

THE SCIENCE VERSUS RELIGIOUS MIRACLE DEBATE

Russell Stannard is a retired high-energy particle physicist born in 1931. He has written books in defence of Christianity against claims that the faith is against science. His book *Science and Belief* is referred to for this article.

Science is about the physical and what to expect from it. It seems to rule out the idea of a God or Jesus doing magic or miracle to turn a black crow pink.

Alister McGrath would say, "Observation does not determine fixed laws, which may be used to determine whether something did or did not happen in the past. It merely establishes the probability of events of a certain type" (page 164, *Bridge-Building*).

Stannard mentions the view that science may prove that miracles cannot happen (page 129).

Stannard mentions the view that as God is all powerful he can disobey the laws of nature or obey them as he chooses. On page 133, he says nobody denies that if God exists then he can act to change the law of nature so the problem is then, does he choose to do so?

Stannard says on page 131, that though the laws of nature are remarkably consistent, there could be times when they are inconsistent.

Stannard then says that using miracles to convert people would imply an attempt to force them to love God and the truth (page 134). Jesus appeared to the disbelieving apostle Thomas and St Paul to force them. Yet Stannard argues that Jesus was against miracles as an attempt to convert people (page 134). Stannard cites Jesus' refusal to do a miracle at Satan's request in order to convert the people by surviving a great fall. And how Jesus said he would not be giving his evil and faithless age a sign. And how he told a story that declared that if people do not believe in Moses or the Prophets then they would not be convinced if somebody was raised from the dead to get them to believe in religious truth. And he would not come down from the cross though people asked him to.

Stannard mentions the New Testament account of how Paul was converted by a miracle and denies that Paul was forced to believe for he might have already started to believe and indeed his conversion was gradual and may have developed afterwards for reasons independent of the miracle (page 134). There is nothing in the New Testament to back up Stannard's speculation.

None of the examples really show what Stannard says they show. Jesus believing in miracle to convert people would not mean he would do a dramatic public miracle because the Devil asked him to. And if that age was evil and faithless would doing a miracle to convert it serve any purpose? It would get even harder in unbelief. And Jesus said we have the miracle of the testimony of Moses and the Prophets so if we don't heed them, somebody rising from the dead to talk to us will do no good. And Jesus may have stayed on the cross and planned another miracle in order to convert them. All the examples show not that miracles intended to convert are wrong, but that they are not worth doing if the people are too anti-god and too stubborn.

They settle for saying that science tests are not everything and a true miracle may happen without there being any scientific backing. It is enough that science cannot refute it. It is assumed Jesus won't do a miracle to convert science or at least the top scientists! Christians condemn critics of miracles for saying they don't seem to be true as assuming they know what God will not do. But the critics are only going a few steps further than the Christians who themselves assume a lot about what God is or is not supposed to do!

HOW DO YOU SEE A MIRACLE?

Science cannot verify miracles any more than it can verify that John is thinking of a white stone. This only means that science cannot comment on something being a miracle. The scientist must assume that miracles may or may not happen. As a scientist, he must say he doesn't know.

If we think lightning has a supernatural divine origin and are proved wrong, it only means that it does not have a direct supernatural divine origin. Religion holds that God still keeps all things in being supernaturally.

An event that is claimed to be miraculous but which is just about a display of power such as a statue drinking milk or a

weeping image of the Virgin Mary must be understood as demeaning to God and we can presume that there is a natural cause even if we don't know what it is. Science may show there is no natural explanation but out of our love for God, we are unable to accept the events as being his work.

David Hume held that no evidence is good enough for a miracle for it is always more likely that an honest and reliable witness is mistaken than that anything magical happened. He does not say miracles don't happen. He does not say the evidence is useless. He just says it is not enough. He does not deny that a case might arise tomorrow where the evidence is good enough.

Stannard & Prayer

Page 158 outlines how experiments for seeing whether or not prayer could help the sick failed. He argues that the results are open to interpretation. One thing he says is that the prayers of strangers for the sick may have been ineffective because they were not heartfelt like the prayers of their loved ones would be. He quotes the Bible as saying that we must not test the Lord God.

Stannard says we must not pray to God in an attitude of, "If you are there then help". Then he tells us to pray as though there was a God (page 159). But that is the same thing! What stupidity! And if you are not sure if there is anybody there, then why shouldn't you pray "If you are there then do something?"