"The idea of miracles is a major obstacle to faith in the modern world" - discuss

From the ideas about the nature of creation to ideas about the laws of nature itself, miracles, and the idea of the impossible, have been part of our culture for centuries. Miracles have been a measure for dispute within religion and between religion and rationality, from St. Augustine in the fourth century to David Hume in the eighteenth century. They have also been used by the corrupt and powerful to gain perverse ends, and romanticized in works of literature such as Caxton's Legenda Aurea. Some miracles have been derided as mere magic, and have been proven fraudulent, yet for many the idea of the miraculous has maintained a grip on the imagination. Miracles are certainly religiously significant, but their meaning varies between faiths. Within Islam, for example, everything happens in order that the will of God can be fulfilled, and therefore nature, history and time are absolutely fluid, constructed by God as a test of the will of God. In Hinduism, there is a sense of the world being infinitely more wonderful than is first perceived, and sometimes, other layers of reality or possibility are seen.

In the Christian faith, the main focus of this essay, miracles play a key role in the story of Jesus. Historian Ian Wilson comments, "That Jesus performed deeds that men called 'miracles,' is…one of the best attested items of information about him". The Bible contains many accounts of miracles performed by Jesus, but that does not mean to say that the miracles were supernatural - some claim that Jesus did not walk on water, but rather on a sandbar just below the surface. Wilson suggests that hypnosis could provide the explanation for a good deal of Jesus' miracles, however, events such as the feeding of the 5000 in Matthew's gospel could not be explained by hypnosis. A believer would say that Jesus was the son of God and so possessed the supernatural powers to walk on water and duplicate the bread and fish. The dilemma of many scholars, claims American theologian Robert E. Webber, is that they are "unable to verify in any historical or logical way the supernatural assertions of the New Testament." Many more it seems hold suspicion because of the lack of natural explanation, and the French historian Ernest Renan said in the mid-nineteenth century that, "No miracle has ever taken place under conditions which science can accept." If the miracles performed by Jesus are proven to be hoaxes, then it is difficult for Christians can accept Jesus is the savior. Although serious doubt can be cast, many say that miracles by definition contradict know scientific laws, and since they are beyond the scope of science to explain, no amount of scholarship can confirm nor deny Jesus' miracles.

David Hume would support the notion that we can neither completely disprove or prove that miracles happen. The locus classicus for contemporary philosophical discussion of miracles is Hume's definition: "A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent". Hume's main line of thought was not that miracles are impossible, but that it would be impossible for us to ever prove they exist; the laws of nature have been supported by billions of examples over a period of many hundreds of years, and so an apparent miracle would need to outweigh all the evidence needed to establish the original law. Hume, who lived in a society obsessed with a Newtonian mechanistic view of science, encapsulated the move towards a 'knowable' world which followed patterns we can observe, and essentially claimed that it would be a miracle if you could find the evidence for a miracle. Four reasons persuaded Hume that Miracles are likely fictitious. First, he thought that there has never been a miracle with so much reliable testament to its occurrence that it should be believed. The next one is about human's passional nature and our natural tendency to suspend our reason in favour of irrational wonder and surprise. The third claimed the majority of reported miracle occurrences happen among 'ignorant and barbarous nations', implying that ignorance is a trait of the miracle-believer. Lastly Hume made the point that different religions are mutually exclusive so the miracle claims of each with the intention of supporting it, cancel each other out.

Swinburne, on the other hand, saw no problem in accepting the occurrence of a miracle, as long as the witness has the ability to interpret the evidence, in the right circumstances, and without proof to the contrary. He used a cumulative argument, and the principles of credulity and testimony, in his attempt to establish an initial credibility of miracle claims. Swinburne's logic, however, could lead us all to accept supernatural claims of any sort, such as sightings of aliens, or a ham sandwich that could talk. It is interesting to note that the modern UFO cults have stories of being 'cured' of illness after an encounter with UFO occupants, just like Christians have claimed that the holy waters at Lourdes heal sicknesses. R.F Holland does not insist upon a transcendence of natural law to count as a miracle - 'a coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle'. If one was to adopt Holland's approach, then the fact that science can explain what some call miracles is irrelevant, because ordinary coincidences can be seen as God's work. There is by no means unanimous agreement on what it means to say 'miracle', and definitions vary in strength from an act which 'breaks the rules' of the world to a much weaker definition, which does not include suspension of the laws of physics.

Many philosophical and naturalistic challenges to the idea of miracles have focused on a certain type of 'law-breaking' miracle, but within the Judeo-Christian tradition the idea of miracle has more depth than that. A favorite explanation for the dramatic parting of the red sea, which has formed a major focus for Jewish and Israelite self-understanding, is that it was the result of a huge volcanic explosion on an Island called San Terini, near Crete. However, there is a fascinating comment in the Jewish Talmud, which says, "It is as wonderful to watch the support of the family for somebody in trouble as it is to see the parting of the red sea". In Hebrew, 'mopet' is the word used to mean 'miracle'. It can be translated roughly to the words 'wonder' and 'sign', and often miracles in the New Testament are 'signs' indicating the character of Jesus, the promised one, and his demonstration of Gods 'wonder'. For example, there is a parable where Jesus is in a boat with his disciples on the sea of Galilee, when a huge storm begins to swirl and creates towering waves. Jesus says a word and everything is calm, and this is meant to show that in Jesus there is the capacity to inhabit the power of the creator God. The apostle John said tales of miracles such as this are not just idle stories to impress, but that they help us to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). Perhaps it is these symbolic truisms and signs in miracles which are necessary to Christianity, not just the literal belief in its occurrence. It seems that attempts at rationalizing miracles in the Judeo-Christian tradition have been largely fruitless to the believers, as ordinary miracles of love, care and compassion are just as impressive as dramatic nature-defying ones.

