

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jtvi-01.php

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute
OR
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

VOL. LXXXIII

1951



LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY

THE INSTITUTE, 21, LOWER BELGRAVE STREET, WESTMINSTER,
S.W.1

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

896TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD IN THE LECTURE HALL OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, 69, GREAT PETER STREET, WESTMINSTER,
S.W.1, ON MONDAY, 5TH FEBRUARY, 1951.

ERNEST WHITE, ESQ., M.B., B.S., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The following elections were announced:—A. W. Langford, Esq., M.A., B.Ch., M.D., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., Member (on transfer from Fellow); A. G. E. East, Esq., Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then called on A. H. Boulton, Esq., LL.B., to read his Schofield Prize Essay, entitled "The Place of Miracle in Modern Thought and Knowledge."

THE PLACE OF MIRACLE IN MODERN THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE.

By A. H. BOULTON, ESQ., LL.B.

(being the Schofield Prize Essay, 1950).

SYNOPSIS.

Miracle is not magic, but the invasion of the natural order as we know it by a power outside of itself. However, we cannot always draw a hard and fast line between miracle and non-miracle.

In one sense "Modern Thought" dates from about 300 years ago and produced the conflict between Religion and Science which tormented the nineteenth century. Since then a new "modern thought" has arisen because fundamental discoveries in all the natural sciences have dissolved the old certainties and called new concepts into being. Yet the ultimate answers still elude us. There are new and puzzling horizons. Materialism is discredited. We cannot set bounds to the possible, and that miracles sometimes happen has to be accepted as fact.

Religious thought too has moved. There is more tolerance and less dogmatism, and the conflict of Religion and Science begins to belong to the past. The time has come for a new and imaginative approach to the problem, and the nature of miracle provides a realistic ground for such an approach.

(No originality is claimed for factual information, and authorities are indicated. The line of argument is entirely the author's own, and so far as he is aware has not previously been presented in this or any similar form.)

I

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MIRACLE ?

THE fact that the question is not an easy one to answer is itself symptomatic of the modern mind and the group of problems we must face in this brief study. Other periods would have experienced no such difficulty. To them a miracle was an event which "broke the laws of nature," or the word was synonymous with magic. Circe with her wand turned the mariners into swine and might have done the same to Odysseus, had it 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 after all, the gods can do anything."¹

"*The gods can do anything.*" So, in the legends of witchcraft and the stories of fairies the tradition of magic has been handed down. But into this crazy world of magic, where man stands naked and exposed to the caprice of gods and demons, victim of a fate which presses so relentlessly upon him, Christianity posited the first limitations to the power of deity, in the profound declaration that God cannot deny Himself. God is therefore reliable, His universe one of order, free from inherent contradictions and nonsensities. This very concept of unchangingness rendered possible a reliable pattern of thought within which the human mind could go on the long quest by which, in the fulness of time, it has reached the science of the middle of this twentieth century.

The idea that miracle and magic are one and the same dies hard. From the *Odyssey* to *Literature and Dogma* is a long pilgrimage. We move from the world of Circe's swine to the lofty calm of the nineteenth-century philosopher. Yet, illustrating the popular assumption that miracle gives indefeasible validity to the testimony of the miracle worker, Matthew Arnold could write :

"In the judgment of the mass of mankind, could I visibly and demonstrably change the pen with which I write this into a pen wiper, not only would this which I write acquire a claim to be held perfectly true and convincing, but I should even be entitled to affirm . . . propositions the most palpably at war with common fact and experience."²

¹ *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu

² Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* (1873).

Circe turns men into pigs, Arnold dreams of turning his pen into a penwiper. One of the ways in which the thought of today has moved since 1873, when Arnold wrote, is that the pressure of discovery has forced us to realise that there is a confusion of thought involved in lumping miracle and magic into a single category "at war with common experience" and therefore essentially incredible.

What then is miracle? The word tells us by the root *mirari* that it is something to be wondered at, but this is not all. We may well wonder at the skill of the acrobat on the high wire, but we do not therefore count his act a miracle. As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, the essential element in belief in miracle is the concept of a "supernature" which enters into and affects the working of the visible world.³ It is the nature of the cause rather than the nature of the happening which gives to an event the quality of miracle.

The classical miracle is that of healing, and we may well use two examples of healing to illustrate this principle. Before the discovery of the sulpha drugs and their value in combating infection, pneumonia almost invariably proceeded through crisis to long and gradual convalescence—or to death. When the now famous "M & B 693" was first used it may have been journalistically described as a "miracle drug", but nobody, however thankful for its value in achieving speedy recovery without crisis, really regards such a recovery as a miracle. On the other hand, Agnes Sanford, an American woman who has had a successful ministry as a faith healer, tells how in one particular case a child's pneumonia was cured in a matter of hours after prayer and the laying on of hands.⁴ Accepting her record, one has to place this happening into the same category as some at least of the things told of in the New Testament, and customarily called miracles. We call it a miracle to cure by the laying on of hands, but not by the administration of a drug. That is to say, it is not the fact of recovering from pneumonia without crisis that constituted the miracle, it is the fact that the recovery appeared to be the effect of a cause lying outside the natural order as scientifically observed and described.

It is therefore never possible for a hard line to be drawn between miracle and non-miracle, for the two sufficient reasons that we can only rarely know *all* the causes of an event, and

³ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*.

⁴ Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Light*.

that we do not yet know the precise bounds of "natural" phenomena. There are many happenings that may lie on either side of the border line. Thus a medical psychologist writes :

"I count among my friends one priest who is neither a physician nor a psychiatrist. . . . He describes himself very humbly as 'a young priest who is interested in mental difficulties'. Often I have sent patients to him who were either recovering from some mental illness or tormented by some mental difficulty and he has been wonderfully successful in many such cases. My medical colleagues criticise me severely because I am encouraging a layman to practise medicine. I am doing nothing of the kind. I am sending certain types of unhappy, anxious, or mentally ill people to a man who . . . loves souls, and who, as a priest has something to give distracted and tormented people that the most distinguished psychiatrist does not possess."⁵

Are such cases miracles? To the superficial observer they will not appear to be. Yet, if it be true that "the secret of the care of the patient is caring for the patient,"⁶ and also that "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him,"⁷ we come very near to bringing "supernature" into the common fact and experience of the ordinary care of the sick.

