

ARTICLE VI.

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND THE CHRISTIAN
MIRACLES.

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THIS last year has been marked by a wide-spread discussion of miracles. It would be hard to find a religious weekly that has not given editorial expression to its views on the supernatural, and opened its columns to arguments *pro* and *con*; and ministerial associations in all parts of the land have threshed the question out anew. "*Cui bono?*" no one has changed his mind." Probably no one has changed sides, but probably everyone has somewhat changed his mind; men on both sides have come to a clearer understanding of their reason for believing as they do; and many men have come to a better understanding of the strength of the argument for the belief that they do not accept. It is good to be more rational one's self, and more sympathetic with one's opponent. It is said that Phillips Brooks hated controversy, and was accustomed to declare "*Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness.*" The spirit of controversy is verily evil, but the spirit of brotherly discussion is not only good, it is indispensable for the progress of truth. There is indeed no use in seeking the final word upon the miracle, for two opposite types of mind here face each other, each seeing a portion of the truth. All argumentation is fragmentary; but, as Dr. Gordon says in his discussion of Kant, an imperfect argument has a right to existence. It may be added that it has the right to

the growth that comes with restatement; it is well, therefore, to "make up one's mind," providing the door is left hospitably open for the further contributions of the future.

We are all fortunate in the occasion of this discussion, the book by Dr. G. A. Gordon on "Religion and Miracle."¹ The author's position as a Christian and preacher and theologian is secure; no one thinks of assailing him personally, or questioning the devoutness of his mind. The whole discussion is therefore lifted above the plane where men challenge each other's Christianity or impugn each other's motives. The question is everywhere accepted as one upon which Christians may honestly differ, in which men may radically oppose each other and still retain full respect for each other. No one doubts that the value of miracles, as evidence, has been over-emphasized in the past; the present disposition to set them aside is a natural reaction. Nevertheless the historical presumption is heavily against the new school of thought which is ready to dispense with the miracles as belonging only to "the fringe of Christianity." Not so thought the Apostles and the early church; not so have thought the leaders of the church through all the centuries up to our own day. These of the new school may be right, as the new school often has been, despite its difference from the older thought. But then again they may be wrong, as new thought often has been. Certainly so sharp a departure from the historical creed of the church calls for careful examination.

When two strange ships approach each other, it is customary to run up flags which show nationality and character. In sympathy with this excellent custom, the writer would here indicate the main contentions of this article. The Gospels characterize Christ's miracles as "wonders," "signs," and "pow-

¹ Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1909. \$1.50, net.

ers"; the miracle can accordingly be defined as a work of God's power, arousing man's wonder and appealing to his reverence; and as a divine seal attached to God's message, appealing to man's reason and faith. The miracle has therefore two aspects—one of power, and one of truth. The power in the miracle is that which belongs to God not only immanent, but transcendent; he is not an absentee God, withdrawn from his creation, neither is he a strictly limited first cause, with no physical possibilities outside of fixed laws. He is free in his own creation. He has given man much freedom; he has his own freedom, on a higher level and broader scale. The truth in the miracle is of the sort to make it a part of the revelation of the truth, as really so as the spoken word; and the miracle is therefore a part of the gospel, not to be taken out of it any more than the scarlet thread is to be taken out of the rope used in the British navy. In the miracle, along with the divine power in the realm of sense goes the divine power in the realm of spirit, allying it closely with the word. The miracles of Christ are exceptional, and so are his words. His miracles are outside of the physical order, and his words are equally outside of the human order. Miracle and word are alike successful, alike unsuccessful, in their revelation of the God of power and truth. Divine work and divine word, "the visible symbol and vehicle and the audible symbol and vehicle," are alike natural (one is almost ready to say, inevitable) expressions of the seeking love which would reveal God's personal care for us, and would win our personal trust in his power and truth, and our personal love for his goodness.

