

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE PROBLEM OF THE SUPERNATURAL

I

"THE Cardinal Requirement of human life," wrote Leopold Clarke recently in his book *Evolution and the Break-up of Christendom* (p. 66), "is to find a certain and unshakable Foundation of Relationship with God, wherein to rest." And that raises the very questions before us now. Can such a sure basis be discovered by man himself, or if not, has God revealed his will to man? In other words the vital matters of "revelation" and "miracle" are now to be considered briefly. The subject may be focused in the phrase, the validity of supernaturalism.

Revelation has had a singular fascination for thinkers of all schools of religion and philosophy in this century and last. Certainly in theology it is Revelation that is the central problem once again. The most important theology at present is that known as the Dialectical Theology as headed by Karl Barth, and for him the fundamental and central conviction is that of "the Person of a speaking God, Who as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, seeks fellowship with his creatures". The main purpose of his vast labours is, as he says, "to think through again the category of Revelation". It is of the utmost interest to observe how he has been re-instating revelation as the very essence of Christianity, as the great fact to which all the Holy Scriptures witness with harmonious voice. Barth makes two distinctions, first between Revelation and Religion, and then between Revelation and History. His whole teaching hinges on this distinction. Religion, says he, is the movement of man towards God. Revelation is the movement of God towards man. It is not merely a species of the genus, religion, but something quite different, it is an event from the side of God, therefore it is an historical revelation, but its unique characteristic is that it is "once for all". Also, Revelation is History, but we may not go on to say that History is Revelation. For God is not working out His purpose IN history, but through history. History is from beneath, Revelation is from above, precedes

history, determines history, is manifest in history, but is distinct from history. Revelation means that God reveals Himself; it is Offenbarung, divine Apocalypse.

But all along we are confronted with the difficulty of determining what is exactly meant by the terms used. For while revelation theologically and properly means a divine self-unveiling, it has been extended to mean much more. Nothing has had a greater measure of agreement in recent times than the conception that all religions take their origin in "revelation", and that all religions are consequently stages, more or less perfect, in the grand evolution of the race! In that view, Christianity may or may not take the highest place, but certainly it is not a unique religion, and has not any authority *per se*. For one example, W. Bousset wrote, "The distinction between natural and revealed religion is impossible. . . . Christianity is not the one religion, the only religion, but simply the most complete species of the genus". But this is to say the very opposite of the previous paragraphs. It is to make history revelation, to make man the seeker after God. Seeker he may be on his own, but what of finding? "When we raise the question, How did Abram find God? the only adequate answer that can be given is, that God found Abram." (Late Professor Strahan.) When we ask How was Moses able to promulgate the Ten Commandments? the answer is, in one word, GOD. (Cf K. Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, p. 18.) The application of the strictest historical and critical methods has afforded ample demonstration of the absolutely unique and extraordinary character of the Religion of Israel, and it cannot be explained upon any other hypothesis than that of a purposeful, loving self-revelation of the Creator Who is also the Redeemer. It is not an evolution, but an ingression. "The Word became flesh" is the key to the Christian religion. "It is that occurrence which, so to speak, shatters the frame of history, because it contradicts the essence of historical existence, which is relativity. Jesus the Christ means eternity in time, the Absolute within relativity . . . the absolute paradox." (See E. Brunner, *The Word and the World*, p. 36.) And so vital is this fact to the truth and mission of the Gospel that for almost two centuries the development of theology has been largely an attempt to get rid of this "rock in the sky", this stumbling-block for the man of reason. It is useful to trace the attempt to rid Christianity of this essentially supernatural core.

