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A Contranatural View of Miracle

ELDON R. HAY

TO THE CONTRANATURALIST, the essence of a miracle is that it is unlawful and inexplicable. Being contrary to or against nature, a miracle cannot be subsumed under a law of nature at the time at which it happens or at any other time.

This essay is divided into two parts: the first part being devoted to a presentation of the contranatural position without comment; the second part being concerned with a criticism of the contranatural viewpoint.

I

For the contranaturalist, a miracle to be such must be contranatural in the strictest sense of the term, incapable of being scientifically explained now or at any time. If the miracle is to have the evidential value contranaturalists ascribe to it, it must be not merely extraordinary, but inexplicable—and indeed eternally inexplicable, in terms of natural law or natural causation. "Miracles are contradictions of known laws: contradictions which no amount of further knowledge will or can explain."¹ A problem immediately arises: some events, once thought contranatural, are now deemed quite natural. The healing miracles of Jesus, once thought completely inexplicable, seem now at least partially capable of being subsumed under scientific categories. "The discovery of natural means of producing effects which once passed for miracles does not logically imply that bygone marvels were not wrought by supernatural means; but it removes all ground for logical certainty that they were so produced."² The contranaturalist replies to such an objection by saying that there has been a mistake in classification. Thus, Lunn writes:

If phenomena be divided into those which are due to natural agents, and those which are due to supernatural agents, it is inevitable that mistakes in classification will be more common in an age of primitive than in an age of advanced science. If there be genuine miracles, we should expect to find that some phenomena once regarded as miraculous will later be explained within the framework of natural law. . . . The point at issue is whether there remains a residuum of phenomena which the advance of science does nothing to explain.³

There are still a number of phenomena for which no natural explanation

1. F. T. Farmer, "Physical Science and Miracle," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, 80 (1948), 74.

2. F. R. Tennant, *Miracle and its Philosophical Presuppositions* (Cambridge: University Press, 1925), p. 32.

3. A. Lunn, "Miracles—The Scientific Approach," *Hibbert Journal*, 48 (1949-50), 242.

can be given; these alone are contranatural, these alone strictly miracles. Probably no one saw this point more clearly than Mozley, who has given the classical modern statement of the contranatural position. He saw that a miracle, to be of evidential value, must be utterly without precedent, and in this sense contranatural. Mozley rejected two natural explanations which, by the use of analogy, sought to make miracle less offensive to scientific minds. The first was Babbage's use of the analogy of the calculating machine, which, completely naturally, but very rarely, produced formations radically different from its usual results.⁴ This supposed aid to apologetic for miracle earned the following remark from Mozley: "The recurrence, with whatever intervals, of miracles with the same invariable antecedents would constitute a new order of nature."⁵ Such an event would have no evidential value, since it is not strictly contranatural. Mozley also rejects the analogy of the activity of a man who in lifting a book seems to suspend a law of nature:

It is quite true that we see laws of nature any day and any hour neutralized and counteracted in particular cases, and yet do not look upon such counteractions as other than the most natural events: but it must be remembered that where this is the case, the counteracting agency is as ordinary and constant an antecedent in nature as the agency which it counteracts. . . . But where the counteracting power to a law of nature is an unknown power, a power not in nature, then the counteraction or neutralization of a law of nature is not a natural fact, being deprived of its ordinary and constant antecedent, and coupled with another and new antecedent. . . . In all these cases the question is not whether a law of nature has been counteracted, for that does not constitute fact contrary to the laws of nature; but whether it has been counteracted by another natural law. If it has been, the conditions of science are fulfilled. But if a law of nature has been counteracted by a law out of nature . . . a new conjunction of antecedent and consequent, wholly unlike the conjunctions in nature, has taken place. The laws of nature have in that instance not worked, and an effect contrary to what would have issued from those laws has been produced. This is ordinarily called a violation or suspension of the laws of nature.⁶

So the terms violation, suspension, intervention, interruption are rightly taken as key-notes of the contranatural position. "By definition, miracles must of course interrupt the usual course of nature."⁷ The contranaturalist can concur with John Stuart Mill's definition of miracle: "To constitute a miracle a phenomenon must take place without having been preceded by any antecedent phenomenal condition sufficient again to reproduce it. . . . The test of a miracle is: Were there present in the case such external conditions, such second causes we may call them, that whenever these conditions or causes reappear the event will be reproduced? If there were, it is not a

4. Cf. C. Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (London: John Murray, 1838), pp. 33f.

5. J. B. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles* (London: Rivingtons, 1880), p. xv.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

7. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Bles, 1952), p. 74.

miracle; if there were not, it is a miracle, but it is not according to law: it is an event produced, without, or in spite of law."⁸

A miracle such as this proves the existence of a radically separated other world and is the sole means of any knowledge of the latter. "If miracles can be proved to occur, the supernatural is not as the materialists vainly declare, a figment of man's mind. . . . Miracles, so Christians believe, are evidence provided by God to demonstrate the existence of a divine order."⁹ Miracles bridge the gap between the natural and the supernatural; more than that, they provide the only means of converse and communication between the two. "There being two worlds, a visible and an invisible, and a communication between them being wanted, a miracle is the instrument of that communication."¹⁰ Miracle is the single rivet allowing the intellect to bind these two worlds together, "A miracle has a foot, so to speak, in each world; one part of it resting upon the earth, while the other goes beyond our intellectual reach into the depths of the invisible world."¹¹ The argument from miracle is the clinching hypothesis which allows us to be convinced of the supernatural. "A miracle is in perfect order and place as the medium between two worlds."¹² But what is meant by this divine order, this other world, this supernatural? Very briefly, the non-natural.

We mean by the supernatural that which is out of the order of nature. God, angels, departed spirits, heaven and hell, are out of the order of nature because they are not in nature at all; a miracle is in nature in the sense of visibility, but is not in the order of nature; the invisible world therefore, and miracles are supernatural. But life, the human soul, conscience, reason, will are natural because they are in the order of nature or part of our constant experience.¹³

Small wonder that "miracles and the supernatural contents of Christianity stand or fall together."¹⁴

A miracle proves the existence of God; it is indeed a revelation of him. "God has willed that to the internal aids of the Holy Spirit there should be joined external proofs of His revelation, namely: divine facts, especially miracles and prophecies which, because they clearly show forth the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, are most certain signs of a divine revelation, and are suited to the intelligence of all."¹⁵ "Miracles are messages addressed from God to men to draw attention to his Almighty Power."¹⁶ Whereas the activity of God is not openly displayed in the ordinary course of events, that activity is revealed in miracle. "God is hidden in the laws of nature. He is revealed to all men in the miracles."¹⁷

8. J. S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (London: Longmans, 1874), p. 225.

9. Lunn, "Miracles," 242.

10. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 18.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 68n.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

15. First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, c. 3, in H. Denzinger (ed.), *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, tr. R. J. Deferrari (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955), p. 445.

16. Lunn, "Miracles," 456.

17. W. W. Everts, "Jesus Christ: No Exorcist," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 81 (1924), 360.

A miracle shows design and intention, i.e. is the act of Personal Being. Some one, therefore, there is who is moving behind it, with whom it brings us in relation, a spiritual agent of whose presence it speaks. A miracle is thus, if true, an indication of another world, and an unseen state of being, containing personality and will; of another world of moral being besides this visible one; and this is the overawing and impressing consideration in it.¹⁸

Miracles alone truly and irresistibly reveal God. "It is of the nature of a miracle to give proof, as distinguished from mere surmise, of a Divine design."¹⁹ Mozley expands this doctrine:

There is one great necessary purpose, then, which divines assign to miracle, viz., the proof of a revelation. And certainly, if it was the will of God to give a revelation there are plain and obvious reasons for asserting that miracles are necessary as the guarantee and voucher for that revelation. A revelation, is, properly speaking, such only by virtue of telling us something which we should not know without it. But how do we know that that communication of what is undiscoverable by human reason is true? Our reason cannot prove the truth of it, for it is by the very supposition beyond our reason. There must be, then, some note or sign to certify to it and distinguish it as a true communication from God, which note can be nothing else than a miracle.²⁰

Miracles prove the existence of God, are communications or revelations from him. Lewis remarks: "If we admit God, must we admit miracle? Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it."²¹

A miracle proves the existence of God. It sets a seal on any document of revelation; it verifies and demonstrates the truth of any doctrine. A supernatural doctrine cannot stand on its own feet; it must be attested to by a supernatural miracle.

Miracles are the direct credentials of a revelation; the visible supernatural is the appropriate witness to the invisible supernatural—that proof which goes straight to the point, and, a token being wanted of a Divine communication, is that token. We cannot, therefore, dispense with this evidence. . . . A supernatural fact is the proper proof of a supernatural doctrine; while a supernatural doctrine, on the other hand, is certainly *not* the proper proof of a supernatural fact.²²

A miracle (we have observed) proves the existence of God; it is indeed a revelation of him. It is interesting to note how the contranaturalists differentiate between miracle and providence, or between miracle and prayer. To Mozley, the one (a providence) is an interference of the Deity with natural causes at a point removed from our observation; the other (a miracle) being the same brought directly home to the senses.²³ Lewis holds that, while it is possible to prove that a miraculous event is caused by the activity of God, "it is never possible to prove empirically that a given, non-miraculous event was or was not an answer to prayer. Since it is

18. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 58.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

21. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 128.

22. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 15.

23. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 7f.

non-miraculous the sceptic can always point to its natural causes, and say, 'Because of these it would have happened anyway.'"²⁴

A miracle proves causation by God or other supramundane being. Whatever may be criticized in the contranatural position, it is unfair to say that it presents the miraculous as that which is uncaused. "A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God."²⁵ Other contranaturalists—Lunn, for example—extend the causation to supranatural agents. If a phenomenon be inexplicable as the effect of natural agents, it "must therefore be ascribed to supernatural agents."²⁶ Implicit in this position is the traditional distinction between primary and secondary causation.

God normally works through secondary causes. The seed is sown, the wheat shoots up and matures, and the baker converts the wheat into bread. But in rare and exceptional cases God suspends for a moment the operation of those laws of nature which owe their existence and validity to him alone, and expresses his will more directly, and performs without the aid of secondary causes. "Just in the millionth instance he multiplies bread instead of multiplying the wheat," and feeds the five thousand without the intervention of secondary causes.²⁷

This direct, unmediated activity of God or other supramundane being is an example of primary causation. Lewis, without using the distinction between primary and secondary causation, substitutes the more refined but essentially similar idea of appropriateness.

In all these miracles alike the incarnate God does suddenly and locally something that God has done or will do in general. Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvass of Nature. They focus at a particular point either God's actual, or His future, operations on the universe. . . . Their authenticity is attested by their style.²⁸

A miracle proves causation by God or other supramundane being. The contranatural position is based upon a cleavage; hence there is a well-defined boundary between the separate domains of nature and supranature. Thus, for its strength and evidential character, contranaturalism depends upon the integrity and fixity of natural law.²⁹ A miracle can only be a miracle when it is contranatural, and to be certain that it is contranatural, the natural must be firmly fixed. "Belief in miracles, far from depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in so far as those laws are known."³⁰ And Lunn remarks that "the greatest service which a

24. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 215.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

27. A. Lunn, *The Third Day* (London: Burns Oates, 1945), p. 13.

28. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 162.

29. This statement is not true of Mozley, who partially bases his argument on the Humian contention that natural law is but custom and so not trustworthy. For adverse criticism of this aspect of Mozley's position, cf. T. H. Huxley, *Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 130ff.; A. B. Bruce, *The Miraculous Element in the Gospels* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1886), pp. 44ff.

30. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 58.

scientific student of the natural order can render to mankind is to demonstrate the existence of phenomena which cannot be explained within the framework of the law of nature."⁸¹

Since a miracle is caused by God or other supramundane being, and is thereby contranatural, one should not expect an abundance of miracles. "For nineteen centuries those who called themselves Christians have maintained that a miracle was a most unusual and uncommon event."⁸² Lewis admonishes his readers not to be concerned if they themselves have never witnessed a real miracle, because "God does not shake miracles into Nature at random as if from a pepper-caster."⁸³ Their rarity is apparently one indication of their sanctity. "If the miracles were offered us as events that normally occurred, then the progress of science, whose business it is to tell us what normally occurs, would render belief in them gradually harder and finally impossible."⁸⁴

A miracle tends to demonstrate the divinity of the human performer. Here note must be taken of a difference among contranaturalists: a difference, that is, between Roman Catholic and Protestant contranaturalists. Four points may be made in this regard. First, *all* contranaturalists hold that the miracles prove the divine origin of Christianity. Secondly, *all* contranaturalists hold that no person can properly be called divine who does not perform miracles to attest to his divinity. But, thirdly, *Protestant* contranaturalists restrict miracles to the one person and the one time, while fourthly, *Roman Catholic* contranaturalists allow that miracles have happened down through the ages.

