

TOP THINKERS AND THEOLOGIANS ON MIRACLES

(BASED ON

OCR Philosophy of Religion for AS and A2,

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A miracle is an event that does not match the way nature usually works. For example, if a cow suddenly got wings out of nowhere that would be a miracle. Or if a dead man rises from the dead when dead people stay dead. Religion attributes miracles to the supernatural power of God and argues that through miracles God is trying to tell us something. Sceptics say miracles are only hearsay.

Tillich and Miracles

Top modern theologian, Paul Tillich, defined miracles as events that people see as signs with religious meaning and significance. For example, if somebody recovers from a flu in time for his or her wedding they could see this as an act of God and a miracle. It doesn't look out of the ordinary to an unbeliever but to the person it is an act in which God reveals his love.

Tillich rejected the theory that miracles were supernatural. He correctly observed that such ideas make God to be a sorcerer. It even makes God, he went on, out to be like demons that possess people (page 320). If God does miracles, he needs to get his people to react properly to them so he needs to possess them. It is the reaction not the miracle in itself that is important to a rational God.

Tillich denied that miracles violate the laws of nature but held that they are or can be astonishing coincidences and events that happen in accord with nature. Miracles also reveal something about the kind of being God is and what God or God's nature is like (page 322). Miracles must cause an ecstatic reaction in the recipient, they fill the person with joy and confidence in God and a sense of his presence and what God is like.

These are the problems with his account.

Two people can experience a miracle and one of them can feel disturbed by it and sense that it is some occult force that could be dangerous that is doing them. For example, a born-again Christian might be disturbed by a miracle at Lourdes.

And if miracles are natural coincidences but astonishing how do you know that the miracle isn't just in your mind? (page 323). How astonishing has something to be before it can be considered to be a miracle? If you accidentally move a chess piece and it leads to you winning the game is that to be considered a miracle? If it is then you can claim miracles to support any nonsense you wish. You can say that the coincidence of a con-artist prophet surviving a horrific car crash is proof that those who have evidence that he is a fraud are wrong.

The philosopher R F Holland says that a miracle is a series of astonishing coincidences that people take a religious message from and not a violation of nature or a suspension of natural law (page 337). This view implies that we must believe to allow miracles to happen. If we don't believe they won't. By unbelief, we may have been to blame for Hitler not getting a vision of Jesus and changing his rotten ways. Miracles then offer a slap against unbelievers and religious doubters. This is something they have no right to do for though people claim to believe in a miracle because they have seen it the real reason is they have come to feel they want to believe in it. The objections to miracles being believable or religiously significant or being signs proves miracles have no right to infer that unbelievers are bad and dangerous.

The rapture and ecstasy would need to be caused by a miracle as well. Why?

If miracles must cause an ecstatic religious reaction, then why can't the reaction be caused without the miracle? In other words, do you need to rise from your deathbed against all the odds to experience such joy in God? You could rise and not feel the joy. Just because the joy comes with a miracle doesn't mean it was caused by the miracle. Joy may often follow certain actions but there is nothing to say it necessarily has to.

Feelings do happen to you whether you want them or not.

Tillich is right that a true miracle would need to cause the miracle of spiritual rapture in the recipient. But this makes the other miracle unnecessary.

It follows that miracles such as healings and statues weeping blood do nothing for anybody. They are not signs for the unbeliever. Only the miracle of ecstasy and rapture is the sign but you have to be a believer already to get it and even then you cannot be sure if you put your hand on your heart that it is a sign.

Prayer is opening and raising the heart and mind to God and uniting with him. It is said that miracles may show that when we pray, God may do what we ask, but in his own way (page 331). Miracles have to advocate prayer above all else. Even membership in the true Church will do you no good without prayer, so the Catholic Church tells us. Even if God made us, it does not follow that he wants us to pray. God didn't need to make us for he is perfect and has all he needs. So he does not need to require us to pray. It is simply untrue that miracles imply that prayer is needed.

Maurice Wiles and Miracles

Maurice Wiles author of *God's Action in the World* declared that he didn't believe in miracles because

1 If miracles are violations of the law of nature, they have to happen extremely rarely. Otherwise we won't be able to talk about laws of nature any more.

2 The random pattern of miracles is a problem

3 God does nothing to stop evil events miraculously.

He denies that God does miracles but says God making all things and revealing himself in creation is sufficient and he doesn't need to do miracles.

Wiles realises that miracles happen so rarely that even if they do happen, we cannot be expected to believe they have happened even if we admit something could have been a miracle.

He is right that the randomness is a problem.