II

The Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*, of the thirteenth century, which was the European equivalent of the English Deism, had enormous influences. In 1899 Adolf von Harnack, the great Berlin professor, reproduced the same main ideas in his *Essence of Christianity*. In this line of interpretation we have the figure of Jesus the Teacher, and his uniqueness lies in that he discovered a certain ideal of human life. Hence the "social gospel", and other groups of "modern restatements". There is nothing supernatural here, and it is "domesticated" theology. Another and closely related conception is that of Jesus the Example, the living ideal, and his value is pedagogical and not simply religious. Then a more aesthetic tendency came in bringing Jesus the religious genius, but again, this is to confine Jesus within the limits of humanity. Genius is a relative term, for we are all geniuses, only most of us are very small ones! He is *the* genius! In more recent years, the attempt has been made to present the Jesus who is the "symbol of the divine", having the greatest importance for the religious community. But the "Jesus of History" never existed, as Albert Schweitzer wrote thirty years ago! We are, in fact, in deeper distress in trying to exclude the supernatural than we are when we have open minds, ready to receive the impression of the facts. Unbelief raises bigger questions than it settles, and its settlements are only tentative. If, in fact, the Biblical revelation, as we may assume it to be at the moment, is the highest religion we know, that itself offers the most drastic blow to the evolutionary and naturalistic theory of religion. For how did they so far back in time rise to such high levels, while we, who are presumably much farther on in the stream of evolutionary progress, can only make our commentaries upon the text of their writings? We in the twentieth century have produced no original scripture, at best we have only modified former views! Is not the fact of the human Jesus the greatest difficulty for the evolutionary view? Why did He occur then? And not now say, or reserve Himself for the consummation? The fact is surely inescapable, that we do our intellects most justice when we admit that He is "the Lord from heaven", that no human category can contain Him, that He is indeed the "Exegesis of God", and that no other is or can be, for in the Bible view,

which is entirely self-consistent, He is none other than God Himself.

But if there is a vague use of the word revelation in much writing, there is the same confusion of the mind in the use of the words natural and supernatural. The real point at issue is the admission or the denial of the supernatural. But here is precisely what most modern thinkers will not admit, viz. that they deny the reality of the supernatural. Hence the efforts of those who try to preserve both terms in the same system, and the end is that we are more confused than enlightened. For instance, we have it expressed by a certain well-known philosopher, "The natural is supernatural to the core, and the supernatural is natural to the limit!" Or in an older writer, we have Carlyle's laconic epigram, "natural supernaturalism". (*Sartor Resartus*, bk. iii, Ch. 8.) This merging or identification of the two in regard to revelation is very deeply characteristic of our modern thinking. The idea of the challenging "Either—Or" is repugnant in the highest degree and the whole trend of philosophy is to get at a "Both—And" method. The antinomies of former days have been obliterated, and if God and man are ultimately one, then it is no wonder that relativity reigns in lesser spheres

But yet the general mind of man will come to realise that one does not speak of God by speaking with a loud voice about man. As there is, in the great Danish philosopher Kierkegaard's words, "An infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity", so God, if He is to be God at all, must be recognised as the "Wholly-other". After all, no man can raise himself by his own bootstraps. Christ is not merely not in the vanguard of the great human army seeking salvation, He is One marching to meet that human host, Himself alone bringing salvation, for He is the Saviour. The Bible reveals a Being who has character, and will, and power to reveal Himself, and besides, who has real purpose and end in so revealing Himself, [in other words, the most reasonable possible idea underlies theism, viz., that God is, and that He is self-conscious, personal, and ethical. Or] To use the Bible language, "In the beginning GOD created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters". (Gen. i. 1-2.) Here in the opening sentences of the Bible we have its greatest assertion. The existence of God is simply