All contranaturalists hold that miracles prove the divine origin of Christianity. "If anyone shall have said that . . . the divine origin of the Christian religion cannot be correctly proved by them [miracles]: let him be anathema."⁸⁵ Again: "The claims of Christ were too great to be believed unless they were supported by miracles. The question is not, are the miracles historically credible, but is the gospel without the miracles historically credible. . . . The internal evidence, the evidence of the moral character of Christians, is used to make the miracles credible, but it is the miracles that make the moral character of Christians possible."⁸⁶

All contranaturalists hold that no person can properly be called divine who does not perform miracles to attest to his divinity. At the very least, miracles are as the clanging of bells pronouncing the entry on to the stage of history of a divine herald. Newman remarks that "the respective claims of the Kings and Priests were readily ascertained . . . whereas extraordinary messengers, as Moses, Samuel and Elijah, needed some supernatural display of power to authenticate their pretensions."⁸⁷ At most, miracles absolutely

31. Lunn, "Miracles," 241.

32. *Ibid.*, 245.

33. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 201.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

35. First Vatican Council, *De fide*, canon 4 (Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, p. 450).

36. Everts, "Jesus Christ: No Exorcist," 360f.

37. J. H. Newman, *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles* (London: Pickering, 1875), p. 24.

demonstrate the divinity of the miracle-worker. "The men whose lives were transformed by Christ were Christians who believed that God for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and that Jesus proved his astounding claims by the miracles which he wrought and above all by the supreme miracle of the Resurrection."³⁸ Thus the one indisputable attestation to Christ's divinity is his ability to perform miracles; this supplies the one indispensable element in the foundation of the faith. And the ability to work miracles places Christ above the pseudo-divinity of other religious founders.

The belief of the Christian is . . . a rational belief, which the Mohammedan's is not, because the Christian believes in a supernatural dispensation, upon the proper evidence of such a dispensation, viz., the miraculous. Antecedently, indeed, to all examination into the particulars of the Christian evidence, Christianity is the only religion in the world which professes to possess a body of direct external evidence to its having come from God. Mohammedanism avows the want of this; and the pretensions of other religions to it are mockery.³⁹

Protestant contranaturalists restrict miracles to the one person and the one period. Once a group of miracles proves the divinity of the human performer, and thus establishes the truth of any complex of doctrines, further miracles are unnecessary and even offensive. So miracles are clustered "on great occasions: they are found at the great ganglions of history."⁴⁰

Though the original miracles are necessary for the proof of doctrine, subsequent miracles cannot plead the same necessity; because when that doctrine has been once attested, those original credentials, transmitted by the natural channels of evidence, are the permanent and perpetual proof of that doctrine, not wanting reinforcements from additional and posterior miracles; which are therefore without the particular recommendation to our belief, of being necessary for the great result before us. . . . First credentials cannot be dispensed with, but second ones can.⁴¹

This position, as Mozley frankly acknowledges, "amounts to saying that permanent miraculous evidence to any religion is an impossible contrivance."⁴²

Roman Catholic contranaturalists allow that miracles have happened through the ages.⁴³ Later ecclesiastical miracles, among other things, "demonstrate the reality of the supernatural."⁴⁴ By a miracle, the spectator is cowed, constrained, and coerced into belief; the event is as a stone hurled from heaven, without which men could not believe in heaven at all. Lewis says that "Christianity is not a series of disconnected raids on Nature but the various steps of a strategically coherent invasion—an invasion which

38. Lunn, "Miracles," 244.

39. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 24.

40. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 201.

41. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 156.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

43. Cf. Lunn, *The Third Day*, pp. 13ff.

44. A. Lunn and C. E. M. Joad, *Is Christianity True?* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1933), p. 332.

intends complete conquest and 'occupation.'"⁴⁵ Another contranaturalist states that "the miracles of the New Testament were at once exhibitions of divine power as well as divine love. As such they were, in many who actually beheld them, direct begetters of faith. Furthermore, they were intended, among other things, to have just that effect."⁴⁶ A miracle, as "a supernatural fact, a communication from the other world, is a potent influence; it rouses, it solemnizes, it is a strong motive to serious action."⁴⁷ To the contranaturalist it is not of course necessary that every man see a miracle in order to know all that a miracle purports to prove. It is necessary, however, that we believe that such and such miracles did actually occur at one time. If we so believe, we know, even as the original spectators, all that a miracle demonstrates. The Bible is thus of greatest importance in this: that it enshrines and attests to the supernatural. "It contains a distinctively supernatural element. Among its supernatural elements are those of prophecy and miracles. Furthermore, it is on such things that our knowledge and salvation thereof depend."⁴⁸ Thus, belief that a miracle occurred is equivalent to belief in the power and activity of God, which is equivalent to salvation. As Mozley says: "If a miracle is incorporated as an article in a creed, that article of the creed, the miracle, and the proof of it by a miracle, are all the one thing."⁴⁹

