MIRACLES : A NECESSARY ADJUNCT OF REVELATION

FROM the earliest times Christians have looked upon miracle as a necessary adjunct to Revelation. In the last half-century, however, this historical view has been abandoned by many leaders of theological thought who now hold that it is no longer tenable. The reasons which are generally advanced in defence of this change of view fall into four main groups.

In the first place a radical change in outlook, affecting not merely the Christian teaching on miracles but many other doctrines as well, has been produced by the steady growth of immanentist and pantheist doctrines since the middle of the nineteenth century. These views first came into favour as a result of the influence of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, for when once evolution was accepted immanentism and the unpopular deism afforded the only loopholes by means of which a belief in God could be maintained. But the origins of immanentism were, of course, much earlier than this, as was also the recognition that it was incompatible with miracle as ordinarily conceived. Thus, in the seventeenth century, Spinoza had urged that since all nature consisted of the Divine Substance, it followed that that which was beyond nature had no meaning, and he very illogically (as Mozley (1) has shown) jumped to the conclusion that Christ's miracles were therefore impossible.

Such views afforded a very easy hiding ground for theologians who had no mind to fight Darwinism. The way in which, one by one, they fell into the trap by adopting this plausible reconciliation of science and theology is a story which has already been told by Clement Webb. Needless to say, various arguments, none of them very satisfactory, were advanced in favour of the change of outlook. Among religious writers widely read at the present time who are pure immanentists or strongly inclined in this direction, mention may be made of Illingworth, Wendland, Barnes, Lloyd Morgan, Alexander, etc. A recent attempt by Lester-Garland to deal with the subject of miracle on the basis of the philosophical views of Whitehead and Eddington is also of interest.

According to immanentism, nature must be an exhibition of God's perfect orderliness, and therefore any sudden change in its sequence would imply disorderliness in God. It follows that even if miracle could occur it would argue an imperfect God (Höffding) and therefore it is no cause for wonder if those who refuse to recognize a dualism between the Deity and Nature should do their best to minimize the importance of miracle.

But if God is transcendental, that is to say if it is granted that God is *able* to work miracles by acting on nature from without, the difficulties do not disappear. For on this view the important point is not so much whether miracles occur as whether they can be recognized when they occur, and many moderns have followed Hume in asserting that such recognition is impossible. Such a conclusion is indeed inevitable if a miracle be defined as an event "contra naturam quae nobis est nota" (Augustine) or as "an event for the occurrence of which no force, or combination of forces known to man, is able to account" (Row).[1] The fact is that man does not know everything and new knowledge constantly explains what was previously held to be inexplicable. This is one of the reasons why many Modernist theologians have abandoned not the possibility of miracles but the belief that they are of evidential value—or of importance to religion. This argument, then, constitutes the second objection to the historical view of the miraculous. It is asserted that since miracles "cannot with certainty be identified as such" they cannot function as a useful adjunct to revelation.

The third objection is closely connected with the foregoing. It is urged that even if miracles could be observed and recognized, they would still be valueless. If it could definitely be shown that no present or future scientific knowledge could explain a certain unique event, this fact would not, of itself, constitute any evidence for invoking God as the cause. A mere prodigy or irrationality in nature cannot be proved to have a religious significance, since, as Locke pointed out, we should then possess no knowledge whatever as to what the cause might be. This is an objection which has been ably discussed by Quick in recent years.

A fourth criticism is one which has been used more by rationalists than Christians. Huxley did not bother to discuss

[1] A seventeenth century writer (Philalethes) goes so far as to put forward the suggestion during the course of a dialogue that all strange noises are due to God!

whether miracles were possible or not, "he simply brought forward numerous other stories of miracles, and asked people why they believed the Bible ones and not the others." This is the method recommended by many rationalists at the present time. It is urged that if Christian miracles are to be accepted, it is illogical to look on all other miracles as frauds.

To put the argument in the words of Hugh Doherty, a nineteenth century writer: "Swedenborg and other men, whose veracity we cannot doubt, inform us they have seen spirits and conversed with them. We cannot say these men were labouring under the delusion of hallucinations, without endangering our faith in prophecies and visions, Scripture and the whole fabric of Divine revelation." And, after all, it is true to say that a few other miracles are as well attested as the resurrection of Christ—notably the transformation of base metals into gold, the evidence on which has been collected by Waite and Gould. But a larger number of medieval stories are as well attested as the Virgin birth or various healing miracles recorded in the Gospels or the Acts.

Although it constitutes a part of ordinary rationalist propaganda, there can be no doubt that this objection is one which is often felt strongly by Christian people at the present time, inasmuch as it appears to undermine all valid evidence in favour of miracle having taken place at all.

