miracle is made, it simply takes time for it to be reasonably known as well. Unfortunately though, not all are able to recognize the reasonableness of an event so this is the reason why there is often permeating discord and distress in relation to these matters.

Take for example the case of John Traynor; a British naval soldier who was injured during World War I and later experienced a miracle at Lourdes by which his injuries were cured.³⁸ Throughout the duration of his life, his health gradually deteriorated and when he was very close to death he made a pilgrimage to the shrine to Our Lady in Lourdes, France. He was healed after spending several nights at the shrine, but the most peculiar part of his specific case is that he did not even recognize at first that he had been healed.³⁹ This is particularly interesting because it again weakens Hume's argument against human testimony. According to Hume, the evidence for a miracle must outweigh any potential argument against it and, as he sees it, this will never happen.⁴⁰ However in cases such as John Traynor's, although the evidence is based on human testimony, the testimony comes from so many unrelated sources in such a short period of time—and the main testimony is not even from the recipient of the miracle himself. Traynor did not realize what had happened to him, yet those around him could see his cure and were able to recognize it as miraculous. The people that recognized the miracle included both those of

³⁸“The Story of John Traynor,” from *Miracles of Lourdes* (N.p., n.d), accessed 17 April 2015.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Hume, *On Miracles*.

authority in the medical professions and those of authority in the Church, again pointing to the cohesion of faith and science in this case.

Conclusion

The truth of the matter is that the transcendent is very real and very present in the world; there is no way to escape it. Despite endless efforts to push it aside or ignore it, the presence of the transcendent is always there.⁴¹ This is why the acknowledgment of the miraculous is so crucial. Though the transcendent is present in every moment of every day, when a true miracle occurs, we are all made witnesses of a very intentional act through which we can directly experience the action of God.⁴² Miracles therefore should not be ignored and cannot be argued away. Accepting that miracles occur reasonably is not necessarily meant to be an easy task, but that does not mean that it cannot happen. As explained, the arguments that attempt to speak against miracles are weak. There is evidence that the miraculous can and does occur, and that evidence is growing every day. Science and faith are compatible in this sense and they build on each other and work with each other in helping miracles to be understood to the extent that they can given all that God has revealed to the world.

⁴¹Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 153.

⁴²Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 367

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