There is no hard line between miracle and non-miracle, but this must not lead us to think there is no difference. This would be the common logical fallacy of the "undistributed middle." We cannot tell at what moment we are entitled to describe as bald our friend whose hair is thinning, but we do know what we mean by being bald! In the same way there is a common level of fact and experience, and there are events—or shall we with deliberate caution say it is claimed that events have happened—which are most definitely not upon that common level. They may be the curing of disease at a touch, the raising of the dead, the stilling of a tempest, calling down fire from heaven. "Miracle" may not be easy to define with a clean, sharp line of demarcation, but it has a meaning. To remember this may save us from two evasions which can cloud the whole issue of the credibility of miracle.

The first is to premise that miracle does *not* happen and then

⁵ John Rathbone Oliver, *Psychiatry and Mental Health*.

⁶ Dr. Thomas Ordway, quoted by J. R. Oliver, *op. cit.*

⁷ I John 4 : 16.

logically deduce that anything that *does* happen, however extraordinary, cannot, *ex hypothesi*, be a miracle.

“I would reject the evidence of my senses rather than accept literally a physical miracle. . . . I may some day conceivably be forced to believe, if the evidence is strong enough, that a man has walked through a stone wall, or been wafted up into the clouds, or that he has been changed into a fox, or even that he has belatedly risen from the dead after he began to rot, like Lazarus. But admitting the factual occurrence I will still deny that a miracle has occurred.”⁸

This is merely playing with words. So is the other evasion, as when one turns to the hedgerow in spring and devoutly declares “It is all a miracle!” It is not, for it is the way Nature works in common experience. It might be justly accounted a miracle if the sap were to rise in midwinter.

The Christian view of miracle, then, is that it is a happening in the world of common experience which surprises us, and is the effect of a cause lying outside the natural order in a “supernature.” It is not arbitrary or capricious or nonsensical, for God is none of these, and as Jesus Christ has declared in a phrase of wonderful poetic compression, miracle is “the finger of God.”⁹

II

It can hardly be gainsaid that this deeper understanding of the nature of miracle to which the Christian thinker has been forced to feel his way has been worked out under the pressure of the doubts and questions placed in his path by “modern thought”. What then is this “modern thought” and when did it begin to perplex the Christian, who had formerly not doubted the validity of supernatural happenings, whether divine, demonic or magical, and had therefore found no cause to disentangle true miracle from the caprice of magic?

To answer these questions adequately would be to write a treatise on the nature and history of philosophy. For our present purpose perhaps two authors may be mentioned, contrast between whom throws into vivid relief the entry of modern thought.

⁸ W. B. Seabrook, *Jungle Ways*. The author is speaking of a supremely baffling experience of African witchcraft.

⁹ Luke 11 : 20.

As I write there lies before me a book written in 1607 by Brother Francesco Maria Guazzo of the Order of St. Ambrose. Its title is *Compendium Maleficarum* and it bears the explanatory subtitle "Showing the Iniquitous and Execrable operations of Witches against the Human Race and the Divine Remedies by which they may be Frustrated."¹⁰ It is a scholarly work, documented with stories drawn from all over Europe, and dedicated to a most illustrious and Right Reverend Lord Cardinal as patron. It contains stories of women who rode on broomsticks or changed themselves into wolves, of a cow that bore a human child, and of the power of holy relics to counter the black magic of witches. There is a marvel on every page, all told in perfect seriousness and illustrating a close-knit theological argument. Yet at the end of the same century a Dutch philosopher is preaching sheer materialism, writing "in true philosophy the causes of all natural phenomena are conceived in mechanical terms."¹¹

Modern thought had entered. And in a very short time it swept the witches and sorcerers, the fairies, elves and banshees out of the minds of serious men, to linger only in the twilight of the Celtic fringe and the pages of children's stories. Through the eighteenth century, cynical and politely sceptical, and into the nineteenth, earnest and prosaic, the process continued until the flood began to wash at the very walls of faith's central stronghold.

Then, and then only, did the leaders of religious thought, at least in the reformed churches, perceive that the new thinking carried a supreme challenge for the faith itself. Everybody, everywhere, had been taught to dismiss as impossible every story of the supernatural. Such books as that of Guazzo were merely regarded as illustrations of the absurd credulity of the times from which the flowering intellect of mankind had so lately emerged. The philosophers evolved their systems of pure reason, while the scientists mentally constructed models of a universe ordered, systematic and logical, in which chemical atoms, "solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, moveable particles"¹² in a state of motion provided explanations for nearly everything. Only those two obstinate intruders, life and mind, continued to

¹⁰ Published in English 1929 (John Rodker), trans. E. A. Ashwin, edited by Montague Summers.

¹¹ Huyghens, 1698.

¹² John Dalton's famous description in formulating his Atomic theory.

defy description, analysis and prediction. Doubtless the time would come when they too would yield to reason and system. What room for miracle ?

The attitude to miracle common among educated men had been admirably expressed by Edward Gibbon in his monumental history when he discussed the coming of Christianity to the Roman Empire. Through his rolling periods, meticulous in their lip-service to the traditional faith, the underlying scepticism is clear. Educated people could not really believe in miracles, but if one wished to maintain an outward and respectable orthodoxy one could hold that they happened in the pristine days of the faith but ceased at some later time, for any reason one might appropriately invoke. The matter is summed up in his words: "Since every friend to revelation is persuaded of the reality and every reasonable man is convinced of the cessation of miraculous powers, it is evident that there must have been *some period* in which they were either suddenly or gradually withdrawn from the Christian Church."