II

The contranatural convictions which we have been surveying must be criticized from several points of view. From the scientific standpoint, to begin with, it is not justifiable to say that, because an event is inexplicable now, it must always remain so. Lunn, the only scientist among our representative contranaturalists, has, in spite of the title of his essay, produced a quite unscientific approach to the miraculous. It is true, as Lunn says, that "the determination to regard the natural world as a closed system is a dogma which is entirely sterilizing in its influence on research." Then he adds, very significantly, "miracles might be defined as 'perturbations' inexplicable in terms of *known* natural forces."⁵⁰ But is it not possible that these forces may some day be known? At any rate, it is clearly unscientific to claim that, because certain phenomena cannot *now* be explained scientifically, they *must always* remain unexplained. There is always the possibility that science may be able in the future to offer an explanation which, though couched in terms as yet unknown to us, remains strictly scientific. One hundred years ago, Christ's miracles of healing were deemed completely inexplicable. Nor can we, in our own day, explain these events in the

45. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 131.

46. G. L. Young, "The Matter of Miracles," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 87 (1930), 70.

47. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 133.

48. Young, "The Matter of Miracles," 87f.

49. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles*, p. 17.

50. Lunn, "Miracles," 243 (italics mine).

scientific terminology of a hundred years ago. But the scientific method has acquired new knowledge, new scientific dimensions, and new terminology. These new aspects enable the scientist to penetrate at least some aspects of this particular group of miracles. Lunn's escape-device of mistakes in classification hardly averts the difficulty. The number of classification errors is likely to increase, while the residuum which can be attributed to supranatural agents is likely decrease continually. The contranaturalist may rightly say, on the authority of science, that a particular phenomenon is at present inexplicable. But it does not follow that the phenomenon will for ever escape the categories of the scientific method.

Nor is it justifiable to say that, because an event is inexplicable as the effect of natural agents, it must therefore be due to supranatural agents. Even were it granted (which is not possible) that an event will never be amenable to the scientific method, it is not scientifically justifiable to attribute the causation of that event to a supranatural agent. Lunn declares that it is on the scientist's authority "that we declare that a particular phenomenon is inexplicable as the effect of natural agents and must therefore be ascribed to supernatural agents."⁵¹ That is a most unscientific statement. It is, in fact, not a scientific statement at all, but a philosophical one. It may well be that no known scientific method or hypothesis will explain a particular phenomenon. However, to say that it is inexplicable as a result of natural agents is bad enough, while to say (supposedly on scientific grounds) that it must be ascribed to supranatural agents is to say something that no one could possibly have the right to affirm on the basis of the evidence alone. Again, "when science records facts without being able to account for them, the reason is that the laws at work transcend the human understanding; they are extraordinary laws, or better still supernatural."⁵² It would be difficult to find a more unscientific utterance. Science does not conclude that facts at present without explanation must therefore be supranatural. If any man reports an event as a miracle, he is going beyond the immediate evidence; he is reporting a fact *and* giving a particular interpretation of that fact. The truth of this contention was clearly seen before Mozley gave his Bampton Lectures. Powell had written: "No testimony can reach to the supernatural; testimony can apply only to apparent sensible facts; testimony can only prove an extraordinary and perhaps inexplicable occurrence or phenomenon: that it is due to supernatural causes is entirely dependent on the previous beliefs and assumptions of the parties."⁵³ But Mozley fell into the trap from which Powell had attempted to rescue contemporary theology, and the contranaturalists have perpetuated the mistake to our own day. In the testimony to any alleged miracle, there is always fact plus interpretation. That is to say, there is always the standpoint of the witness to be considered; his situation, his previous assumptions, will almost

51. *Ibid.*, 242.

52. F. de Grandmaison, *Twenty Cures at Lourdes* (London: Sands, 1920), p. 241.

53. R. Baden Powell, "On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity," in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), p. 107.

certainly determine whether for him a particular event can be called a miracle.

