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Eastern Christendom and the Miracles of Jesus

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It is a comparatively straightforward matter to discover what has been said or written in Western Christendom about the miracles of our Lord. There are many books on the subject.¹ It is not so easy to find a history of Eastern thought in this connection. It is to be hoped that we shall one day get a full study of what has been said or written from the Eastern angle on the miracles. For the time being we have to be content with random observations. A few of the more obvious of the latter are put down here.

THE PRIMARY IMPORTANCE OF MIRACLE IN EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

Dr. A. M. Ramsey has described some of the 'constant characteristics' of Eastern Christianity as follows: — 'the sense of the dominance of the Resurrection; the unity of the Cross and the Resurrection; the vivid realization of the Communion of Saints; the contemplative life as a life to which the heavens are opened; and the insistence that Nature is not left behind but is transformed by Christ in the same new creation wherein the souls of men are drawn into union with God'.² To put it in another way, we may describe Eastern Christianity as containing a two-fold emphasis, on the Transfiguration of Christ and on the Resurrection of Christ. Since these form the background of the understanding of miracles in general and the miracles of Jesus in particular, they need to be examined at some length.

(a) *The Transfiguration.* The world both of human nature and of nature are seen as different and changed since our Lord's Transfiguration. They are seen as already now full of a splendid glory, if men would only realize it, and as full of immense possibilities for the future and for the final transformation of all things. A Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergius Boulgakoff, who died in 1943, wrote that the Transfiguration was a manifestation

¹ E.g. J. S. Lawton, *Miracles and Revelation* (Lutterworth), 1959. Also a standard summary: A. C. Headlam, *The Miracles of the New Testament* (Murray), 1914.

² A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Longmans), pp. 135-140.

of glory not only in Christ but also in the world, which is 'transfigured with Him in some of its parts: the garments, the air around, the mountains and the earth'.³ He meant that even Christ's garments were radiant and transfigured, the air around Him was transfigured, the whole mountain-top was transfigured and those who knelt nearby also shared in some way the glory of transfiguration (Luke 9:32-33). The world of nature and human nature shares in some real sense in the New Creation in Christ. Thus the Transfiguration foreshadows the glorious change which awaits the whole Body of Christ at the General Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:53), and the glorious change which awaits the whole of nature (Rom. 8:21) at the restoration of all things. Is it any wonder that, in view of all this, Eastern Christianity should have treasured especially not only the healing miracles of Jesus but also His nature miracles? A miracle such as The Changing of Water into Wine is a transformation of created matter. A miracle such as the Walking of Christ and St. Peter on the Water tells of transformed bodies. The earthly body is so transfigured as to be able to transcend the laws of gravity as we know them and to do entirely what the spirit pleases. So these miracles foreshadow the glory that shall be in the New Creation and that can even now be spiritually realized in the New Creation that is the Body of Christ.

In a world-famous Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, written in the nineteenth century by Dostoievsky, a whole chapter is devoted to the deepest meanings of the miracle at Cana of Galilee. It is introduced in connection with a vision experienced by one of the characters. We should not expect to find this in the middle of a novel: but it shows how deeply such a miracle had become a part of Russian culture and belief, fed on the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy. A modern Western Christian, in discussing the Transfiguration, is likely to discuss the scientific side of it and ask 'Is the story actually true?' or he may put the stress on the individual moral aspect and ask 'Were the disciples morally transformed?' But the Eastern Christian is perhaps content to rejoice in the glory of the Manifestation in Christ and in the cosmic effects of Christ's Redemption.

(b) *The Resurrection*. Dwelling on the joy of Easter and the Resurrection is also a special feature of Eastern Christianity as we know it. Someone once asked Bishop Azariah 'If you were in a village where they had never heard of Christ, what would you preach about?' And he answered without hesitation 'The Resurrection'.⁴ The same emphasis can be found in the traditional Orthodox liturgies. Here the focus of adoration is both the Cross and the Empty Tomb, but it would be fair to say that it is always in the Empty Tomb that the climax of the revelation is felt to be known. It is taken for granted, of course, that if a man is to enter into the meaning of the Resurrection and the new life in Christ

³ S. Boulgakoff, *Of the Incarnate Word* (Paris).

⁴ C. Graham, *Azariah of Dornakal* (S.C.M.).