Meanwhile the illogicality of any such belief caused the miracles of the Bible to come under continuous attack. From the *Decline and Fall* a century passed, a century which witnessed vast social changes and triumphant expansion of scientific knowledge. The Christian had been forced to the position of upholding the miracles of the Bible, and, as the Catholic would add, the miracles of the Church, whilst denying miracle and the supernatural everywhere else. Could such a position be held ? It was small wonder that Matthew Arnold in his earlier days of unrest could make his cry from the heart :

" The sea of faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd :
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy long withdrawing roar,
 Retreating to the breath
 Of the night wind down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world."¹³

In the years following the publication of *Literature and Dogma* and other books in which Arnold tried to expound a non-miraculous Christianity, he was reproached by some as an infidel and his book as an attack upon the Christian religion.

¹³ Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*.

The conflict between science and religion had emerged fully into the open, and it seemed indeed that his writings betrayed much of the Christian case. Yet now, in the perspective of three-quarters of a century, we can discern in him a penetrating and sensitive intellect, perplexed by the tragic dilemma which the whole current of thought from Descartes onward had placed before the world; a man who would fain have held to his faith but had felt it ebbing within him with the inexorable recession of the retreating tide.

Arnold sought to construct a Christianity without miracle out of the "power not ourselves that makes for righteousness" and the "method and secret and sweet reasonableness of Jesus." He was outwardly optimistic. The world, he argued, was manifestly getting better and better. It had already become in large measure the Kingdom of the Lord "by its chief nations professing the religion of righteousness." It is easy for us to be tragically wiser in the shattering disillusion of the first half of our century. His superficial thinking was, we perceive, the product of his age, its assurances and false optimisms. He looked to science to reveal ultimate truth, "some day, perhaps, the nature of God may be as well known as the nature of a cone or a pyramid." But he was less happy within. In himself he knew the ebb of faith and the desolation of the world's naked shingles. We in our time have likewise realised that the "sweet reasonableness" of Jesus was itself a Victorian myth. The quest of the historical Jesus has led away from the gentle dreamer of Renan.

The value of *Literature and Dogma* is that besides showing the fundamental weakness of the nineteenth-century Christian viewpoint, it represents the end product of a process of religious thinking. To the question, "Have miracles happened and do they happen?" the author of the *Compendium Maleficarum* would have answered a confident "Yes", and the scientists and philosophers of the nineteenth century an equally confident "No." Arnold pointed out that the Christian apologist of his day tried to answer, "They have but they don't," without any logical explanation of the implicit inconsistency. Christianity, he argued, must therefore be refashioned in a form consistent with the new thought and knowledge.

But what was "today" in 1873 is very much "yesterday" now. By contrast with ancient or mediaeval thought, 1873 is "modern", for in one accepted sense "modern thought" begins

with Descartes. Yet when in 1950 we read the polemics and the confident assurances of the 1870's the world that lives in them seems as distant as that of the Reformation. What if we carry this problem of the miraculous into the world that is "modern" to us in 1950, the world of sub-atomic physics, Picasso, psychoanalysis, genetics, the electron microscope, psychic research and the poetry of T. S. Eliot!

Every basic assumption of the later nineteenth century is now outdated. For a moment, therefore, we may well lay down the question of miracle to call to mind the changes which have transformed our thinking about the nature of the universe.

III

To seek in a few hundred words to describe the growth of scientific knowledge during the last three-quarters of a century is to attempt what is manifestly impossible, even if the author were competent to speak with the slightest pretence to authority upon the subject. Yet some outline must be attempted, and it is inevitable that it begin with physics, *enfant prodigue* of this century.¹⁴

This vast science in its new concepts reaches from the interior of the atom to the farthest nebulae. Absorbing the whole of chemistry and touching the sciences of life, it is all new since Matthew Arnold faced the dilemma of his day. The atoms of John Dalton have disappeared. At first it seemed that the new theories exchanged the "massy, hard impenetrable" bits of stuff that were Dalton's atoms for miniature solar systems consisting of even smaller bits of stuff. The picture is still so preserved in popular armchair expositions of science, but it is an illusion. The explanation of the structure of matter has passed beyond the possibility of constructing models or pictures.

When knowledge is advancing with such giant strides, it is rash to speak of anything as the latest concept, but reference may be made to the wave physics of Heisenberg in which the contradictions otherwise inherent in the attempts to describe matter in terms of particles, and radiation in terms of waves, have been resolved, but only at the cost of abandoning all attempts at constructing any picture of the structure of matter or energy intelligible to the imagination. The whole concept

¹⁴ For much of the information contained in the next few paragraphs I am indebted to *Physics and Philosophy* by Sir James Jeans, and to other books of the same author.

has retreated into mathematics, a relationship between measurements expressed in symbols and in which there is no ultimate distinction between matter and energy.

Further, in the world within the atom, even the mathematical principles of the world of common experience do not apply. Nor does it seem that every event has a cause. In it either causeless events occur or there is a deeper substratum which has completely evaded our analysis in which the springs of those events are concealed. One of the most revolutionary concepts in modern physics is the belief that the laws of physics are themselves statistical in nature, their apparent immutability deriving from the immensity of the statistical magnitudes in which they are observed. Thus, in the modern concept, in each gramme of radioactive substance so many million electrons will pass from matter into radiation each second, but each one of these events is isolated, uncaused within the system in which it occurs, and the regularity is due only to the same kind of statistical law which enables us to forecast within a narrow margin the number of births or deaths in England each year.

Studying the nature of the universe in the light of the new physics is as though, seeking to see more clearly the detail of the picture in our newspaper, we have studied it through a lens, only to find it dissolve into meaningless dots geometrically arranged. The ultimate questions, Why? Whence? and Whither? are as far from answer as ever.