In relation to point three, some who feel that God can let people suffer and be good, would amend that to say that God doing miracles such as sending Mary to appear at Lourdes and making statues bleed and making waters turn into Jesus isn't acceptable. He should be doing acts of miraculous healing instead. If the problem of how an almighty God can be good and let evil happen despite having the power to halt it and erase it is unsolvable then Wiles is right and no amending of his logic against miracles is necessary.

Miracle violation or absurdity or reality?

A miracle could be a pack of lies or people have made a mistake. Undeniable. This is possible. Believers and unbelievers in miracles both agree with this. Believers hold that miracle reports are false more often than they are true.

A miracle could be a violation. Undeniable whether miracles happen or not.

A miracle could be an absurdity. Undeniable whether miracles happen or not.

Believers say a miracle is not a violation or absurd and there is evidence for miracles. Deniable. The truth of what they say is disputed. They have to resort to lies and distortions and manipulating people's desire to believe to retain any semblance of credibility.

We see here that the view that miracles are what religion says they are is outnumbered. It is three against one.

There is more.

The violation possibility is a fact. The absurdity possibility is a fact. But the believers have nothing but belief or an assumption, to be more precise, against these two facts.

The believers have the silliest and most stubborn position. It is a clear preference for what they wish to believe against the truth and against the facts. Miracles need dishonesty and self-deception like a parasite needs something to feed off. They accuse those who see miracle reports as not believable of being stubborn when it is they themselves who are being stubborn.

Some conclusions follow.

No matter how educated the verifiers of miracles and witnesses of miracles are they are unreliable insofar far as they testify to miracles. They are trying to hark us back to the days of superstition.

If miracles are violations they are not evidence for God but evidence that something is trying to fool us when miracles speak of God ie apparitions, prophets, divinely inspired Bibles and scriptures etc. Believers are playing into its hands and they must be discouraged.

Whether miracles are what believers say or violations or absurdities, we would seem to be encouraging them by responding to them religiously. We could be encouraging some power for example to tamper with the evidence for somebody's guilt to get them off the hook so that they dodge jail.

Even if miracles occur then that does not mean we ought to believe in them for probability matters more than evidence. For example, the evidence that a dying man murdered his wife by hitting her with a frying pan may be strong but if it was improbable that he could get out of his death bed to do it then the evidence is wrong and we can reject the conclusion it points to. For compassionate decent people, the doctrine of Jesus that sinners will sin and suffer in Hell forever without mercy and without hope if they die without asking for his mercy, is proof that no evidence for the resurrection will ever be enough. Those with a bad streak will not be too bothered about the Hell doctrine.

If miracles happen, ought we to believe?

We have seen that even if miracles happen that does not mean we ought to believe in them. Let us say more in defence of this fact.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. You need miraculously immaculate evidence for a miracle. Only a miracle can verify a miracle. Even if other people have this evidence it is no good to me. I need to have it too and see the miracle. Those who ask me to believe their miracle report or who say that God is asking it - naturally if God does a miracle for you he wants you to get others to believe in it too - are asking me to be gullible and unfair with evidence.

Also, even if a miracle has satisfactory evidence to its name that still does not mean we ought to believe in it. People are allowed to change their minds about what the evidence they have points to. In court, evidence is presented to the jury and not all will agree on its interpretation. The Christian insistence that we must believe in the death and the miracle resurrection of Jesus Christ is just pure bigotry and is illicit controlling. These beliefs though at the heart of Christianity oppose human rights and show that Christianity does not care for human rights in themselves at all but only cares about what rights the faith allows. It is faith not people that matter in this faith though the appearance of caring for people is a big thing.

If believing that the world will end in a hundred years sends the whole world into depression and panic, then it is immoral or evil to promulgate the belief even if it is true. The more unlikely the belief is to be correct the worse it is to promulgate it. If the belief should cause depression and panic but doesn't then that doesn't change the fact that promoting the belief is promoting what is evil in itself. It is evil in itself to lie to a woman that her husband has been sleeping with prostitutes even if she laughs at you. If it is wrong to tell her even if it is true it is still evil in itself.

A man can hit his wife because he is momentarily insane and thinks that it is good, or he can do it to save her life if somebody is blackmailing him or he can do it out of malice. But when it happens you assume that he did it out of malice.

A miracle is saying that natural law at the time the miracle happens is a bad thing. Christians try to deny that today for they hold that God can't rebel against his own laws ie that miracles are not violations of nature. But like the man hitting his wife we must assume the worst based on the fact that miracles look like a rebellion. We also know that believers like Swinburne who seem to think miracles are very astonishing natural events are really saying that a miracle is no different from one of the non-miraculous wonders we experience all the time such as child prodigies. They are really just calling some of these miracles though they are not and using them as evidence for God and religion. They are bending the evidence and sifting it to fit what they wish was true.

No matter how strong the evidence for any miracle is, we ought not to believe in it.