From the philosophical point of view, the evidential value of miracles is undermined by the fact that every religion has its stock of miracles, every religious leader has had miracles attributed to him. Hume gave powerful voice to this objection, and we may follow Broad's clarification of the Humian argument. Let R_1 and R_2 be two incompatible religions. And let it be supposed that miracles occur *only* in connection with *true* religion. (This is the suppressed premise of this argument.) Then the assertion "Miracles occur in connection with R_1 " implies that R_1 is true; this implies that R_2 is false and this implies that miracles do not occur in connection with R_2 . Similarly, the assertion "Miracles occur in connection with R_2 " implies that miracles do not occur in connection with R_1 . Now both these assertions are made (though of course by different sets of people). The compound proposition implies its own contradictory and therefore must be false, and therefore one of the separate assertions may be false, and both may be. This argument however, needs the premise that miracles only occur in connection with true religion.⁵⁴ Mozley bases his belief in the superiority of Christ and Christianity over Mohammed and Mohammedanism on the fact that Christ worked miracles. Mohammed did not effect miracles, Mohammedanism cannot boast a miraculous origin, and the pretensions of other religions to such a miraculous origin are, according to Mozley, nothing but a mockery. That is, the contranaturalist must condemn non-Christian miracles from some arbitrary standpoint which he himself denies when it is used as a basis for attacks on Christian miracles. The same arbitrariness is evident in those contranaturalists who deny any miracles in the later history of the church. The apologist who rejects the validity of the *a priori* negation of Christian miracles must not himself fall into the same error by rejecting miracles in all other religions on similar grounds. And if the alleged non-Christian miracles be once admitted, the absolute proof of miracles falls to the ground. If men are taught to believe in Christ upon other grounds than because he attested his claims by works of wonder, and that they are therefore bound to accept those claims, how can they consistently refuse to believe in any other who may come along, attesting his claims by miracles? We can only conclude that a miracle does not prove the truth of a doctrine, or the divinity of the person who brings it to pass.

There is no philosophical justification for the Protestant contranatural contention that, although miracles were once necessary for the faith, they are no longer necessary. This Protestant contranatural view implies that Christianity is an isolated phenomenon; that, if it is connected to anything, it can only be to the Old Testament faith and history which preceded it; that it is completely unrelated to all other religions. As against this, we must insist that, although we believe that only in Christ does God truly

54. Cf. C. D. Broad, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 17 (1916-17), p. 93.

reveal himself, this does not mean that there is no relation of man to God outside Christianity. If there is not *some* relation between the gospel and "natural man," then the gospel is meaningless to that man. The Protestant contranatural view assumes that God acted at certain specific periods in past history, and that he cannot act at any other time—that intervention was justified only at a particularly momentous period in the past. As against this, we must insist that God's activity in Christ cannot be restricted to a certain specific period in the past, however momentous. Have not some succeeding ages been equally momentous? Protestant contranaturalism is strangely supercilious; it has the presumption to speak about a situation in which God's activity is not necessary. As against this, it must be declared that man's sinfulness always demands an outside power to aid him in his plight, and that, in this sense, miraculous happenings are essential. As against the Protestant contranatural contention, the strictures of both Niebuhr and Kierkegaard seem justified. "A faith, not quite sure of itself," Niebuhr writes, "always hopes to suppress its scepticism by establishing the revelatory depth of a fact through its miraculous character. This type of miracle is in opposition to true faith."⁵⁵ "A dead faith," Kierkegaard remarks, "dares not have anything to do with contemporary miracles."⁵⁶

The contranatural position must be criticized also from a theological point of view. It presents a primitive picture of the activity of God. "Whatever has loomed upon the world of [man's] ordinary concerns as something terrifying and baffling to the intellect; whatever among natural occurrences or events in the human, animal, or vegetable kingdoms has set him astare in wonder and astonishment—such things have ever aroused in man, and become endued with, the 'demonic dread' and 'numinous' feeling, so as to become 'portents,' 'prodigies,' and 'marvels.'⁵⁷ Bett tells of the African explorer who, when he got into trouble with the natives, took out his glass eye, flung it into the air, caught it, and replaced it, whereupon the astonished natives grovelled at his feet and worshipped him.⁵⁸ Brown tells of the Peruvian king who is reported to have said of the sun that it could not be a god, because if it were, it would not repeat the same course day after day.⁵⁹ These stories are characteristic of primitive man to whom arbitrary power appears inherently excellent, and the stranger and more unusual an event is—the more it contradicts convention and defies public opinion—the more divine it appears to be. Consistency is a noble attribute for the subject, but inconsistency is the mark of the sovereign. To do as you please without giving a reason is the supreme prerogative of the deity, at least for primitive man. The same attitude appears in Homer. Circe with her wand turned the mariners into swine and might have done the same to Odysseus, had it

55. R. Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (London: Nisbet, 1949), p. 167.

56. S. Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and tr. A. Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 412.

57. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 66.