Turning from physics to the science of living things there is a strange similarity in the progress of discovery in this period. Just as physics has embraced and absorbed chemistry, so biology has found the once separate sciences of botany and zoology to be intimately involved and ultimately one.

At the turn of the century the biologists were still cherishing the idea of a primal living stuff which through long aeons had grown into the myriad forms of nature. They gave it a name, "protoplasm," and felt that by this subjective act they assured its objective existence. As to the nature of life itself there was little but conjecture. The unit was the cell, imagined as a tiny bag of undifferentiated jelly, and all living things larger than the single cell consisted of organised collections of such cells.

The penetration of the secrets of the cell has led to the realisation that this biologic atom is itself a complete structure, a living thing with differentiated organs of whose individual functions our knowledge is as yet scanty. Out of the observations

of certain of these organs, the chromosomes, has newly flowered the science of genetics, a science which notwithstanding the patient researches of the Abbé Mendel had previously been something of a Cinderella.

Probing deeper, the unit of our analytic method ceases to be the cell, and becomes first the chromosome and then the gene. The little *drosophila*, conveniently living its life span in a few days, has provided opportunity for the progress of characteristics to be followed through successive generations. Meanwhile the infinitesimal in biology begins to approach the magnitudes of molecular physics. According to most recent conjecture the chromosome consists of a single chain of large and complex protein molecules, each one of which in its interlocked atomic systems of electrons and protons contains, as in a code, the plan upon which the individuality of the separate organism is built.¹⁵

The science of genetics promises to raise profound questions when the full impact of modern discoveries is felt. How is the code of the genes interpreted? What is the essential difference between living and non-living? Life itself constitutes a reversal of the otherwise universal law of entropy¹⁶; by what means is that reversal begun and maintained? The answers are not found in the atoms and molecules of which the living tissue is composed, and the analytic process, reaching downward from the cell to the gene, has almost reached the field of the physicist. The analytic method has failed to answer the ultimate questions. Life itself has evaded analysis. As in physics, so in biology, there seems to be a substratum in which the springs of events are hidden, but of that substratum we have no direct apprehension. Like physics, biology has not revealed the reality behind phenomena.

One great branch of knowledge and research remains to be mentioned to complete our sketch of modern knowledge, the science of psychology. The layman approaches with trepidation, knowing that more uninformed nonsense has been and is being written about it by those unqualified to speak than about any other field of study.

To the science of the nineteenth century, mind was beginning to appear something of an intruder into the cosmos. The universe worked like a well-oiled machine, and biological evolu-

¹⁵ Schrödinger, *What is Life?*

¹⁶ Schrödinger, *op. cit.*

tion, so it appeared, could work without conscious will or desire. The tendency was to determinism.

“Our mental conditions are simply the consciousness of the changes that take place automatically in the organism the feeling we call volition is not the cause of the voluntary act, but the symbol of that state of the brain which is the immediate cause of that act.”¹⁷

With this outlook it was natural that the mind as such was not studied. Even in relation to disorders of the mind research was concentrated on the study of such matters as the response to heat and cold or to electrical stimuli.

The early study of hypnotism by Charcot and others, following its chance rediscovery by Mesmer, fell into disrepute, but it was one of the factors which led to the recognition of the mind as something more than a by-product of the body. The discovery that under hypnosis forgotten memories are accessible led to the momentous realisation that mind and consciousness are not synonymous. The full significance of this fact, first expounded and demonstrated by Freud, is as yet not fully realised, but it is already recognised that the mental life of the human being is deeper, richer and infinitely more complex than the scientist of the nineteenth century ever dreamed. In fact, to find any realisation of the complexity of the human being comparable with that revealed by modern psychology, it is necessary to go back into mythology. The ancient Egyptians, who possessed in their priestly cults a considerable knowledge of medicine, and who certainly practised hypnosis as a therapeutic agent, taught a doctrine of multiple selves which constituted a very definite anticipation of the modern doctrine of the subconscious mind.¹⁸

Between the sciences of psychology and biology lies the mystery of the mind-body relationship, perhaps the most obstinate question mark of philosophy. Whatever that relationship may be, two things stand out with utter clarity. The first is that physical health and disease are largely controlled by mental states, and the second that there is hardly any limit to the power of suggestion. As between mind and body it is being realised that mind is the dominant partner, or the truer and more ultimately real aspect of a single whole.

¹⁷ Thomas Huxley.

¹⁸ Gregory, *Psychotherapy, Scientific and Religious*.

IV

Attempting to sum up and express in a few generalisations this brief sketch of scientific progress, we may say that the old certainties and finalities have gone. The atom, the cell, the individual are all more complex than had been dreamed, and the analytic method leads only to the margin of mystery which surrounds us on every side. To our grandfathers it seemed that only a few pages were left unread of the book of knowledge. We have turned those pages, but instead of finding the subscription "The End," we have found "End of Volume One," and we are not sure where to look for the second volume. And even Volume One has ended, not with a period, but with a note of interrogation. The underlying substratum, the spring of being, has not discovered itself to our search. We have sifted the physical universe to its constituent electrons, but life and mind, meaning and purpose have slipped through our fingers, probably because we have looked in the wrong place and in the wrong way.

During the last century a new field of research and conjecture has come to the fore, so relevant to our study that to ignore it would be a grave omission, and yet so difficult of approach as to provide many pitfalls for the unwary. Yet we must perforce rush in though angels fear to tread. I refer to "psychic research."

The early spiritualists of the mid-nineteenth century started a cult which for a short time became fashionable, then fell into derision as a happy hunting ground for charlatans and a snare for the unstable. Orthodox Christianity, recognising some of its techniques as sorceries ancient as En-dor,¹⁹ roundly condemned it as demonic. Science, engrossed with things it could cut and weigh and measure, passed it by on the other side. Even the conversion of so eminent a thinker as Sir Oliver Lodge did little to ruffle the complacency of the Orthodox, whether of Church or Science. Indeed, nothing in the history of modern thought has demonstrated more clearly the bias of the scientific world than its blank refusal to investigate the phenomena of the séance room, whatever they may be.