(‘rising with Christ’), he must also ‘die with Christ’. But it is felt that the process of dying with Christ and rising with Christ will always be out of man’s reach if the presence of the Risen Lord and the victorious grace of His Empty Tomb are not first accepted and received as a free gift. This is the good news of the Resurrection. It is as though the sinner is felt only to be able to experience the Cross truly when he has first received the splendour and strength of the Risen Christ. An Orthodox writer puts it clearly: — ‘It seems that to the Orthodox the Empty Tomb of our Lord is an instrument of salvation, as the Cross is to Western Christians. The Orthodox by no means belittle the saving value of the Cross; but they have an original approach to the Sepulchre (Tomb); they even give the Empty Tomb, as the symbol of the Resurrection, a kind of predominance over the Cross . . . We must not forget that the Apostles were graciously admitted to the joy of the Resurrection without having shared in the immolation of the Lord. They had indeed fled from it. They know later on through their own martyrdom the meaning of the Cross. But it may be affirmed that if they became able to give their lives for Christ, it was because the strength of the Resurrection had first been communicated to them’.⁵

In the light of all this, we can understand why it is that Eastern Christianity has especially treasured all Christ’s miracles of resurrection, His raisings from the dead and His healings of the sick. And why it is that it has been able to plumb the depths of the deepest meanings of these miracles, in a way not found elsewhere. The miracles of Jesus are understood fully only in the light of the supreme miracle of the Resurrection. Those who best understand the meaning of the Resurrection best understand the meaning of the other miracles.

THE PRESENTATION OF THE MIRACLES IN THE EARLY CHURCH PERIOD

In a real sense, the presentation in the East has been much easier than in the West. There is in the East a deeper understanding of the reality of the unseen world. But points of distinctive emphasis and points of difficulty do arise. We may notice two particular difficulties that arose in this period: —

1. The first is the hostile statement made by the Jew Celsus in the third century. He admits that Jesus’ miracles must have taken place, but says that they probably owed their origin to evil demonic powers. He actually suggested that Jesus had learnt demonic arts while in Egypt. This attack was met by Origen, who answers it by insisting on the moral goodness of Jesus and on the miracles as primarily acts of a moral personality rather than just ‘wonders’.⁶ This line of approach leads on to an understanding of the miracles as revealing God’s personal care and

⁵ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Orthodox Spirituality* (S.P.C.K.), pp. 94-95.

⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I: 67, 68; II: 48, 53.

love for individuals, and His constant activity in the saving of man.⁷

2. A second difficulty was the tendency among some religious people to interpret the miracles in a Gnostic or Docetic manner. For example, the incident of Christ Walking upon the Water was taken to mean that Christ on earth was all along pure spirit without a true human body, and that the manifestation of this fact is the point of the incident. We have full details of how this interpretation was found later on among Gnostics in the West in the twelfth century in the sect called 'Cathari', who were infected with Manichaeism and dualism. But it is clear that similar Gnostic ideas were to be widely found in the early centuries, especially in the East. In fact, of course, as we have seen, this miracle was most truly to be understood in terms of the Gospel of the Transfiguration, and its significance lies in the transformation of Christ's human Body, which is a prefiguring of Christ's Risen Body, of our risen bodies, and of the new transfigured Creation as a whole. The message of the miracle is not 'See Christ escaping from the body, which has all along been only an appearance!'; but 'See Christ with His Body transformed!'

Out of these two situations certain distinctive points in connection with the presentation of the miracles came to be established:

(a) *The miracles could not be widely used as evidences of Christ's divinity.* Traditionally, Christians in general have presented the miracles in three ways:

- (i) as acts of love, compassion and goodness (i.e. with an emphasis on the *ethical* or moral value of the miracles);
- (ii) as acts of the Kingdom (i.e. with an emphasis on the *eschatological* value of the miracles);
- (iii) as evidences or proofs of Christ's divinity (i.e. with an emphasis on the *evidential* value of the miracles).