It will be convenient to deal with these criticisms one by one. In the first case immanentist objections are irrelevant, for ultimately, as Mozley (2) and more recently Tennant have shown, a belief in miracle rests upon Deism—or upon the Deist element in Christian Theism. In other words it is senseless to criticize miracle from a standpoint which begs the question at issue. It is not miracle but immanentist or pantheistic conceptions of God's relationship with nature which require discussion on such a view. Without going into the matter fully, it can be said with sane confidence that modern research on the decreasing organization of energy in the universe, together with Maxwell's observation that mind is, so far as we know, alone capable of recreating organization, has done much to make Spinoza's conception seem far less probable than it might have appeared in his day. True, it has been defended by many moderns but never with any clarity of exposition. Illingworth's analogy with a man incarnate in his body carries no conviction, because

man's mind is not incarnate in his body as such but only in his brain—no one ever supposed himself to be incarnate in his toes or felt his personality disintegrating with the loss of his nail parings.

No other authors have, so far as the writer knows, offered any better explanation as to why they deem it impossible that God should act on nature from without. Indeed, most discussions which aim at providing such a reason are vitiated from the start by a confusion of thought in that the scientific principle of evolution is applied to philosophical speculation without justification. But it is satisfactory to see that this whole movement of thought has suffered a severe set-back during the last decade, though, as so often happens in such cases, the set-back has been produced not by progress in knowledge but by the sense of hopelessness engendered by the World War which has forced Christians on the Continent of Europe to doubt whether a God of love could possibly be immanent in such events.

It is reasonable, then, to assume that since the opponents of transcendentalism are unable to give any valid reasons for their belief, that therefore such reasons do not exist. From this it would follow that there is no intrinsic impossibility that God should work miracles. We shall turn, therefore, to the second and third criticisms which relate to the identification of miracle and the possibility of interpreting it when once it has been identified.

At first sight these two objections appear conclusive. And we are met by the further difficulty that science is now capable of providing possible " explanations " for most prodigies. Thus it would be easy to devise carefully hidden electrical apparatus which would prevent lions from eating a modern Daniel, while for a miracle such as a resurrection from the dead suspended animation might reasonably be postulated. Moreover, even if science failed and the observers were known to be reliable, there would still be the fact, pointed out by Francis Newman, that no amount of evidence from credible witnesses could, under ordinary conditions, distinguish genuine miracle from conjuring. And again, in recent years, experiments such as those conducted by Varendonck and Bestermann have shown how notoriously unreliable the best intentioned people can be when confronted by any startling event.

Despite the devastating nature of these criticisms it is easy to see that in reality they only prejudice Christian faith in so far

as that faith is founded *entirely* on miracle. And historically neither in the New Testament nor in the Patristic writings (Mozley (3)) has miracle ever been exalted to this position. On the contrary, the real evidence was usually taken to consist in a dovetailing of the prophecies concerning the Messiah with the actual life and miracles of Christ.

The objection that observers are likely to be unreliable is certainly relevant for many of the New Testament miracles, but, as Morison has so brilliantly shown once more, the case for the resurrection of Christ rests on far stronger ground. As for Newman's difficulty concerning conjuring, it seems practically certain that moral rather than observational grounds were originally employed to distinguish the real miracles from the unreal. It seems clear from the early records that Christ's character was such as to produce a complete confidence in His truthfulness. Obviously, therefore, His companions are not likely to have speculated as to whether His miracles were genuine. And if their trust was justified, Christ in turn would never have encouraged them to see the miraculous in the ordinary. Indeed, there is a record of at least one mild reproof given to those who saw miracle where none was intended (John i. 50). There can be no doubt, then, that for His early followers the fact that One who claimed to be more than man showed powers greater than man's must have seemed to have substantiated His claim.

Very soon, however, the situation altered. Christ ascended and left others to spread Christianity. But how could the miraculous element retain any value as evidence when once it was handed on—second, third or fourth hand? That is the question to which an answer must be found.

The possible lines of policy which early Christians might have adopted are clear enough. On the one hand they might easily have sought to thrust on others that evidence derived from miracle which to them had appeared convincing and, by making much of events to which other interpretations would have been given by outsiders, they could easily have defeated their own cause. But, on the other hand, the complete elimination of miracle would have had consequences of its own. The moral worth of Christ's teaching would hardly have convinced people that He was more than a prophet.