Of recent years, however, psychic research has moved away from the séance room and the moated grange, to the cool asepsis of the University laboratory. Such researches as those of Rhine

¹⁹ I Samuel 28.

and Soal²⁰, though their tentative conclusions be expressed cautiously and prosaically, are likely to be revolutionary when properly evaluated. It is becoming clear that in its relationship with space and time the mind is not bound by the laws which prevail in the world of matter and energy, and that we have no precise definition of the reach of the mind in the world of matter itself.

Psychic research has made a small but decisive breach in the prison wall of materialism within which the Victorian scientist thought to enclose the human spirit. The Christian may well hesitate before the ancient techniques of those who have converse with familiar spirits, but it is well to remember that to believe in demons is just as destructive to materialism as to believe in God.

Yes, much has happened in the last three-quarters of a century, and the place of miracle in modern thought and knowledge is certainly not what it was before. We dare not be so dogmatic about the miracles of the past or the present. As a twentieth-century psychologist has remarked, "We cannot too strongly insist that the bounds of the possible do not coincide with and are not set by the limits of our present powers of comprehension."²¹

Looking back at the miracles of the past the largest group have now ceased to be in any way incredible. Knowing even as little as we now do about the power of the mind and its part in health and disease, it is in the highest degree believable that the presence of so unique a personality as Jesus of Nazareth should effect cures of the kind He performed. Commenting upon our new vision, Dr. Alexis Carrel has written: "After the great impetus of science during the nineteenth century . . . it was generally admitted not only that miracles did not exist but that they could not exist. . . . However, in view of the facts observed during the last fifty years this attitude cannot be maintained."²² He had been recounting the records of cures experienced at the shrine of Lourdes. Equally impressive healings have been recorded against Protestant backgrounds.²³

²⁰ See, for example, *New Frontiers of the Mind* and *The Reach of the Mind* by J. B. Rhine.

²¹ McDougall, quoted by Gregory, *op. cit.*

²² Alexis Carrel, *Man, the Unknown* (written 1935).

²³ See, for example, *By Stretching forth Thy Hand to Heal* (Spread), *The Healing Light* (Sanford), *Recovery* (Starr Daily), *Accept a Miracle* (May Culley), and other records.

Commenting upon the healings he has generalised thus: "The only condition indispensable to the occurrence of the phenomenon is prayer. But there is no need for the patient himself to pray or even to have any religious faith. It is sufficient that someone around him is in a state of prayer. Such facts . . . show the reality of certain relations of a still unknown nature between psychological and organic processes. They prove the objective importance of the spiritual activities which hygienists, physicians, educators and sociologists have almost always neglected to study. They open to man a new world."²⁴

Neither the Catholic Church nor the Protestant communions, nor indeed Christianity itself can claim a monopoly of such happenings. They happen in Buddhist shrines and beneath the hands of the psychic healer. They happen sometimes outside of any religious environment.²⁵ Wherever they occur they are exceptional and rare, but they do happen, and it is a tragedy that orthodox medicine and orthodox theology neglect them or flatly disbelieve without investigation. Too readily the medical profession takes refuge in a dubious distinction between "organic" and "functional" disease, a distinction which often breaks down before the facts.

It may be true that sometimes the fervour of the "faith healing" mission can do harm, especially when it approaches the matter of healing through mass hysteria or an over-sentimentalised evangelism. But because a thing is done wrongly is no valid reason to refuse to do it well, and the conviction is deepening that the Church has erred in forgetting its healing mission and abandoning it to secular science. It still sings

"Thy touch has still its ancient power ;"

but in the mouths of the ninety and nine the words are thoughtlessly untrue. If it was true that among his own fellow townsmen even Jesus Christ could do no mighty work because of their unbelief;²⁶ is it surprising that in an age when even the believers have ceased to believe, miracles should become only a far-off tale of other days, half disbelieved and wholly ignored? We have found it difficult to believe in the miracles of the past

²⁴ Alexis Carrel, *op. cit.* This is not very happily phrased. What is meant is that the effective faith is not always that of the patient.

²⁵ Some interesting cases are collected in *Christianity and the Cure of Disease* by George S. Marr.

²⁶ Matt. 13 : 54 and Mark 6 : 5.

because we have ceased to believe in miracle in the present. Matthew Arnold was wrong in his conclusion but utterly right in his logic. Contrary to his conclusion, we may believe miracles happened in the past because they happen to-day and would happen more frequently if our minds were not closed. In the full triumph of the materialist victory, before the obstinate questions had been encountered and the more reverent agnosticism of to-day forced upon us, one of our most genuine mystics could cry out in anguish :

“ The angels keep their ancient places ;
 Turn but a stone, and start a wing !
 ’Tis ye—’tis your estranged faces,
 That miss the many-splendoured thing.”²⁷

We probably fashion to ourselves a wrong view of miracle in the New Testament setting. Jesus performed many cures. There are twenty-five specific recorded miracles of healing, beside several more general references to the healing of a number of persons at the same time. But He did not cure everybody. There were blind and palsied who remained uncured even in His presence. What was it that determined success or even the choice of subject ? We know this much, that the vital factor was called “ faith.” Lack of it in the patient could hamper or prevent healing. Lack of it in a would-be healer could have the same effect.²⁸

What is this “ faith ? ” It is not credulity, nor is it intellectual belief, theological or otherwise. It is much nearer to imagination. Psychology feels toward it in the word “ suggestibility.” The relation between the faith that makes miracle possible and the suggestibility of psychiatric practice has yet to be properly explored. May we with caution venture the possibility that the healing miracle comes from a power of mind over body occasionally evoked and focussed in a supreme degree by the presence of a dynamic personality or the condition of prayer, and that the use of suggestion in psychological treatment is a tentative and slower use of this same power ? We have still much to learn. It is becoming clear that whatever powers dwell within us may be immensely reinforced by greater powers outside ourselves. Miracle is not a magic once present and now absent, but the release of powers never far away which we have well-nigh

²⁷ Francis Thompson, *The Kingdom of God.*

²⁸ Matt. 17 : 14-20.

ceased to call upon because we have forgotten that they are there. The angels keep their ancient places.