Returning to the arena of debate, one outstanding fact immediately impresses the observer as he watches the disputants, and that is the power of prepossessions. On the one hand there is the conservative, ready to say, as Mr. Moody is re-

ported to have said, "I would believe the Bible if it declared that Jonah swallowed the whale." Some room must be left for the sense of humor, even in theological discussions: but if the above remark is made seriously, it shows a closed mind. There is a difference between credulity and faith. To say that God can do anything, that one thing is just as easy for him as another, is by no means a good creed, if it means that we are ready to believe anything about God. Such a spirit in the Hindu would render him blind to the extravagances of his sacred books, and impervious to the reasoning of the missionary. The Bible miracles must be worthy of the God revealed by Jesus Christ, or they must be rejected.

On the other hand, this attitude of pre-judgment appears in three strong presumptions against the miracle. The scientist declares that he finds none, and that it is his business to explain everything as "natural." The historian declares that he easily dismisses alleged marvels in other sacred books as legendary, and that the "historical spirit" requires him to treat the Bible as he treats other books. The philosopher's business is to bring all things into a complete and unified system, and the miracles are either incredible, or else are simply apparent exceptions, which must be conceived of in terms that will also apply to the ordinary manifestations of God. To which it may be replied that all these objections are *a priori*, and that they stand for a closed mind. All theistic thinkers agree that the miracle is logically possible; but these *a priori* presumptions would make a possible event impossible of proof. Obviously, our canons of evidence ought not to be so constructed that a class of events could occur as facts, and yet be excluded from our knowledge and acceptance as facts.

It is not at all worth while to trim down the statement of miracle in order to make it unobjectionable to these minds.

When a miracle is explained in terms of natural law, known or unknown, it is explained away. Dr. Gordon is surely right in separating "relative miracles" (wonderful to us because we do not know the law) and "psychological miracles" (like conversion, divine works in the realm of the spirit), from the "real miracle." A relative miracle is not a real miracle. We easily put aside the alleged miracles of healing in our own day, because none of them show a power indubitably above the power of man; we find in them only evidence of unusual gifts of healing, operating on the body through the mind in ways as yet unfamiliar and untraced. They are natural and wonderful, not supernatural and wonderful. This distinction must have been perfectly obvious to Paul, must have been forced upon him by the false wonders he met at Ephesus and elsewhere. And how could he more plainly express it, than by making such an explicit distinction between gifts of healing and miracles as is found in 1 Cor. xii. 9-10? And by ranking gifts of healing below miracles in the twenty-eighth verse?

Our generation is on the whole eminently fair-minded; it has not closed the door against either the old or the new. But if miracles are to have a fair chance with it, the method of statement is of the utmost importance. Truth to be accepted as truth must be presented truly. An unusual and inexplicable fact, and this the miracle is, can easily be described in such fashion as to harden the mind against it. For the word miracle not only denotes an event, but connotes an explanation of it, as an extraordinary work of God; it is therefore an immediate appeal to faith, and as such must bear in mind the rational character of real faith. No presentation of the miracle could be more unhappy than that which is involved in its common definition as a violation of natural law, or a suspension of natural law. If we are going to hold to this false

conception of the miracle, belief in the miracle is bound to disappear, for the modern mind, thinking of God as a God of law, cannot adjust itself to a belief in the author of the law violating it or suspending it, in a kind of divine anarchy.

Here is a leaf floating down a rapid stream, and entering the sea; a hand takes it and carries it well up the stream, and then commits it again to the water. In all this the laws of the stream are not violated or suspended; they remain inviolate and fully active. But from outside their sphere a force enters and accomplishes a result impossible to them, a result the precise opposite of the "natural." May we not find in this a suggestive parallel to one of the most notable Gospel miracles? Lazarus has floated down the stream of mortality, and has passed its limits. A divine power withdraws his body from the operation of the laws of decay, and sets him back again into the stream of life. No law has been violated or suspended; all the forces of nature have been in full and normal activity, and the restored body of Lazarus is as fully within their range as the leaf is in the sphere of the stream. The power of creation is not contrary to nature; without it, nature could never have come into existence. In such a work God does not dishonor nature, or deny himself. Given a sufficient reason for this exceptional work, he is simply revealing himself as transcendent above nature, using a freedom as much like the freedom of man in nature as God is like man, as superior to man's power as God is superior to man. The miracle is not unnatural, not contra-natural, but extra-natural and co-natural, a work in which the revelation of God in nature's laws is supplemented by a transaction in which man is brought face to face, not with second forces, but with God.