58. H. Bett, "The Theory of Miracles," *London Quarterly Review*, 145 (1926), 93.

59. W. A. Brown, "The Permanent Significance of Miracle for Religion," *Harvard Theological Review*, 8 (1926), 318.

not been for the protection afforded to him by Hermes' magic potion. This potion, Homer naïvely observes, was prepared from a herb which was awkward to dig up, "at any rate for a mere man. But the gods, after all, can do anything."⁶⁰ The younger Barth apparently concurred with this Homeric opinion. To Barth, fallen man still remains human—"he is still man and not cat,"⁶¹ as he quaintly expresses it—but his humanity has been so totally corrupted by sin that he is no more able than a cat to hear God's voice, unless God in a miracle of sheer omnipotence hurls Christ into the human situation. "Willing as we are to allow the possibility of God's revealing His will, and imparting His grace to beings (such as stocks and stones) hitherto devoid of all capacity to receive them, we are unable to feel that in His approach to us in Christ we actually do have such an act of omnipotence. There is miracle enough in what God does for us in Christ, but it is not a miracle of this kind. It is, in fact, not a miracle of sheer omnipotence, but a miracle of grace."⁶²

A somewhat amusing incident illustrating this contranatural attitude may be cited from a debate on the question "Do Miracles Happen?" held in London in 1914.⁶³ Joseph McCabe, in replying to G. K. Chesterton's plea for miracles, said: "If Mr. Chesterton should rise in the air, I should not go searching for natural causes and agencies that would bring about such a phenomenon; I should fall down and worship Mr. Chesterton at once." No doubt this was said with a smile, but nonetheless it is (ironically enough) illustrative of the mentality of much contranatural apologetic, in that it construes divinity in terms of abnormality of power. The contranaturalist stresses the arbitrariness, the unusualness, the inconsistency of God's activity.

The contranatural position must be criticized further from a theological point of view. It presents an unbiblical view of the activity of God. In the first place, the Bible never denies that others than Jesus could work miracles; such are even the sign of Antichrist. "False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Mt. 24:24). "The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders" (II Thess. 2:9). "It [the beast] works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men" (Rev. 13:13). Instances are also given in the stories of Simon (Acts 8:9ff.), and of Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13:6ff.). It is therefore clear that, from the biblical point of view, miracles do not prove the divinity of the human performer. "For many of the contemporaries of Jesus the miracles may have had . . . significance as a sign of the mystery of His person, and may have drawn attention to Him and to His secret. But many who were witnesses of these

60. Homer, *The Odyssey*, X, 305f., tr. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946).

61. E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology* (London: Bles, 1946), p. 88.

62. J. Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 24.

63. Cf. G. K. Chesterton and others, *Do Miracles Happen?* (London: Christian Commonwealth Press, 1914).

miracles, in spite of this, did not believe in Him."⁶⁴ "From the moment they took place they were interpreted otherwise than as proofs of the Word of God."⁶⁵ Tillich correctly remarks that popular piety is wrong in wanting "a God, walking on earth, participating in history, but not involved in the conflicts of existence and the ambiguities of life. Popular piety [does] not want a paradox but a 'miracle';"⁶⁶ it wants, not a person, but a prodigy, not a man, but a monstrosity.

Secondly, the contranaturalists make the unbiblical assumption that arbitrariness and power are the keynotes of the activity of God. Richardson, who has strong affinities with the contranaturalists, says that the "discussion of miracles must always be conducted from the standpoint . . . of the power of God."⁶⁷ Since the object of the miracle is to prove or demonstrate, the greater the display of mere power or arbitrariness, the greater the effectiveness of the miracle itself. Those miracles would be best which were of the nature of naked signs, stripped of every attribute except conspicuousness—staring, undeniable stupefaction—the sort of miracle that the Jews wanted when, unsatisfied and unconvinced by the works of the healing ministry, they demanded a sign from heaven (Mt. 16:1). Matthew Arnold made this arbitrary theory look ridiculous when he postulated the supposed miracle of the pen changed into a pen wiper.⁶⁸ Though such a case is certainly trivial, it is not irrelevant. The supposed miracle very clearly lacks utility, dignity, or ethical character—just the qualities which the pure contranatural miracle essentially lacks.

Thirdly, the contranatural position assumes a distinction between nature and supernature—a division unknown and alien to the Bible itself. In biblical times the strict connotation which the contranaturalist attaches to the word miracle was as yet unknown; such a conception arose only with a knowledge of the laws of nature and their general validity. No one can feel anything to be an interruption of the order of nature who does not yet know what the order of nature is. To biblical man there was no hard and fast line drawn between nature and the supranatural. (A conceptual law of nature was, of course, developed in Greek philosophy—particularly perhaps in Stoicism and Neo-Platonism—and in the Aristotelian Thomism of the Middle Ages; in each of these cases, however, the natural law was an a priori notion, in contradistinction to the supposed a posteriori natural law of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.) With the advent of natural law (whether of an a priori or a posteriori kind) the contranatural position stiffened; a miracle, in order to possess evidential value with respect to divine intervention, now had to be conceived as unaccountable and inexplicable in terms of natural law. This conception belongs pre-eminently to the eighteenth century, when science threatened to control the

64. E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), pp. 304f.

65. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 188.