V

Thus far we have spoken as though "modern thought and knowledge" was altogether a matter of science, but this is not so. The changes that have swept across the world have been wide and deep, and if religious thought had remained unchanged it would have been a sign of death rather than life. Though the ultimate truths with which religion is concerned lie in the eternal and are thus not subject to the flux of time, their expression and interpretation are temporal, and take their colour from the minds through which they are formulated. It is given to each generation to make its own, in its own idiom, the revelation that belongs to all. In the supposed conflict of Religion and Science, how has the religious approach and conviction become modified?

We have, I believe, lost some of our clear-cut assurances. Three-quarters of a century ago it seemed that the defender of the faith must hold every position at the peril of all. To regard "Jonah" as a parable would be to strike at the roots of the faith. To admit the validity of the literary criticism of the Bible would be to deny to it the inspiration on which everything depended. Was there an element of fear in this, an inner doubt of the things so confidently professed?

The unfolding of the years has neither vindicated our best hopes nor confirmed our worst fears. The tide of literary criticism has flowed past, its more valuable contributions accepted, its excesses rejected, and the Bible still remains the textbook of our faith. If in every jot and tittle its prosaic and factual accuracy has not remained unquestioned, any loss has been far more than outweighed by the greater appreciation of its poetic truth and the immediacy of its social and moral challenge. Those whose lives have been lived through these decades of conflict may feel that there has been a great shaking "that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." Inwardly they are gratified that so much has remained.

We are more tolerant of one another's opinions and difficulties. We know that even within the Church we shall never all believe alike, and that some may find belief easy where others do not. For the most part we have learned not to unchurch one another over doubts and intellectual problems. So, if one says "I would fain be a Christian but I cannot believe this or that, at which

my mind balks," we do not say, as our fathers might have said in the period of the "religion versus science" conflict, "You must believe or forfeit your claim to the fellowship of the Church." We know it is more in harmony with the spirit and leading of the Lord to say, "Do not pretend to believe where you cannot, but walk in the light of the faith you have, worship with us and we believe your faith will grow." So long has it taken the Church to realise the truth behind the saying concerning faith like a grain of mustard seed—that it matters not how small a grain of faith one has, if only it be living.

With this change, which has resulted in there being many prominent Christians who have publicly expressed doubt or disbelief of this or that, we have found to our surprise that a living active and fruitful faith can coexist with many such reservations. The centre of gravity of Christianity does not rest quite where we thought. If we have laboured through the pages of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, our amazement at the author's erudition passes into bewilderment because the familiar lineaments of the gospel story seem to dissolve away. Can faith survive such treatment, we wonder? Yet remembering the test, "By their fruits ye shall know them," we realise in humility that the name of Albert Schweitzer has become a legend in his work for God and for humanity.

It is not the writer's purpose to exalt doubt and unbelief, nor to praise the nebulous half-faith of so many who profess attachment to the Christian Church. His desires lean the other way; and he is assured that in the end of any reverent and informed study the traditional and accepted faith of the Church in her Lord will be found to have been substantially vindicated by the progress of thought and knowledge in the present century. His plea is for patience and sympathy with intellectual problems, and for a recognition of the changing emphasis in Christian thinking.

For these reasons the "problem of miracle" has changed its nature. To believe in miracle is not a burden a reluctant faith must carry, and if some particular miracle is especially difficult of acceptance to our brother whose mind is cast in critical mould, we do not threaten, "You must believe—or else. . . ." Yet, as we recognise, our whole faith as Christians is a faith in miracle, in the supreme miracle of the incarnation. We may rejoice that the whole trend of scientific thought has now pointed toward a concept of the universe which makes it seem right

and proper to posit a spirit, unseen and eternal behind the flux of visible things. Mechanical materialism is dead. As so often happens, it is a poet who expresses in a word the truth toward which the scientist gropes :

Behold ! he lent me as we went the vision of the seer ;
Behold ! I saw the life of men, the life of God shine clear
I saw *the hidden spirit's thrust*. . . .²⁹

The vision is not given thus clearly to us all, but many of us catch a fleeting glimpse when for a space the shaken mists unsettle.

The whole concept of religion and science being in deadly opposition is out of harmony with the temper of our thought to-day. Truth is whole, and the mind pursues its quest through both. Religion and Science each probe the margin of mystery in their own way, and if for the moment some of the interpretations we place upon our religious and our scientific experiences appear to conflict, there is abundant reason for us to manifest sufficient humility of mind to make it our personal act of faith to believe that when more still is known, the reconciliation of fact with fact must be found in the singleness of all truth. The humility that is compelled in us awakens us to the realisation that now we "dimly sense what Time in mist confounds," or in more clumsy scientific language, the relation of our conscious minds to the time sequence imposes a limit upon our understanding of ultimate reality. However many facts we discover, the mystery will remain, because the limits of our understanding belong not so much to the extent of our knowledge as to the very texture of our thought. We see as in a glass, darkly.

Because of this the time has surely come for a new and imaginative approach to the apparently inescapable dilemmas of the nineteenth centuries. Upon each side of the Religion and Science controversies the old proud dogmatisms have passed, the old intransigence is passing away and the days are ripe for a new and more humble synthesis. To face clearly and reverently the fact and nature of miracle in the past and the present could be as promising an approach as any to the new reconciliation we so deeply need.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN (Dr. WHITE) said : I am sure that I shall express the thoughts of all who have listened to Mr. Boulton's paper when

²⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Uxbridge Road*.