posited without apology, it is the denial of atheism. The absolute oneness of God is also asserted, for "the Lord our God is one GOD" is the heart of the Old Testament doctrine, and by this, polytheism, which Anthropology is showing to have been a later corruption, is contested. The statement of creation by this living and planning God makes pantheism impossible, God is above His creation, He is not part of it at all. And yet another distinction is made, matter being created, is not eternal, the outward is phenomenal, materialism is an impossible refuge. Here we are faced with the great contrast formed by the East and the West in their profoundest modes of thinking. The East is in its very nature spiritual, the things that are unseen are most real to it. To the Western mind, the seen is much more real. God is a difficult conception to grasp. This opposite tendency has never been sufficiently realised. It is in the New Testament, the difference between the Jewish mind and the Roman say—the mind for which John wrote, and that for which Mark wrote. It is the West that is materialistic, and the East that is spiritual. But again, fatalism is excluded by the first verse of Genesis, for God acts in freedom, and there is no absolute determinism. The Will of the holy God is the final factor in determining the course of the stars or the fall of a sparrow. In a very real sense it is the only factor. Can we not see in this verse however a deeper significance? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John iii. 16) comes to mind here. The only truly sufficient motive power for creation is love. Love *must* create, and create good at that. "In the beginning God created" . . . dare we ask why? If we do, it will be a true Christian answer to say because the God of the Bible is in His very essence and nature holy love, "God is love". God created because He is love. And if that is what the first verse reveals, it is certainly infinitely more than all the other "revelations" (sic) in natural religions have altogether shown. Their total content is out-matched by this exordium of Scripture! Now to a mind convinced of the existence and agency of a living, loving, personal God, any theoretical objection to the supernatural can have small influence. It belongs to the very idea of God, in the full theistic view, to think of Him as self-revealing, and if this revelation of Himself is a necessity for His own being, it is

manifest that miracle will be an essential element of any such event. There is said to be a decay in faith in miracles, and yet to-day we are more than ever aware of vast existences that certainly cannot be localised or classified. The enormous piles of literature on the shelves of the psychical research library bear witness to this unknown realm. The modern world is so very frequently using the word miracle that it has lost the sense of wonder that used to attach to it! The achievements of science in every department at the present day make doubt of the miraculous look really ridiculous. And yet we are faced with the most dogmatic statements from every quarter denying the truth of the supernatural intervention of God in the world.

III

The contention is easily proved, and it is of primary importance, that the difficulty said to be experienced with regard to miracle is the difficulty of simply believing outright in the idea that God is the living and acting God whose character we have defined as holy love. We may concentrate upon the Scripture "miracles", and before we review the statements of unbelief in these, it is useful perhaps to recall that thinkers so diverse as Augustine, Origen, Aquinas, Pascal, Locke, Berkeley, Butler, Paley, and many others, believed without question in the historical reality of the miracles. The "time-spirit" has given rise to a temper in regard to miracles which the French R.C. apologist Mgr. Mignot, Archbishop of Albi, called "une gêne, une hésitation, une incertitude, un pourquoi, un peut-être!" (In *Revue du Clerge Français*, November 15th, 1900.) Rationalism opposed the supernatural from the beginning, and in 1800-4, Paulus, the German theologian, published his Commentary on the N.T., in which for one illustration we may recall the case of Zacharias being made dumb. Says Paulus, the leader of this school, "Zacharias really went into the Temple at the hour of incense, as he is said to have done in the first chapter of Luke; while there, the glow of the fire or something of that sort seemed to take the form of an angel; when he came out he did not use his voice, because, thinking that dumbness was the punishment that had been imposed upon him for his unbelief, he did not even try to speak"! (*Kommentar über das neue Testament*, 2te, 1, pp. 26 f.) This drew forth the invective of Strauss, and even he argued that the miracles are really central in the