On the whole we find that Christians in the Eastern setting have been very cautious about presenting the miracles in the last-mentioned way. This attitude is based on Christ's own attitude and on experience gained in such controversies as the one with Celsus. It will be remembered that our Lord did not do His miracles to prove His own divinity. Although He longed that people should come to believe as a result of His miracles (John 10:38), and said that the miracles were to be secret preliminary signs of who He was for those with faith (Matt. 11:4-5), yet He specifically stated that He would not do miracles for the purpose of convincing people of who He was (Matt. 12:39). Jesus knew well that many of the unbelieving Jews would merely interpret them as proofs of demonic power (Mark 3:22). It is true

⁷ See, for example, St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* No. 40, in connection with the Sabbath healing of the man with the withered hand. See also Jesus' own words in St. John 5:17, which of course underlie the whole approach.

of course that the early Fathers present the miracles as fulfilment of prophecy,⁸ and that some of them speak of the miracles as proofs of Christ's divinity: e.g. St. Athanasius writes: 'His bodily acts declare Him to be not man only, but the Power and Word of God. To speak authoritatively to evil spirits, for instance, and to drive them out, is not human but divine; and who could see Him curing all the diseases to which mankind is prone, and still deem Him mere man and not also God'.⁹ But on the whole for the first three centuries there was comparatively little stress laid upon the miracles as evidences, except with regard to the great crucial miracle of the Resurrection. Christian apologists in the East through the centuries have presented the miracles mainly as acts of love, compassion and goodness or as acts of the Kingdom.

(b) *The miracles must not be presented as mere temporary divine appearances, but as the beginning and foretaste of the transformation of humanity and the Creation.* Enough has been already said on this point. The miracles must be seen in their full significance as part of the Gospel of the New Creation and of the Resurrection.

THE PRESENTATION OF THE MIRACLES IN THE MODERN AGE IN INDIA

The stories of Jesus' miracles find a sympathetic hearing in India, and the arguments of Celsus are absent. In the nineteenth century one Hindu writer (a follower of Keshub Chunder Sen) wrote most movingly of Christ's miracles, bringing out their significance as acts of love and compassion.¹⁰ Christians do not need to stress overmuch that the miracles are not mere 'thaumaturgic' wonders. Thoughtful Hindus are most conscious that a deeper meaning can be seen in them.

A modern Hindu attitude is well seen in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi: especially in the volume entitled *Christian Missions*,¹¹ which is largely compiled from extracts out of articles in *Harijan*. He makes three points:—

(a) The miracles are just a part of Christ's whole ethical teaching and ministry, and should not be brought forward as evidences. 'Nothing can be more miraculous than the three years of his ministry' (*Harijan*, 17-4-37). He would place great emphasis on the moral authority of Jesus. In fact, he implies, displays of supernatural power are so morally neutral that the miracle-stories in the Gospels in themselves are not especially important. 'From my youth upward I learnt the art of estimating the value of scriptures on the basis of their ethical teaching. Miracles therefore had no interest for me' (*Harijan*, 18-4-36). We can well understand this viewpoint, when we remember that the

⁸ J. B. Mozley, *Eight Lectures on Miracles* (Longmans), pp. 195-215. A good detailed note is given on the patristic view of miracles.

⁹ St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, ch. 18.

¹⁰ P. C. Mazoomdar, *The Oriental Christ* (Paul), ch. 9.

¹¹ M. K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions* (Navajivan Press, Allahabad).

writer was also deeply concerned that Hindus should concentrate on moral values and not only centre their thoughts on the miracles of the gods recorded in the epics.

(b) The miracle-stories of the Gospels should be carefully examined. Some of them, he implies, are exaggerations. 'I do not deny that Jesus had certain psychic powers and he was undoubtedly filled with the love of humanity. But he brought to life not people who were dead, but who were believed to be dead' (*Harijan*, 17-4-37). This viewpoint was also understandable in one who was combating superstitious and magical tendencies in his own religion.

(c) The miracles of Jesus are a shining example of the realization of man's spiritual and psychic powers. They are not to be seen as in any way an intervention in the laws of nature from outside. They are a realization of the innate divine power in man. 'The laws of nature are changeless, unchangeable, and there are no miracles in the sense of infringement or interruption of nature's laws' (*Harijan*, 17-4-37).