I congratulate him on the ability and clearness of thought which he has shown in its composition, and not alone for the clarity of thought but also for the literary excellence displayed throughout the essay.

The author's introductory discussion of the definition of miracle is important, for, as he so well points out, the statement that the wonders of nature observed by us in our ordinary experience are miracles, produces confusion of thought. A miracle is something lying outside the natural order as observed by us.

It is interesting to note that the word often used in the New Testament, especially by St. John, to describe a miracle is the word "sign." "This beginning of His signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee and manifested His Glory." The miracles were signs of the presence of Divine power working in and through Jesus, and confirmed the belief of His disciples in Him.

I am particularly interested in what Mr. Boulton has to say about the miracles of healing. I should not quite agree with him that "orthodox medicine neglects or flatly disbelieves [in miracles] without investigation." I have lived long enough to observe a very great change in the attitude of the medical profession toward the relation of mental states to physical diseases, and even toward miracles. Many well-authenticated cases have occurred of the healing of organic diseases by spiritual methods. The distinction between organic and functional diseases is not so readily taken refuge in by the medical profession as Mr. Boulton appears to believe. For example, peptic ulcer, certainly an organic lesion, is believed by many medical men to be of psychogenic origin.

Dr. Somervell, in his book *After Everest*, describes a case of cancer and a case of advanced tuberculosis of the lungs, both healed completely within a few months as the result of faith and prayer. Dr. Somervell is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons with a very wide experience, and is hardly likely to publish such statements about cases he himself saw, unless he was very sure of his ground. Both these cases had refused medical treatment and were regarded as otherwise hopeless.

The materialistic conception of medicine almost universal in my student days has been very much undermined by recent discoveries in psychological medicine.

Nevertheless, in my opinion it is a mistake to jump to the con-

clusion, as some have done, that all the miracles of healing of our Lord can be explained on psychological lines alone. Some of the miracles of healing involved profound organic changes impossible to explain in the light of modern scientific knowledge. As two examples, I would cite the restoration of sight to the man born blind and the healing of the woman with the bent back—probably suffering from a form of arthritis of the spine. In the first case there must have been a creation of new tissues in the eyes or in the optic nerves and, in the second, extensive alteration in the structure of muscles and ligaments.

Toward the end of his paper Mr. Boulton says: "Our whole faith as Christians is a faith in miracles, in the supreme miracle of the Incarnation." To that I should like to add the miracle of the Resurrection. If those two miracles are established as fundamentals of the Christian faith there surely need be little difficulty in accepting the remaining miracles recorded in the New Testament.

Mr. Boulton has approached the subject of his paper in a new and original way, and we are indebted to him for the thought and painstaking effort expended by him in its preparation.

Mr. B. C. MARTIN said: I have studied Mr. Boulton's paper with much interest and profit. I notice, however, that the paper deals almost exclusively with one type of miracle, viz., the Miracle of Healing.

What would Mr. Boulton say of the other Bible miracles, particularly the "Nature" miracles of the Old Testament, such as the Crossing of the Red Sea, the Ten Plagues and the sun "standing still"?

Were these "invasions of the natural order" or, as some hold, natural events which God caused to synchronise with certain human situations, thus giving them the appearance of miracle to those concerned?

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Mr. B. B. KNOPP wrote: Mr. Boulton is to be congratulated on this brilliant paper with its evidence of deep thought and its new approach to the ancient problem of Miracle. As one who has also thought much upon the subject, may I offer a few observations?

I was a little sorry not to find a more positive presentation of the abundance of evidence for miracles. All thought, whether modern

or of any other period, must take account of this. Mr. Boulton mentions the supreme miracle of the Incarnation. He might also have referred to its "twin," namely, the Resurrection. This, apart from still being the "best attested fact in history," is specifically stated by Paul to be indispensable to our faith. (See 1 Cor. 15: 17.)

It cannot surely be ultimately true that there are some events that have no cause. Mr. Boulton's alternative must be right. "There is a deeper substratum which has completely evaded our analysis in which the springs of those events are concealed." Mind has eluded the scrutiny of science. We cannot watch mind acting on matter. We see only the effects. If the cause lies here we cannot expect to measure, weigh or examine it. We are unable to determine its location, much less see it.

The allusion to "protoplasm" is appreciated. Too long have men imagined that when they have given a name to anything they have thereby understood and explained it. The truth is, of course, as Mr. Boulton points out, that we are still very much in the realm of conjecture both in biology and physics.

The reference to Jonah towards the end of the paper prompts the thought that gone also are the days when one could dismiss Jonah by affirming that a whale's throat is much too small to swallow a man. (This was, however, actually repeated recently on the Radio.) The Christian cannot surrender Jonah. The words of our Lord preclude that (see Matt. 12: 40). Nor can we surrender any jot or tittle of Scripture in the original. We may feel more sympathy than formerly with those who have difficulty in accepting some things recorded in the Bible, but we should, nevertheless, realise that the underlying cause is still the same, namely, the pride of the human heart. Did not Jesus say, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18: 3)?

In his penultimate paragraph Mr. Boulton has this trenchant sentence: "However many facts we discover, the mystery will remain, because the limits of our understanding belong not so much to the extent of our knowledge as to the very texture of our thought." This is undeniably true and it suggests the ultimate definition of a miracle. It is an event whose cause lies beyond the reach of human

thought. From this standpoint the working of God in nature (not of "Nature" itself) is a miracle. Though a common annual experience, the *ultimate* cause lies hidden from human investigation.