The Sadducees limited God's power of social organization to the types of this world; they fell into error because they did

not understand the power of God in its variety. It is a similar error to confine God to nature, as we know it, and to assume that he will do nothing outside of the realm of unalterable natural law. "But why should he do anything?" Simply because natural law is unalterable, and absolutely impersonal. Nature's heedlessness of the person is at times majestic, but at times terrible, with a sweeping destruction that is utterly opposed to any human thought of fatherhood. "Not a sparrow falleth on the ground without your Father"—"Nature" never said that to the Man of Nazareth, and our readiness to accept this high assurance comes from his furnishing us something above nature. Unvarying law can reveal God's wisdom and goodness with regard to the human race in a mass; but it cannot reveal a God of personal freedom, transcendent as well as immanent, seeking personal relations with us, caring for the individual as a father cares for an individual child. If God wants us to know him in that way, it is reasonable that he should reveal himself, not only in the natural but in the supernatural.

This does not mean that the natural in everyday experience is less divine than the supernatural in the miracle. In a sense, the natural is more divine; that is, it is used by God vastly more than the supernatural, for the miracle is definitely and inherently exceptional. The main use of the miracle is to give a new vision of the God who is personally free, and who deals with us personally. This vision being secured, we can go back to nature and see God there, to law and see God there; we can enter into the spiritual realm and can find him in the secret of our souls, and know that person is dealing with person in celestial fellowship.

The miracle is a work of God, in which his power is revealed along with his truth. Power is no proof of truth in a man.

Magicians and sorcerers have astonished men with the marvelous and inexplicable; but the knowledge of the secrets of nature is perfectly possible to a bad man, and such marvels are no proof that he is a messenger of God. But if a power is revealed which is evidently the power of God, then the logic becomes incontestable; who can "withstand God"? Divine power is the power of the God of truth, and that power will be given only in the revelation and support of the truth. In one of Christ's supreme moments of majestic self-assertion, he declares, "If I with the finger of God cast out demons, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you" (Luke xi. 20).

The marvel in a miracle is important in rousing the mind of the one who sees; "Greater works than these, that ye may marvel" (John v. 20). The appeal of the extraordinary in the world of sense is adapted to men who live in that world. Yet the marvel is not the main thing. Living in that world, men may see the miracle as a mere wonder, and may defeat its appeal by a gaping sensationalism; from such Jesus withdrew his miracles. But it is an equal mistake on the other side to toss the miracle away as a mere wonder, out of place in the spiritual world. The true miracle belongs in the spiritual world, and strongly calls the thought of the witness to a work in which God's truth and love are revealed. The signs confirm the word, but only by being in themselves another sort of word, worthy of the God from whom they claim to proceed. It is often said that in the old times the miracles proved the Gospels, but now the Gospel has to prove the miracles. That was as really true in Christ's time as now. The minds that were shut against the testimony of God in wondrous word, were equally closed against the witness of God in wondrous deed. But the pressure of the deed was mighty; what stronger evidence do we need than their taking refuge

in the utterly illogical and blasphemous explanation that Satan was casting out demons? One who is willing to be skeptical cannot be convinced by mere wonder or mere power. The inexplicable can always be referred to some trick, some use of unknown law, some power other than God's. But the skeptic can dispose as easily of alien truth. It is important to recognize that the miracle and the word dwell on the same plane of appeal. The power of God must be seen in the truth of the word, the truth of God must be seen in the power of the deed, otherwise neither appeal can succeed.

