

that he made in order to qualify for the privilege. "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And, although there are indications that point in the opposite direction, I believe that, a hundred years hence, all really spiritual believers will find some such simple formula as that enough to bind them together. Not in the chanting of elaborate creeds, not in subtle accusations of heresy, nor in any harsh methods of excommunication will the strength of Christian orthodoxy ultimately be found. If we are disciples of Him "who went about doing good," and "preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven," we shall find that "we pass from death unto life when we love the brethren." The service of the poor is the truest imitation of Christ.



Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

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II. THE SOURCES ; LIVES OF SAINTS.

IN studying the Lives of Saints which have come to us from very early ages down to comparatively modern times, we must remember that for centuries they filled a place in literature which is now filled quite otherwise. They were the *novels* of all ranks of society.

There never was an age which devoured more novels than ours does. And, if consumption may be gauged by production, there is no nation which reads so many novels as the English do. A glance at Mudie's catalogue or that of *The Times Book Club* will show the difference between the amount of fiction which is in circulation and the amount of solid literature. And the thoughts to which such a fact gives rise are not altogether cheering.

Can we imagine ourselves transferred to a state of society in which there were no novels? Of course, if we were transferred,

we should greatly feel the loss of what we had once enjoyed. But, even if we had been born in such an age, we should find that at times we needed something more than the daily experiences of life with which to fill our time and occupy our thoughts. All of us, even the most prosaic, must have some food for our imagination ; and from ages before the dawn of history people have loved to listen to tales, not merely of what has actually taken place, but also of what—for all we know to the contrary—might have taken place. Imaginary men and women, and imaginary monsters, have from the earliest times been food for men's minds. Literature of this imaginative kind abounded at the time when the Gospel was first preached to the world.

But a great deal of this literature was saturated with polytheism. Gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs, were the common ingredients ; and thus, not merely paganism, but often paganism in its foulest forms, contaminated the imaginative literature that was current throughout the civilized world. What attitude was Christianity to take in reference to writings which, often as regards morality, and always as regards religion, were of a thoroughly unchristian, and even antichristian, character? Many Christian teachers thought that the only safe course was to forbid the perusal of such literature altogether. This was specially the case in Western Christendom, where the leaders of the Church took a very rigid and unsympathetic line with regard to the whole of pagan literature, even that portion of it which was free from taint, and which, as some of the teachers in the Churches of the East were able to see, had been, in a very real sense, a preparation for the Gospel. But it was the stricter view which prevailed, especially where the Latin rather than the Greek language prevailed. Consequently, converts from heathenism, after joining the Church, found themselves cut off from almost all the literature to which they had been accustomed, and especially from what we should call "works of imagination"—in fact, they were in the condition in which we just now tried to suppose ourselves. They were suddenly transferred to a state of society in which there were no novels.

The change was a violent one ; but, as a rule, the situation was loyally accepted. Christian people abstained from what was forbidden, which they knew had not been forbidden without reason. But loyalty to new prohibitions does not put an end to the craving for the things which have been prohibited. These new Christians did not, of course, want stories about gods and goddesses ; still less did they want indecent stories about them. But they did want stories. They did want something different from the familiar experiences of their own uneventful lives. And they quickly had this want supplied by the production of numerous stories of saints ; and not unfrequently these stories were worked up into complete biographies, beginning with the saint's birth, and going right through to the death. These Lives of the Saints were eagerly read, and for that reason were frequently produced, for they ministered to a natural and constant craving ; and, of course, they were capable of being made not only interesting, but instructive and edifying.

They are of every kind of merit. Some of them are very valuable material for the historian. Others contain much valuable material, which can be sifted by criticism from what is doubtful or certainly untrue. Others, again, are pure fiction from beginning to end. No such person as the saint, whose life is described with so much detail, ever existed at all. He or she has been invented to explain a name, or a custom, or a statue, or other existing object.

A love of the marvellous is a common characteristic of mankind, and consequently these Lives of the Saints abound in miracles. But a love of the marvellous is not the only explanation that we need in order to account for the wonders with which these biographies often abound. For many centuries it was commonly believed that a holy life was sure to bear fruit in the power to work miracles. A saint was a person endowed with supernatural gifts, and it would have seemed almost a contradiction that persons should attain to exceptional holiness and yet not possess the exceptional gift of working miracles.