When we come to think of man's origin we are right up against the miracle question. Even the most modern thought can only produce two alternative hypotheses—creation or spontaneous generation. Both of these, being contrary to our experience and beyond our investigation, qualify as miracles. As Professor Bettex (*Modern Science and Christianity*, trans. E. K. Simpson), speaking of unbelieving scientists, has pointed out, "Men do not escape the miraculous, however far in space and time they may relegate it; even the materialist believes in it, sworn enemy to the supernatural though he be. Not, indeed, in those which occurred 1,900 years ago and were confirmed by the testimony of many credible witnesses, numbers of whom joyfully laid down their lives for the truth of that testimony; but, forsooth, in others which are alleged to have happened millions of years back, and were observed by no eye-witness who could accredit their genuineness. To avoid believing in creation he believes in an unattested spontaneous generation, or imports germs of life at great expense from unknown worlds. He cannot believe that Christ raised a man from the grave, in other words, requickenened an organism that had already been alive; but, then he does believe, to be sure, that organisms were once upon a time generated out of a concourse of atoms. [This was written in days before man had penetrated the atom.] That God should have, for a specific end, opened the mouth of an ass to speak a few words he will never credit; but that an ape, one fine day, began little by little to speak without knowing why and acquired a human larynx—that he can easily accept!"

No examination of miracles is complete without reference to the miracle of conversion. A drunkard, a blasphemer, the most profligate person in the world may, by the grace of God, become a new man in Christ Jesus. No power but God's can bring this about. He commonly uses His own Word for the purpose; witness the miraculous effect of the new impact of the Bible in heathen countries. The old term "a miracle of grace" was no idle tale, and I believe that every true Christian will ultimately acknowledge himself with joy to be just this, "a miracle of grace."

Lt.-Col. L. MERSON DAVIES wrote : This is a valuable paper, citing a large number of notable facts. I, too, have often insisted that the supernatural seems to invade the very heart of what we regard as natural—for how can we explain the fact that, as Bateson remarked long ago, William Shakespeare began as a “mere speck of protoplasm” and nothing was subsequently added which would not equally have served to “build up a baboon or a rat” (*Nature*, August 20th, 1914, p. 641) ? What chemical or other formula could ever explain how the entire human personality, and all the arrangements for building up the human body itself, with its numerous very different (yet intimately correlated) parts and organs, and the countless timing arrangements for producing each in due order, together with the fixation of the whole life cycle of adolescence, maturity and senescence (although no part of the living body is ever more than seven years old), can be present in a single initial cell ? I asked Joseph Needham this question, when reviewing (*Nineteenth Century*, Aug., 1943, Vol. CXXXIV, pp. 77–84) his large work on *Biochemistry and Morphogenesis*. He never attempted to answer it ; nor did any of his colleagues at Cambridge who, I was told by one of them, discussed this review with interest. Yet, although the utterly inexplicable marvel of reproduction occurs daily, in all parts of the world, we think nothing of it. In short, it is not the intrinsic mystery of a happening which usually impresses us, but only its abnormality. Thus, the story of Jonah and the whale is often cited as a peculiarly incredible miracle ; although (as I have elsewhere shown) it may not have involved more than God’s Providence, the whole being explicable on purely “natural” lines.

As regards spiritism, I would recall that Dr. Schofield himself affirmed the supernatural nature of many of its phenomena, while deprecating resort to it ; and the Bible testifies to its essentially evil supernatural character—both Old Testament and New Testament denouncing it as abhorrent to God and calling those who practice it an abomination to Him (Deut. 18 : 12).

Again : while Christians should let no denominational trifles—as, e.g., between Anglicans, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, Baptists, etc.—mar their cordial relations with each other as fellow-believers in the Gospel, the Bible insists that they should never compromise with those who deny the Gospel essentials. A Unitarian, for

instance, is most definitely not a Christian—denying, as he does the Incarnation of the very Son of God—and should be countenanced by no genuine Christian (*cf.* 2 John 7-11).

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

May I, first of all, take this opportunity of saying that I have indeed felt it a great privilege to present this paper to the Institute, and I would thank the members for the kind way in which they have received it.

Turning to the points which have been raised by the members, I have little to add, but I would like to make my meaning clear upon one or two matters which have been referred to in the discussion.

I acknowledge Dr. White's comments upon the changing attitude of the medical profession, and I agree that my comment as to the neglect of modern "miracles" by that profession, and its refuge in what I called the "dubious distinction" between organic and functional disease would have been more accurate fifteen or twenty years ago than it is to-day. One still finds the distinction made, however, and in connection with our present subject it always seems to me that its weakness is that it is sometimes only in retrospect that it is invoked to explain some happening otherwise unaccountable by conventional scientific thought.

I do not believe, nor have I intended to convey, that the healing miracles of our Lord could be explained upon psychological lines alone and I should like to make it clear that my comment that psychology feels towards the meaning of faith in the word "suggestibility" does not mean that I would by any means equate faith with suggestibility. What I do believe is that there is some relation between the two. I think this can be discerned in a negative way. The unfaith which grieved the heart of Jesus was "hardness of heart," a closing of the mind against His message, a refusal of the imagination even to allow the possibility of its being true. In the same way, it is possible to close the mind against suggestion, and a patient can thus refuse co-operation in his own treatment. But the faith of which we, as Christians, speak must go far beyond mere suggestibility. It is imaginative trust in a living Lord.

It is a puzzling fact, however, that where a ministry of healing has been active, such as that described by Spread in his *Stretching*

Forth Thy Hand to Heal, the benefits obtained have been quite unpredictable. Sometimes the strongest faith seems unrewarded, whilst the half-sceptical have been healed. We have to reserve our judgment and wait with patience and humility for more information. Almost any generalisation we might make as to the nature of healing faith would be likely to be disproved by the facts.

The subject of "nature miracles" is a difficult one, on which I do not feel that I have anything to offer that would be either new or of assistance to members of the Institute, and for this reason I confined my remarks to healing miracles. There are some events in the Bible record which, as has been said, appear to be explicable as natural events providentially synchronised with human needs. I have never been very happy about these explanations, however, and I think the happenings in question must be left to individual interpretation and the measure of each man's faith.

In conclusion, I would again express my thanks to the Institute and to the members for receiving this paper.