"But all Christians are skeptical with reference to the alleged miracles of other religions, easily rejecting them." True, but is it because "the order or nature" is against these miracles? With ninety-nine out of a hundred this has nothing to do with it. It is because these wonders are adjudged to be unworthy of God in their own content, and because they are associated with teachings unworthy of God. Their "word" is not worth confirming, and most of the "signs" seem just as little like God. But in the Gospels we are breathing another atmosphere.¹ The Christian religion is unique, the Christian miracles are as unique; the miracles of Christ are as like Christ as are his words.

This suggests the fact that "Religion and Miracle" is one question, the Christian religion and the Christian miracles is quite another. Religion pure and simple needs only a belief in righteousness and a belief in God. One can believe in these without knowing anything definite about the future life, without knowing anything about Christ and his atonement. This minimum creed is found in the author of Ecclesiastes, who was

¹The Old Testament miracles are not here discussed, because they are of secondary importance, their credibility being a corollary of the main proposition.

certainly religious when he said, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." A God worth obeying, a man who finds his worth in obedience to God, these are certainly the fundamental conceptions of religion; the question of miracles may well be postponed if these are in danger. (But this is true also of the inspiration of the Bible, the atonement of Christ, and various other important matters.) These fundamentals being granted, however, much must be added to them before we reach Christianity, and the worth of what is added must be recognized. If we merely emphasize in the Christian religion what it has in common with other religions, as found for example in a genuinely devout worshipper of God who is a Buddhist or a Parsee, and if we then drop from Christianity its other qualities as unessential, we have stripped it of that which makes it Christian. What Christianity adds to religion in general, what makes it Christianity as distinct from other religions, is what constitutes its distinctive excellence.

Christianity is not mainly a worthy standard of life, or a worthy idea of God, though these things are precious in Christianity, and are there presented in unique fashion. The minds to whom these things are enough may be wholly ready to dispense with the supernatural, and may find the miracles superfluous; but the experience of such souls, as judged by the experience which has been typical of the Christian church through these centuries, has not reached an element which is most unique and characteristic in the religion of Jesus. Surely this is no railing accusation, for what man supposes that his individual experience includes all that is important in Christianity? Christianity is supremely "the power of God unto salvation." It furnishes an ideal, but it furnishes something vastly more important, the power to strive and to attain; it

brings not only a new revelation of God, but it adds something vastly more important, a divine power which frees the soul from its sins, and draws it up to God in an approach otherwise impossible. This power of God, which can face everything in man that is spiritually intractable and hopeless, and confidently declare "With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible," has been intimately associated in the thought and faith of the church universal with the miracle. For this association we have Gospel authority. When Christ's critics were shocked because he forgave sins, a power which belongs to God alone, he proved his right by exercising another power that belongs to God alone, and the proof was a miracle.

Now when we come to ask what would be the effect of withdrawing the miracles from the gospel story, we face a kind of examination in which few have had occasion to train themselves. Suppose we bring together all men who honestly believe in goodness and are trying to practise it; for the purposes of the paragraph we will call them all good men. Then this remarkable fact appears; there is no religious doctrine, no form of distinctly religious experience, that is not superfluous to some good men, and even objectionable to some. There are good men who find no satisfactory evidence of a being that is good and all-powerful; they call themselves atheists, and seem to be wholly satisfied with the support of human goodness. Just what do they lose? By many good men the personality of God is wholly unrealized in personal experience, and some good men protest against the doctrine as "narrowing his being." Just what do they lose? Good men in our time are proclaiming a God that grows; in abandoning the familiar doctrine of God's absoluteness and infinite perfection, just what do they lose? Many good men get on without prayer, and even object to it, as a hindrance to self-reliance.

or a vain protest against the divine decrees. Just what do they lose? Many good men are "incurious about immortality," or even declare themselves glad to lie down to an eternal sleep. Just what do they lose? Many good men oppose authority in religion, whether from sacred book or prophetic voice, claiming that the truth is its own and sufficient authorization. Just what do they lose? Many good men see in Jesus of Nazareth the noblest of men and no more; and they claim that this Jesus means much more to them than could any "God-man," "an incomprehensible and even monstrous conception." Just what do they lose? If any one will work his way through such questions as these, he will be better furnished, both with intelligence and sympathy, for the inquiry as to the value of miracles in the Christian system of belief.