narratives, and that details are brought in for their sake. Either accept the narratives as they stand, including their supernatural contents, or else, without seeking a historical basis in detail, regard them as myths—i.e. as the embodiment, in historical form, of certain fundamental religious ideas. (See *Das Leben Jesu*, I, pp. 71-80, 1835.) But Bousset of Göttingen, in his *What is Religion?* has written more recently and as explicitly, "There is still one thing that no longer fits in with this new world—a miracle, in the strict sense of the word, in the sense of the intervention of God in this natural order of things by setting aside its laws." (Op. cit., 284.) The able Professor Troeltsch said that the historico-critical methods of to-day have become so important that the use of miracles as apologetic has "been rendered untenable, not by theories, but by documents, by discoveries, by the results of exploration. The force of such evidence cannot be resisted by anyone whose sense of truth has been educated by philology, or even by anyone possessing an average amount of common sense". (*Christian Thought—Its History and Application*, 1923, p. 15.) While another recently dead professor, Dr. G. B. Foster, of Chicago, dealing with the miracles of the Bible, is equally dogmatic (and unconvincing?), "an intelligent man who now (i.e. in 1906) affirms his faith in such stories as actual facts can hardly know what intellectual honesty means." (*The Finality of the Christian Religion*, p. 132.) But all these religious teachers' strong repudiation of the supernatural element in the Bible, goes back to such influential philosophers as Kant, who in 1793 published his *Religion within the Bounds of Reason only*. He says, "Moral religion tends to displace and disperse with all miraculous beliefs whatever; for mankind betrays a culpable state of moral unbelief when he refuses to acknowledge the paramount authority of those behests of duty primordially insculpted on his heart, unless he sees them accredited and enforced by miracles." (Eng. tr., p. 103, Edin. 1838.) And Hegel, in his lectures on the *Philosophy of History* (Eng. tr. 1900, p. 326), declares in accordance with the whole of his philosophical outlook that "the real attestation of the Divinity of Christ is the witness of one's own spirit—not Miracles." Probably the most influential thinkers of last century have taken up more or less the same view. In this country T. H. Green complained of the "habit of identifying Christianity with the collection of propositions which constitute the written New

Testament" (Works iii, p. 160) and his objection lay in what he ridicules as enfeebled Christianity which believes in the miraculous. The two Cairds, and both in Gifford lectures, spoke against the admission of the supernatural. However varied the objections to miracle may be in the writers quoted, the same dogmatic and naïve spirit is usually combined which we have long been familiar with in Hume's famous dictum, "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 nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined." Again, he says, "It is a miracle that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country." (Essays on Miracles.) But such a universal induction is impossible, and besides, the glaring *petitio principii* involved at the heart of his statement, invalidates his whole point. And when Matthew Arnold adduces as an instance of miracle, "a pen turned into a pen-wiper", and T. H. Huxley envisages "a centaur trotting down the street", it is obvious that they have lost the right to be heard, for it is sheer frivolity. The setting of the Scripture miracles is such as to make the credibility not only possible, but reasonable. Given the person of Jesus Christ, the absence of miracle would have been *the* disproof of His claims. There is an economy of miracle, even a "parsimony of miracles", and the reported occurrence must in each case be examined in its whole context. From the epistemological point of view we may say that "everything that happens must be considered etiologically and teleologically—from the standpoint of the efficient cause, and of the purpose". The miracles of the Bible are never aimless displays of power, but are always part of the history of revelation, and are in every case strictly subordinated to its ends. Never mere prodigies, but wrought mostly through the agency of, or in connection with great persons in the divine drama, e.g. Moses, Elijah, or Christ, for high and holy purposes in order to advance the kingdom of God.

II

To adopt the attitude of the writers we have quoted who will not allow miracle because they did not observe them, as Hume says, is to be back in the days of Voltaire and Renan who would have said that because the miracles did not happen

before the élite of the French Academy in the Hall of Science in Paris, they must therefore be rejected now. Merz adequately shows the ridiculous state of things in Europe even in the year 1790, when the Paris Academy, and many learned persons, ridiculed the authentic reports of the fall of meteors (*History of European Thought*, etc., vol. i, p. 327). When Franklin brought the subject of lightning-conductors before the Royal Society, he was laughed at as a dreamer, and his paper was not admitted to the "Philosophical Transactions"! The *Edinburgh Review* called upon the public to put Thomas Gray into a strait jacket for maintaining the practicability of railroads. It had been pointed out that even Comte himself, who maintained so dogmatically that the age of theological dogmatism was past, declared that men could never know anything as to the chemical composition of the heavenly bodies! (See Sir J. A. Thomson, *The System of Animate Nature*, p. 15.) M. Flammarion had a friend who actually dedicated his work ironically (*Choses de l'Autre Monde*) thus:

To the memory of all savants
 Brevited, patented,
 Crowned with palms, decorated and buried,
 Who have been opposed to the rotation of the earth,
 To meteorites,
 To galvanism,
 To the circulation of the blood,
 To vaccination,
 To waves of light,
 To lightning-rods,
 To daguerreotypes,
 To steam-power,
 To propellers,
 To steam-boats,
 To railroads,
 To lighting by gas,
 To magnetism,
 And all the rest.
 And to those living now, or shall yet be born
 Who do the same in the present day,
 Or who shall do the same hereafter!

And we might well add the supernatural to this list of once incredible things! Perhaps we should remind ourselves of the very valuable advice of Alfred Russell Wallace, when we have thus reviewed the dogmatism with which on *a priori* grounds miracle has been eliminated by various thinkers. He wrote in his book, *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*, p. 17, "Whenever

the scientific men of any age have denied the facts of investigators on *a priori* grounds, they have always been wrong!"

In summing up, we may quote some of the ablest writers who have maintained the supernatural, and shown its nature to be entirely compatible with the highest religion we know, even to be of the essence of the Christian faith. Christlieb, one of the most distinguished Germans of last generation, wrote in his great work, *Modern Doubt and Christian Belief*, p. 286, "With the truth of miracles the entire citadel of Christianity stands or falls. . . . The negation of miracles leads to the annihilation not merely of the Christian faith, but of all religion". And Beyschlag (quoted by Christlieb, *op. cit.*, p. 288) says: "The same grave in which modern heathenism buries the miraculous, swallows up everything which gives to human existence an ideal character, a true value: the soul made in the divine image, faith and prayer, the holy person of the Redeemer, the entire system of Christian truth, the future world, the living God." In England, Mansel said that if the reality of miracles were denied, "all Christianity . . . so far as it has any title to that name, so far as it has any special relation to the Person or teaching of Christ, is overthrown at the same time". (*Aids to Faith*, p. 3.) And one of the best Bampton lecturers, Mozley, held that "miracles are the necessary complement" of the truths of Christianity, "which, without them, are purposeless and abortive, the unfinished fragments of a design which is nothing unless it is the whole. . . . Miracles and the supernatural contents of Christianity must stand or fall together. These two questions—the *nature* of the revelation, and the *evidence* of the revelation—cannot be disjoined". (*On Miracles*, 3rd ed., 1872, p. 11 and p. 18.)

For once we agree with our Roman Catholic friends, as when the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* (vol. x, p. 346), declares, "Miracles are so interwoven with our religion, so connected with its origin, its promulgation, its progress and whole history, that it is impossible to separate them from it". Only our references are to different "miracles"!

"There is in Christianity, but one miracle, the appearance in the world of a supernatural Person," so said Dr. Salmon, in his early days (in *Evolution and Other Papers*, p. 35). The Rationalism which opposed the supernatural never even offered to substitute a new conception of revelation. To jettison the past is lamentably facile work, but what are we to have in place of these

things? Are we to return to a naturalistic view of the cosmic order, and try to live in the nature that is a closed system? If we are bound to exclude the supernatural, then we are equally bound to essential pessimism, philosophical pessimism, that is the knife that cuts the nerve of progress. We shall sink to the dark and morbid view of such as Lord Russell, when he writes, "Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race, the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. . . . The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long. One by one as they march, our comrades vanish out of sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death". (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 56.) All that is seen is temporal, and has the seeds of death in it, but the things of the Spirit, the supernatural, are abiding.

T. CHRISTIE INNES.

Edinburgh