At this point it may be well to reason out the best policy which could have been adopted by the Christian Church. It is

at once apparent that any supposed miracle may be of an evidential or non-evidential nature. For instance, Christians believe that " all things work together for good to them that love God " (Rom. viii. 28). Therefore, if a Christian watches the manner in which events in his life are turned to the best advantage, he will naturally regard the matter as direct evidence of God's care and goodness. But such evidence would be almost valueless to an outsider. The sceptic will compare it with many similar cases in his own life where difficult circumstances have straightened out and he will promptly and rightly accuse the Christian of selecting the data which happens to fit in with his own views. This is, in fact, the usual form of answer to all " testimonies " from experience and it has been ably exploited by Tuckett from the agnostic standpoint.

The case may be compared with a development which has occurred in scientific research during recent years. A decade ago it was supposed to be practically impossible for atoms to join together in rings containing more than five or six members. Many compounds, it was true, could not easily be represented by these formulae and some chemists postulated rings of much greater size, but they were usually considered uncritical for so doing. Finally, in 1926, Ruzicka showed beyond a doubt that larger rings could be obtained and were, in fact, represented in various natural products. Since that time formulae involving large rings have been assigned to many substances and, although the evidence for the structures in these cases is no better than that which was available in similar cases prior to 1926, prejudice against the existence of large rings has disappeared. The reason for this is not difficult to see. When once a precedent of interpretation is established, a far smaller amount of evidence is necessary in order to substantiate the view that this particular interpretation is to be invoked a second time.

Identical considerations apply in the case of miracle. If once the principle of miracle has been definitely established in connection with the Christian religion it becomes rational to interpret many events, for which other possible explanations *could* with difficulty be found, along the same lines. But unless the principle has been conclusively demonstrated in the first case it is folly to attempt to convince others of its truth by appealing to events which, in themselves, admit of several reasonable interpretations.

It was this simple fact which early Christians appear to have realized. The proof-miracle of Christianity was the well-attested resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it appears that, in the earliest days, this was practically alone cited as affording a specific miracle as an adjunct to the Christian revelation. This explains much that has mystified scholars. It explains, for instance, how it is that a miracle like that of the virgin birth is not so much as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles—a fact which has led some to suppose that it was denied. Again, it explains how it is that there is so little of the " personal testimony " element in early Christian evangelism. In short, the whole attitude of the New Testament towards miracle reveals an astonishingly consistent and well thought out plan, a plan which is the opposite of what might have been expected to result from the enthusiasm of a multitude of illiterate people who had become excited with a new idea. The facts are, in short, consistent with the view of the New Testament itself, that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Christians.

The answer to the second objection now becomes plain. A miracle is an event which is caused by mind acting on nature from without. It is not, therefore, equivalent to a mere absence of explanation. Thus in order to identify a miracle it is only necessary to show that the event took place in such a manner as to suggest that a purpose lay behind it, while on the other hand an explanation in terms of physical law is, if not impossible, at least far more difficult to conceive. Thus, in every event, two types of explanation are always possible—the scientific and the teleological—and in order to decide which is correct it is only necessary to decide which covers the facts with a minimum of special pleading. Now the resurrection of Christ afforded a good example of a miracle, for on the one hand it was difficult to explain physically, while on the other the mere fact that a particular man rose after a prediction to this effect strongly suggested that a mind had planned that one event should follow the other. Moreover, the raising of the body implied mind in the same sense as its original creation implied mind.

Thus the resurrection of Christ introduced the *principle* of miracle into the Christian religion and, this being done, all other miracles could be discussed on their merits by the Christians who would now possess no special predilection towards miraculous or natural explanations.

But it is necessary to enquire more deeply into the problem than this. If Christ's resurrection was the very first time in which men were asked to entertain the notion of a teleological cause, it is obvious that it would have had to contend with immense prejudice. But such was not the case. The Jews as well as many Gentiles believed that the world had been created by God and therefore the principle was already established. All that was needed was a very good case for believing that God had intervened again, and this was afforded by the resurrection. In this connection it may be noted that in Christ's own view, the fact that He worked miracles constituted direct evidence in favour of His claim to reveal God. According to St. John's Gospel He constantly speaks of these miracles as "works of God" and, in view of the fact that He is recorded to have created or at least suddenly cured many parts of the human frame, as well as actually given life to the dead, the expression is exceedingly apt.

The third attack on miracle has already been answered in part. It is, however, an extraordinary fact that an objection of this kind should be raised at all in the present age. There has always been some difficulty in relating the God of experience with the God Who is the Creator of nature. Writers such as Wells and Middleton Murry have even urged that no connection is possible and that confusion of thought arises if the two meanings are permitted to be hidden beneath one word.