Philosophically, one might answer that to give them up because of the "immanence of God" in nature is practically to lose his transcendence, and the push toward pantheism, with its dim and weak conception of freedom in God and man, will be inescapable. To give them up because of the "reign of law" in nature is practically to abandon theism for deism, and to lose "revelation" in evolution. These statements will be strong to those whose convictions they express!

But the ordinary believer in Christ is not especially concerned about philosophy; he is greatly concerned, however, about the integrity of Christ's character and power, and of the men who present to him a non-miraculous Gospel he is ready to declare, "They have taken away my Lord." Some of the most notable elements in the character of Christ disappear, if we deny to him the power of the miracle. The temptation to cast himself down from the temple is meaningless, if it would have meant his sure destruction; his wonder-

ful abstinence from all miracle in his own behalf, which we admire and adore when upon the cross he refused to "save himself," would lose all its significance. Furthermore, Jesus having no distinctive "power of God," naturally takes his place among men, among "other masters," differing in degree but not in kind. The age-long controversy, never keener than at the present time, as to the choice between the man Jesus and the divine Christ, turns largely on the miraculous and what it stands for. And that not only his divine Saviourhood, but the perfection of his character as man and teacher is endangered by this lower classification, is evident to most who have followed the discussion. Yet again, if the miracles are torn out from the Gospel, it becomes for the average man a thing of shreds and patches, a record hopelessly discredited as authentic history. His confident faith in apostle and evangelist as truly describing the works of God, and truly preserving the message of God, would be destroyed, and he would be left to pick and choose among the alleged utterances of Christ, not knowing how to obey the command, "Hear ye him" — but no such command was spoken from the heavens, for the heavens have never spoken.

Now it would be absurd to declare that all who set miracles aside illustrate all these consequences. Individual men have proved themselves able to stop near the top of a hill; but the slope is definite, and to the average man it is commanding. The Christian miracles are for most Christians an integral part of the "power of God unto salvation," as revealed in Christ. One could give them up, and retain the ideas of Christ; but the distinctive power of Christ to save us from our sins, to lift us up to the level of those ideas, would be mainly gone. The conquering energy of the gospel, its desire and power to evangelize the world, is characteristically

found in those Christian denominations that believe in a miracle-working Christ.

But the objection is inevitable: "You do not believe that miracles occur now, and you get on without them; why insist on their occurrence in the first century?" And this brings out the necessary limitations of the usefulness of the miracle. The exceptional must be exceptional, or it ceases to have the power of the exceptional. If miracles became the ordinary experience of life — if, for example, miracles of healing in answer to prayer always followed the "prayer of faith," as some would have us believe — they also would be classified under invariable law, and would become as much a matter of course as the action of the most reliable drug. The "economy of miracles" has always been a divine law, as any student of the Scriptures can see. They occur in isolated groups, at great historical crises, with long stretches of time between the groups. (But it is to be noted that the prophets come in similar groups, that there has been an "economy of inspiration" as well as of miracles.) Furthermore, even in the days of miracles, they have been strictly confined to occasions of spiritual usefulness. We find Christ constantly refusing to work them, when the spiritual effect of his message would be impaired, or the spiritual character of his mission would be obscured. (But the same subordination to the practical spiritual purpose is found in the use of the word; pearls are not to be cast before swine; when necessary, parables are used, and not the plain truth; there are many things Christ does not say, because his disciples are not able to bear them.) And all this economy of the supernatural in miracles has in mind their cessation, just as the exceptional inspiration found in the Bible prepares the way for a time when such inspiration would cease, just as the era of the crucifixion was be-

stowed "once for all." As surely as parent and teacher strive to train the child to the point where parent and teacher will be unnecessary, so surely miracle ever works toward the time when it will be unnecessary, when the exceptional can be dispensed with because the regular has been clearly and definitively revealed as the work of a divine person; and because the supernatural in the history of men's souls, in the transformation of sinners into saints, has brought God undeniably close to the minds and hearts of men — above all, because the character of Christ has been revealed, not only as immanent in his church but as transcendent above humanity, the supernatural made a permanent part of human history, "God manifest in the flesh."