We may then turn to the writings of Mr. V. Chakkarai, whose aim was to give a Christian presentation of the miracles, but in terms intelligible to Hindu readers.¹² As a Christian recently converted from Hinduism he was in a good position to do this. Four points are noticeable:—

(a) The moral value of the stories must be stressed. They are acts of love and compassion, which cost Jesus much. 'Jesus performed the miracles . . . not with a view to impress the imagination of His people or as an aid to His teachings, but purely out of love to suffering humanity' (p. 102). It is stated that this fact must give Jesus' miracles a quite different status from the miracles recorded of the lives of many Indian religious figures of the past, where the moral aspect does not enter into the miraculous working.

(b) The miracle-stories of the Gospel are as far as we know reliable accounts. There is no sign of their having been added later to the tradition. They are embedded in the heart of the Gospels. Without them the Gospel story would fall to bits. 'The miracles form an integral part of His history' (p. 102).

(c) The miracles of Jesus are indeed shining examples of the realization of man's powers: that is, of man's powers as made new in Jesus. The miracles are not to be seen as an intervention into the 'natural' from the 'supernatural': 'all reality is one . . . This is the first presupposition of Indian philosophy' (pp. 95-96). Christ did His miracles as man. In them we see the new humanity. 'His humanity . . . is as transcendent and mysterious as His divinity' (p. 31). 'The miracles of Jesus point to Him as the supreme Norm, constituting the highest region or *loka* of God' (p. 104). 'In His presence we stand before the moral miracle of humanity, the true man in whom, as in looking into a mirror, we

¹² V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (C.L.S.), ch. 7.

see our own deformities, and yet realize what is the inner meaning of our own strivings after a holy and perfect life' (p. 74). And He told His disciples that in Him they too could do miracles, even greater than His (John 14: 12). 'He is the true man, the ideal man, or the man in all men . . . Our humanity receives an immeasurable breadth in view of the humanity of Jesus' (p. 31).

(d) The miracles were acts of the Kingdom. 'They were part of the organic laws of the Reign of God' . . . 'Jesus raised the miracles from the region of divine accidents and thaumaturgic wonders to the normal sphere of the Kingdom of God' (pp. 103-104).

A comparison of these two sets of comments is instructive. We notice a marked similarity in many ways. In both, we see:

- (i) A great reluctance to stress the evidential value of the miracles.
- (ii) An immanentist approach to the theology of miracle. The miraculous power comes from within humanity: Christ did His miracles from within humanity.

Any Eastern concept of miracle is likely always to bring out these two valuable points.

But we may notice three distinctive points in Chakkarai's presentation and the implications of them: —

(a) His phrase about the costing love lying behind Jesus' miracles suggests that the miracles in their deepest meaning are to be seen as revealing to us the personal, constant, loving activity of God. The miracles, as it were, point us on to a Gospel of a Personal, Loving God. This is the final logical conclusion of an understanding of the moral value of the miracles.

(b) His phrases about Jesus' perfect and as it were unique humanity suggest that the miracles are to be seen as revealing an immense, unique transformation of nature and humanity through Jesus Christ. The miracles point us on to a Gospel of Transfiguration and Resurrection through Christ. This is immanentism, but it is Christocentric immanentism.

(c) His mention of the connection of the miracles with the Kingdom suggests that the miracles are to be seen as a revealing of and a part of the eschatological purposes of God. They are important decisive events (as St. Mark in particular brings out in his Gospel) and constitute the preliminary contests of Christ in His battle against the demonic powers of the universe. The miracles point us on to a teleological Gospel of a Blessed End to which God is bringing all His Creation.

These points are no more than hinted at by Chakkarai. He is concerned to express himself in Sanskritic terms, and he does not use some of the phrases just employed. But the points are surely implicit in what he writes and he does in fact suggest to us a number of distinctive meanings which must ultimately emerge in the deepest understanding of the miracles.