Therefore, to write the Life of a Saint, without recording any miracles, would come very near to denying that there was anything very saintly in the life. With regard to other details in the biography, when the writer had no materials, he guessed at what was probable; and, of course, he must do the same with regard to miracles. His object was to interest and edify his readers; and the Life of a Saint without miracles would seem to be not only very improbable, but very uninteresting and unedifying.

This is really not so very different from the practice of those who write historical novels at the present day. They make very free with events and with chronology. Indeed, even with regard to what is given to the world as sober history, we admit a good deal of imaginative construction. But, with regard to the Lives of the Saints, there is another consideration to be remembered. There is sometimes no invention, perhaps not even any exaggeration, but only a wrong point of view. Something really extraordinary took place, and it was wrongly regarded as miraculous. With us, when anything very extraordinary takes place, a miracle is the very last hypothesis to which we resort in order to explain it. We would perhaps much rather leave it unexplained than adopt any such solution. But, during many centuries of the Church's life, a miracle was the very first hypothesis to be suggested as the explanation of what was surprising. It was not only the easiest solution, but to many people it seemed to be the most reverent solution.

We have, then, these three causes at work in determining the form in which the biographies of saints were commonly written—the love of the marvellous; the feeling that miracles are appropriate to a holy life; and the belief that, because God is Almighty, He is constantly manifesting His power by changing the course of Nature.

Are we then to reject all miracles as incredible, excepting those recorded in Scripture, and perhaps even some of them? That would be a needlessly rash position to adopt, and even Dr. Schmiedel does not adopt it. He holds that "it is not

right to deny unconditionally that miracles are possible," though he refrains from committing himself to the belief that they have taken place. He points out, rightly enough, that even if we could examine all the miracles that have ever been reported and be able to trace these to natural causes, "we should be powerless to prevent an event taking place to-morrow which we should be obliged to recognize as a miracle, and nothing would then be gained by the statement that there are no such things as miracles. A scientific caution therefore bids us in no case to make this statement a guiding principle."

But what do we mean by a miracle? Not a violation of law. The law by which God governs His universe cannot be violated. He is not a God of disorder or confusion; *οὐκ ἔστιν ἀκαταστασίας ὁ Θεός* (1 Cor. xiv. 33): and we cannot believe that He wills that His *κόσμος* should ever set us an example of the disorder which inevitably results from violations of law. But it may well be the case that, for sufficient reason, God sometimes produces a result which cannot be explained by any laws that are known to us. Yet, even in such cases, we may be sure that the highly exceptional event is the outcome, not of lawlessness, but of law. On God's side, we believe that such exceptional events depend upon the sufficiency of the reason for them; on our side, the belief in them depends upon the sufficiency of the evidence. Miracles, as Huxley has taught us, are simply a question of evidence.

Let us, then, in studying the Lives of the Saints, try to approach this question with caution, and without prejudice. The assumption that miracles are impossible is as unscientific as the assumption that they must have taken place. That God will not violate His own laws is a safe assumption; but this assumption does not exclude the possibility of His having provided laws, still unknown to us, which operate only when exceptional combinations of circumstances call them into operation. What we have to consider, in any recorded or reported case, is, whether the occasion seemed to require a special manifestation of Divine Power, and whether the reported

manifestation seems to be worthy of the Divine Wisdom and Goodness. These two considerations will lead us to the conviction that vast numbers of reported miracles are quite incredible. But, when we have satisfied ourselves upon these two points, we have further to ask, whether the reported marvel really took place, and, if so, whether it cannot be explained by the operation of known laws. These two additional considerations will lead us to reject, or at least to be doubtful about, a great many more of the reported miracles. Then the question arises as to there being any residuum. When these two pairs of tests have been applied with critical acuteness and fairness, will any alleged miracles remain as material for history? The present writer, speaking only for himself, answers that question unhesitatingly in the affirmative; but all that he cares to insist upon here is, that a miracle is not a violation of law, and that the occurrence of miracles is simply a question of evidence.