We must all honor the mystic, who finds his way directly to God in his own soul and in physical nature, and who feels independent of miracles as a revelation of God: we must all honor the idealist, to whom truth shines by its own light, and with compelling power, and who feels no need of external evidence for the truth. It is obvious that some of our noblest thinkers live in a region into which miracles do not enter. It does not follow, however, that the mystic and the idealist gain nothing from an objective revelation, for the hopeless confusion of tongues that emanates from this region shows that man needs something more than the formula, "The Lord has revealed this unto me," or "I know this to be true because it is self-evident." Aside from this, the mystic and the idealist make but a small fraction of mankind. To the ordinary sinner the truth that he most needs is not self-evident, is not powerful enough to draw him from his absorption in the things of sense. Even when the vision of the ideal comes to him, it is to him something beyond his reach, and the God of the ideal is one from whom he shrinks. The assurance of power that

comes with the miracle, the power of the God of truth as well as the power of the truth, has been of marked value in all the history of the Christian church; its faith in the conquering God has largely come to it from a belief in a supernatural revelation, supernatural in deed and word.

I wish to rank myself as an ordinary man in this matter. I am something of an idealist myself, to whom much of the truth of the gospel now shines by its own light, with self-evidencing power. I am something of a mystic myself, finding God in tree and brook and mountain and sky, and in the ordinary affairs of life as really as in its unusual crises. I am thankful that I live in this age. There is a sense in which we understand Christ more fully and adequately than did Peter and Paul, because the spirit of Christ through all these centuries has been guiding us into truth beyond that visible in the first century. There is, therefore, a sense in which I am glad that I did not live in the day and place where I could see Christ in the flesh. In that sense I am glad to live in an age in which miracles are not used and are not expected, because we now have something that for us is far better..

But these things are true because we of to-day have the miracles as a permanent possession. It is the Christ who wrought deeds of divine power and truth, as well as spoke words of divine truth and power, that has made so much of truth self-evident to me to-day. I test Christ's words in experience, and find them worthy of God and of the Son of God; I bring his recorded deeds to the test of my growing experience, and find them no less worthy of God and of his Son. The miracles of that distant past shine for me by their own light as really as the word of that distant past. The way in which Christ used the power of God in his " signs " has made it possible for

me to believe that the God of nature to-day is the same God who revealed himself then, in works that are an abiding revelation of his gracious character.

The miraculous—not simply the individual miracles, but the divine power from which they proceeded, and the divine attitude which they revealed,—the miraculous has been for me the bridge by which I have reached my present faith in the fatherhood of God. Suppose some flood of criticism should destroy that bridge; I would still be on the right side of the bank, and my habitation would not be utterly destroyed. Truth would still be truth, and goodness would still be goodness. I should still believe that God is true and good, and in some sense a father. But what about those on the other side of the bridge, whom I would fain reach? My sense of power to influence others, my sense of available spiritual income to spend for them, would be seriously diminished. I should have to admit that God had not sought the human race, after all, as I had supposed he had; he had not shown himself as much of a father, as fully a father, as I had thought he could not help doing. And in my personal experience, the life of faith would be made much harder. It is difficult enough now to hold to “God in Christ,” the sort of God whom Christ declares to us. But without that power of God which revealed itself in miracles, it would be much more difficult. And I turn from all these debates and discussions, and take up again the gospel story of “Jesus of Nazareth, a man, approved of God unto you by mighty works and signs which God did by him,” and I thank God and take courage. If I understand my own heart, humanity needed just such a Son of God, in whom should dwell “all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” And my soul rests in full satisfaction upon this God, all of whose power, in all realms, is at the service of his truth and love.