THE PROBLEMS OF HINDUISM IN RELATION TO THE MIRACLES

There is a likelihood that because of its own theological background, Hinduism may find it hard to accept these deepest implications of the miracle-stories. In the first place, in spite of the more personalistic concepts found in the Bhakti movement, the prevailing Hindu understanding of God is to be found in monistic, pantheistic or even impersonal terms.¹³ This may make it extremely difficult for there to be seen in the miracles any message of a truly personal, loving God. Or again, Hinduism, because of its extreme immanentism, may find it hard to accept any idea of Christ's unique place in humanity, as the One in whom all humanity is raised and transfigured. If Father Zacharias is correct, Hinduism speaks of the 'causal' presence or indwelling of God among men, but does not allow a supernatural or 'vital' presence.¹⁴ Again, the absence in Hinduism of any teleological concept comparable to the coming of the Kingdom of God (as indeed the absence of any concept of a purposive Creation at the beginning of things) may make it wellnigh impossible for a Hindu to arrive at the eschatological interpretation of the miracles which has been suggested above.¹⁵

The dialogue between Hindus and Christians must deal first, not with the question of Jesus' miracles as an isolated topic, but with the basic underlying concepts of Creation and the End, and with the doctrine of man and the nature of the Divine Indwelling.

The Christian in his presentation must avoid a facile evidential presentation. He must know that if this is his method, others will reply: 'That means nothing to me: is it not recorded in the Bhagavata-purana that Sri Krishna proved his divine origin by lifting up the mountain-range Govardhana on his finger, to shelter the herdsmen's wives from the wrath of Indra? Did he not do equally wonderful or more wonderful things than Jesus?' Not only that. The Christian must also bring out the deepest moral and eschatological implications of the miracles.

Narayan Waman Tilak once wrote an account of his conversion, and in the course of it declared how hard he had found it at first to believe in the miracles of Jesus.¹⁶ He had been attracted by the Sermon on the Mount: he had been deeply perplexed by the miracles. Many of his old friends, he said, had gathered round him after his conversion and laughed at his believing in the miracles. 'Any seeker after truth', he wrote, 'who tries to assess the worth of the Bible in the strength of his own deficient judgement, finds the miracles of Christ as related in the New Testament lying in his path like mountains. That seeker will have an acquaintance with the Son of Man. He is not

¹³ P. D. Devanandan, *Living Hinduism* (C.I.S.R.S.), p. 28.

¹⁴ Fr. Zacharias, *Christianity and Indian Mentality* (Alwaye Seminary), p. 14.

¹⁵ A. G. Hogg, *The Christian Message to the Hindu* (S.C.M.), ch. 4, p. 57.

¹⁶ Lakshmi Bai Tilak, *I Follow After* (Oxford).

yet worthy to understand the Son of God. The Crucified he knows, but to comprehend the Risen Lord is 'beyond him'. We do not know exactly why Tilak found it hard to accept the miracles. Perhaps he just humbly means that, like the rest of us, he was lost for words in front of the mystery of Christ's miracles. But his account of his difficulty may at least remind us that many a Hindu enquirer, as many a Christian disciple, finds the miracles 'difficult'. It may remind us that there is an abiding task of communicating, as far as it is given us to do so, the message of the Risen Lord. Tilak concludes with a moving passage: 'The best way to bring conviction to such a seeker' (implying that this was how he himself found conviction) 'is to pray with him. Through the great golden door of prayer he should repeatedly be brought into the presence of the Father, and in his heart there should be awakened true love of the merciful Father of this world. In this way he will come to know the Father, and his doubts about the miracles will be removed naturally. I have always thought that God Himself resolves such difficult questions for the true seeker.'

CONCLUSION

Eastern Christendom has inherited a very deep understanding of the reality of the unseen world. In some measure this is a common heritage of all oriental spirituality, Christian and non-Christian. The contribution of this spiritual heritage is badly needed in a world which is in danger of interpreting itself in purely materialistic terms. But it has been necessary, in what has been said above, to examine certain differences within the Eastern setting, between the Christian and non-Christian understanding of spirituality and of miracle. The presentation of the miracles of Jesus in Eastern Christendom is always something distinctively Christian, and is firmly based on the Christian doctrines of the Resurrection, the Transfiguration, the Kingdom of God, and the Love of God. It will be obvious that before the message of the miracles can be effectively preached, these underlying doctrines must be communicated. The Christian must believe that it is within the framework of these great cardinal Christian doctrines and beliefs that the true significance of miracle in general and the miracles of Jesus in particular is to be found and to be proclaimed.

Man is not an immortal soul in a mortal body. Man is body and soul, a total person, in an immortal relationship to God. Man is made in God's image. This relationship is immortal. God does not allow His holy ones to see corruption.

D. T. NILES: Preaching the Gospel
of the Resurrection.