“The Life of St. Cuthbert,” by the Venerable Bede, will serve to illustrate a good deal of what has been stated above. Bede was considerably in advance of his age, both in the critical principles which he adopted and in his efforts to carry them out in practice. He knew that evidence must be sifted, and he knew the superiority of contemporary evidence, and of evidence at first hand, over mere tradition and hearsay; and he took pains to obtain the best evidence that was within his reach. In editing the “Hieronymian Martyrology,” he inserted (he tells us at the end of his Ecclesiastical History) the names of all the martyrs of whom he could find definite information as to the kind of sufferings which they endured or the judge who condemned them. This seems to imply that he would not insert the names of those about whom nothing was known; he preferred to leave the days blank, rather than insert what lacked evidence. But Bede’s work was enlarged by subsequent editors, and, as only the enlarged edition has come down to us, we are in doubt as to the precise character of Bede’s critical work. But in his “Life of Cuthbert” we are upon surer ground.

He dedicates it to "Bishop Eadfrid,¹ and to all the Congregation of the Brethren who serve Christ in the Island of Lindisfarne," and this in itself is some guarantee that it was written with care. But in the dedicatory letter he thus assures them and other readers who may not have their knowledge of the facts: "I have ventured, neither to write any circumstance relating to so great a man, without the most sure research, nor to give out for general transcription the things which I have reduced to writing, without the most scrupulous examination of indubitable witnesses. Indeed, it was not till I had investigated the beginning, progress, and end of his most glorious life and conversation *from those who had known him* that I ventured to reduce anything to writing. I may add that I have also thought it right to mention here and there in the course of my work *the names of my authorities*, as unquestionable proof of the acknowledged truth of my narrative. Moreover, after I had digested my little work, I kept it back in manuscript, and showed it frequently to Herefrid the priest,² when he came here, as well as to several others who, from having long dwelt with the man of God, were thoroughly acquainted with his life, that they might correct or expunge, as they thought advisable. Some of these amendments I carefully adopted, and, all scruples having thus been removed, I ventured to commit the result of this careful research to these few sheets of parchment. And whilst, by God's aid, I was so occupied, my little work was read before the ancients of your congregation; and, after every part had been carefully examined, it was found unnecessary to alter a single word." Could a modern critical writer have taken more pains to be accurate? And what is the result? Bede had an earlier "Life of Cuthbert" which has come down to us, by an unknown monk of Lindisfarne, to work upon; and the latest editor of "Bede's Historical Works" tells us that Bede in re-writing it "shows a marked tendency to exaggerate the ascetic

¹ He was Bishop of Lindisfarne A.D. 698 to 721, and was the artist who wrote and illuminated the famous Lindisfarne Gospels.

² He was the intimate friend of Cuthbert, and it was from him that Bede got the beautiful account of Cuthbert's death (ch. xxxvii.—xxxix.).

and miraculous element" (Charles Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica*, vol. i., p. xlvi). That probably means that, when Bede's informants told him of these wonderful particulars, he readily admitted them as in the highest degree probable—indeed, as almost certain to have occurred in the experiences of so holy a man as Cuthbert. A glance at the headings of the chapters in Bede's narrative will give plenty of examples: "How he was crippled through a painful swelling in his knee, which was cured by an Angel"; "How the wind was changed at his prayer"; "How he saw the soul of St. Aidan carried up to Heaven by Angels"; "How he foretold that he should receive a supply of food by the ministry of an eagle, and did receive it"; "How by prayer he extinguished the flames of a house on fire"; "How he cast out a devil from the Prefect's wife, before he had even seen her"; "How the Abbess Aelfred and one of her nuns were healed by his girdle"; "How he cured an Earl's wife by water which he blessed and sent by his priest"; "How by tasting water he gave it the flavour of wine," and so forth. Assuming that the evidence was in many of these cases good, mere coincidence, exaggeration, suggestion, telepathy, and the operation of other laws, which are known now but were unknown then, will explain a great many of these wonders and other medieval miracles. But a writer in that age is not to be condemned as untrustworthy in everything, because he freely admits such stories as these. Lives of Saints may contain very valuable historical material, although they abound in details which criticism cannot accept as true.