Now those who urge that miracle can be of no religious importance completely overlook the possibility that a link between the two conceptions of God may be furnished by miracle if the latter serves as an adjunct to revelation. It will not be difficult to make this point clear. The God of nature is primarily a God of organization. A study of nature tells us this one thing about Him—that His mind has planned the heavens and the earth. Now Jesus came claiming to reveal God to man. Moreover, it was obviously His purpose that men should understand that the God He revealed was God the Creator and not merely an indefinite principle of goodness.

It was, therefore, extremely appropriate that miracles—the evidences of the Creator's working—should have centred round the life of One Who reached a standard of goodness previously unknown to man and, moreover, that so many of them should have been the means by which works of mercy and love were

performed. It was in this way that Christ bridged the gulf between the God of experience and the God of Creation by showing that the powers of each were united in Himself. It is, therefore, as a result of His miracles that it becomes reasonable to trust His explicit statements about God's care for His creation and the possibilities for man of mental contact with the Creator.

Before closing this paper, it is necessary to say something about the fourth and last objection and to discuss the possibility of false miracle.

Anyone who has studied the works of Schrenck-Notzing, Densmore, Geley, Richet, Osty or Rhine cannot fail to be impressed with the accumulating evidence that phenomena do actually occur in our own day, especially in connection with mediumship, to which the word miracle might fitly be applied. On physical grounds it seems inconceivable that matter should materialize in the form of hands and, after dipping itself in molten wax with the fist clenched, should dematerialize, leaving a hollow glove—yet such appears to be the case (Richet and Geley). Or again, it is even more difficult to understand how any natural process could account for the astonishing results of the Ostys in which invisible beams of infra-red light were partially but never wholly cut off by some substance which was invisible in ordinary light but which centred at a place where, according to the medium, a " force " had concentrated.

But such events are not to be regarded as in any sense new. Miracles of this low order—usually frivolous and useless but none the less extraordinary—have filled the records of history and were well known in Christian times. What, then, is their bearing upon Christian miracle ?

In the first case they remove a great part of the scepticism with which we might otherwise regard the miraculous. It is not merely the case that Christ's rising from the dead constituted a breach of the uniformity of nature, but that the same is true of events taking place in our own day. This alone makes it absurd to treat the Christian miracles as if they were unique in kind. But what bearing has this upon the use of miracle as evidence ? The bulk of the early fathers answered this question by drawing a contrast between the two types of miracle (Mozley (4)). Origen states that in his day the vestiges of the miraculous gifts of the spirit " still remain among those who live according to Christian

precepts". But the later fathers are agreed that miracles have ceased—except for the low strata of the miraculous which had always been present. The story of Simon the magician (Acts viii. 9-24; cf. Exod. viii. 19) in his encounter with apostolic miracle, in which we see him staggered by its power, appears to be typical of the contrast. In a later age this difference was forgotten, a fact which produced enigmas indeed for the theologians. Thus, as Görres points out, witches were often carried to the Sabbat by the Devil, but God had never worked so great a miracle for the saints. Not until the fifteenth century did Christian men, such as Calvin and Reginald Scott, return to the doctrine once held by the fathers. Yet even now the contrast is rarely mentioned for fear lest offence be caused to well-meaning faith-healers and Catholics, although spiritualists like Tweedale and Stobart have been allowed with little opposition to explain New Testament events in terms of mediumship.

The answer to the fourth question is not, then, so very baffling and it is fair to argue that, were it not for differences among Christians the agnostics would have been unable to "get away with it" so successfully. It is reasonable to accept the truth of any miracle, no matter what the source, *provided* the testimony comes from unbiased and independent witnesses and provided there are good grounds of a moral and ethical nature for ruling out the possibility of conjuring. But it is unreasonable to interpret events in Christian times in the light of the miracles of later ages for such a method of interpretation ignores the fact that, according to contemporary writers, the greater miracles ceased at a very early period.

In conclusion, none of the four criticisms of miracle which have been outlined above appear to rest on sound reasoning. At the very most it may be claimed that miracle can only be identified by an inductive method such as is used in the sciences instead of with absolute certainty. But such an element of induction or faith is common to all knowledge. Moreover, the general character of the particular miracle which early Christians chose as best suited for evidential purposes is still such as to create belief in the reasonableness of their conclusion—in fact, the progress of modern knowledge has, as we have seen, done more to remove than to create difficulties. Is it, then, too much to hope that the tide will turn and Christians generally

will once more find one of the strongest grounds of their faith in the evidence for the resurrection of their Lord and Master ?

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