If a believer accepts that miracles in the Bible happened as is written, he might have to ask himself why miracles are so random, and why God is selective about when and for whom to intervene. Questions such as these can present difficulties in reconciling a belief in miracles with belief in the omnibenevolent and omnipotent Judeo-Christian God. Maurice Wiles points out that many are reported to have been saved by God in Exodus, yet "No miraculous intervention prevented Aushwitz or Hiroshima", and that a God with such selective and reserved power is "not worthy of worship". Wiles, wanting to hold on to the goodness of God, said that we should see the whole of creation as the great miraculous act of God, and not just meaningless coincidences. In the early 15th century, Augustine theorized his own definition - "Everything is miraculous", and that there is no difference between 'natura' and 'miraculo'. He was concerned to ensure our concept of a miracle is relative to the individual experiencing it, saying, "Miracles are not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know about nature". Brian Davies is another theist who believes God is as present in what is not miraculous as he is in the miraculous, and so for people like Davies, Wiles and Augustine, it would not make sense to talk about minor instances of the 'intervention' of God. K. Ward is able to reconcile his belief in God with random intervention by saying if God acted in every situation, his creation would be disrupted. The Augustinian and Irenean theodicies could also be used to defend the morality of God, perhaps saying that we need to encounter difficulties to step

in to the likeness of God. If God prevented every disaster or wrongdoing by intervention, Swinburne contended, then we would be living in a 'toy world' where no truly worthwhile activity could be pursued, and we would not develop valuable qualities such as compassion, sympathy, and charity. This, it would seem, presents us with a solution to the moral objection of miracles, and thus removes a major reason for miracles to be an obstacle to faith.

Whether the idea of miracle is an obstacle is dependent, therefore, on both the type of faith under discussion, and what people consider to be 'miraculous'. For example, if God is considered a personal being then interaction with the world seems infinitely more possible, and if we consider, like Wiles, that the whole of creation is the miracle, or that miracles do not have to breach the understanding of science, then much of the obstacle is removed. What is central to the Christian faith, however, is the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, without which the apostle Paul said that preaching would be 'in vain'. One does not have to be a fundamentalist evangelical to agree with Paul here, and it is hugely important to many believers who are traditional theists whether miracles could or could not occur, and if one could justify a belief that they did oc cur. Miracles such as the resurrection and the delivery of the Qur'an to Muhammad are exempted from the criticism of morality because they do not bestow favours directly on to any individual. However, they are not exempt from the criticism of science.

In Christian theology, perhaps because of pressure put on their faith by naturalistic speculation, there has been a movement to demythologize the New Testament. Increasingly people believe that miracle stories aren't true, but they house, symbolically, important messages. We have begun to realize that an awful lot of ancient wisdom actually contains a profound insight and truth, and simply taking a reductionist approach, some say we've lost knowledge that were now recovering. John Macquarrie said the problem with miracles is they are so subjective, and so we should treat the stories in the New Testament as being myth. Some even say the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is unimportant - the stories contain all they need intrinsically. Perhaps, therefore, miracles in the Bible and other literature do not have to be taken as fact, but should be accepted for what they are, vehicles for the change of life. Moreover, many modern believers are inclined to think this way because so many skeptics view belief in miracles as primitive fantasy, a relic of the age of magic, a vestige of polytheism.

The conflict between science and religion over the issue of miracles is unending. The skeptic might say that many who pray for a miracle from God receive nothing but agony and death, but the tired response could follow that, "God moves in mysterious ways". C.S. Lewis was shocked to learn that Neville Coghill and J.R.R. Tolkein, some of the most intelligent and best-informed people he knew, we supernaturalists. Following his con version, C.S. Lewis and others like him argued that miracles are reasonable and plausible. This polarity of worldview is framed by John Lafarge's comment that, "For those who believe in God, no explanation is needed; for those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible". It might seem to an atheist that the idea of God performing miracles is extremely improbable - surely an omnipotent God has no need for miracles, and even if it were to demonstrate His 'divine power', surely He could do something incontrovertible instead of conjuring obscure 'signs'.

Clearly, thoughts of aerial phenomena, levitation and healing powers are deep rooted in the human psyche. In the age of magic they were prominent and overt. With the development of organized religion, they became refined and submerged, but the strong primeval element has never been far below the surface. Now, with the decline of organized religion, they have resurfaced in technological guise, employing the language of spacecraft and pseudoscience. Perhaps therefore, the idea of miracles is not so much an obstacle to those who already believe or who have an attraction to the supernatural, but far more so to the modern skeptic. It is ultimately a matter of

faith, but for the religious the idea of miracles is not an obstacle, rather it is a celebrated and exciting dimension of some of the world's major religions.

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