66. P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (London: Nisbet, 1957), p. 144.

67. A. Richardson, "Miracle," in Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1950), p. 155.

68. M. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* (London: Smith, Elder, 1873), p. 128.

whole of life, though it was clearly stated as early as Aquinas. The eighteenth-century apologists assumed that miracles were the best method of proving a revelation, while their opponents assumed that it was necessary to disprove the miracles in order to disprove the revelation. But this outlook is far removed from the biblical viewpoint. All this is not to say that biblical personalities and biblical writers did not recognize an unusual or extraordinary event. "Joseph knew just as well as any modern gynaecologist that in the ordinary course of nature women do not have babies unless they have lain with men."⁶⁹ The point is that the notions of supranature and miracle, as these terms are viewed by the contranaturalist, are unknown and alien to the Bible. The contranaturalist tends to emphasize the *teras*-aspect of miracle (*miraculum*). Yet such a view completely eradicates the ethical content of miracle and replaces it with bleak astonishment or mere amazement. As Headlam remarks: "It is unfortunate that the word habitually used in English 'miracle', as in German 'Wunder', should be one that emphasizes the abnormal character of the events without any accompanying spiritual and ethical associations such as are always present in the Gospels."⁷⁰

Fourthly, the contranaturalist assumes a distinction between primary and secondary causation; again, there is no biblical foundation for this contention. For the Bible, God's sway extends over everything. Jesus says: "The very hairs of your head are numbered" (Lk. 12:7). Speaking of the works of nature, the psalmist remarks: "He established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds which cannot be passed" (Ps. 148:6). God, "in whom there is no variableness, neither shadow which is cast by turning" (Jas. 1:17), is a God of order. "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22). It is no indication of a developed religious consciousness to declare that God is only, or especially, manifest in primary causation; or in the breaches of nature's orderly processes.

The contranatural position must be criticized yet again from the theological point of view. It presents a demonic view of the activity of God. Contranaturalism splits reality into two realms which are mutually exclusive, but are tenuously joined together through the medium of miracles. God is split from his creation and seen as acting arbitrarily as a so-called primary cause to negate and abrogate so-called secondary causes. The only logical outcome is a dualism which is both philosophically untenable and religiously meaningless, if not positively harmful. Barth rejects the idea that God is split within himself: "Naturally there can be no question of His contravening or overturning any real or ontic law of creaturely occurrence. This would mean that He was not at unity with Himself in His will and work."⁷¹

69. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 57.

70. A. C. Headlam, *The Miracles of the New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1923), p. 5.

71. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), p. 129.

And Tillich says: "Miracles cannot be interpreted in terms of a supernatural interference in natural processes. If such an interpretation were true, the manifestation of the ground of being would destroy the structure of being; God would be split within himself, as religious dualism has asserted. It would be more adequate to call such a miracle 'demonic,' not because it is produced by 'demons,' but because it discloses a 'structure of destruction'."⁷²

We may conclude that a contranatural miracle, one that evidentially proves the existence and causality of God, and the divinity of the human performer, must be abandoned. The fact is that a miracle, if there be such a thing, must be relative and not absolute. "The visibility of miracle in no way 'coerces' one into faith."⁷³ Marvellous phenomena may cause faith, but they cannot absolutely demonstrate the truth of the doctrine they accompany, the divinity of the miracle-worker, or the presence of divine activity in their production. At most, miracle is an event which suggests divine activity; it certainly does not prove it. The contranatural position must be rejected as being philosophically unsound, as well as destructive of some of the best insights of both science and theology. As Schleiermacher put it:

It is commonly supposed that an event which lies outside of the fixed order of nature and which cannot, therefore, be accounted for by natural causality, has a special religious value because the Divine causality is demanded for its explanation. But this is to suppose that the religious sphere lies outside the universal order of relations, making the *religious* synonymous with the *arbitrary* and exalting the quality of arbitrariness to the rank of a Divine attribute. Nay, it does more; it separates God from the world and makes a religious view of the world impossible. It is destructive of science and of religion too.⁷⁴

72. P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (London: Nisbet, 1953), p. 116.

73. H. Thielicke, *Theologie der Anfechtung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949), p. 113.

74. Quoted by G. Cross, *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 159f.