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Owen F. Cummings

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contemporary
thinking about
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Though miracles do not excite much interest in the halls of the academy, they are not only part and parcel of the Christian tradition, but they also engage the interest of ordinary Christians from time to time, perhaps especially when they find themselves in particularly difficult circumstances, for example, in the situation of serious illness. Theologian Hans Küng has written about miracles with sensitivity: “I do not want to violate the religious feelings of anyone for whose belief in God the miracles understood literally are important. I want to give a helpful answer to those modern men and women for whom the miracles are an obstacle to their faith.”¹

His project, therefore, has to do with presenting an approach to the miraculous for modern people who find the notion of the miraculous problematic for their Christian faith. That is very clear. Right away, Küng describes the difference between a biblical approach to reality during the times when the Scriptures were written and a contemporary approach. “People did not think scientifically, and so they did not understand the miracles as breaking the laws of nature; they did not understand them as a violation of seamless causal connections. So nowhere in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is a distinction made between miracles that correspond to the laws of nature and others that break them. For every event through which God revealed his power was regarded at that time as a miracle, as a ‘sign,’ as a mighty act of God. God was at work everywhere, the creator and primal ground.”² This is a helpful distinction. From this broad perspective and in the light of historical and literary-critical approaches to the Bible, miracles understood as breaking the laws of nature cannot be demonstrated, “and those who think they can be demonstrated bear the burden of

1 Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things, Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 151.

2 *Ibid.*, 151-152.

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proof.”³ Küng’s conclusion, therefore, concerning miracles is this: “The miracles stand in the Bible as metaphors, just as in poetry metaphors too do not set out to overturn the laws of nature.”⁴ This perspective generates an understanding of miracle as not in competition with the scientific and technological understanding of reality. Narratives about miracles are meant to be pointers to God’s presence and action in the world, metaphors in Küng’s words, and, moreover, pointers that require faith in God as their ground. Miracles are not to be regarded as sheerly objective, neutral demonstrations of the reality of God. Rather, they are faith-narratives indicating to believers that the God to whom they are committed is a God who is involved in the *nexus* of human affairs, and not a God who lives serenely on a supra-mundane plane, as it were. “(The miracles) proclaim not an unchanging unworldly and unhistorical God who unfeelingly leaves the world and human beings to their fate, but a God who gets involved with the destinies of the world, and commits himself for people and for individuals ... a God who does not leave the world and human beings alone, who does not make history a dark, ominous fate for people by the connection of events that can be recognized in faith.”⁵ So far, so good, but we are still left with a number of questions.

Needless to say, of course, Küng’s understanding raises the question of *how* God acts in the world. Eschewing an external, anthropomorphic and interventionist view of God as “controlling” or “guiding” events, Küng advocates an understanding of God in terms of a modern evolutionary understanding of reality in which God as Spirit is in the world and the world is in God, a view of God as transcendence in immanence. “God’s spirit works in the regular structures of the world but is not identical with them.”⁶ In these words Küng is able to affirm God’s utter and transcendent priority while simultaneously affirming his immanence in creation. God’s Spirit is not at work in gaps in the world process but everywhere, and so there is no competition in that sense between God and creation. God and the world are not two competing causalities. Rather God and creation are, panentheistically we might say, in each other, transcendence in immanence. This leads Küng to the conclusion that “most miracles take place for believers not in the cosmos but in the human heart, where God’s spirit is at work.”⁷

We are nevertheless still left with the question of *how* God’s Spirit is at work, a question that is not capable of being answered with exactitude because we are always when speaking of God and

3 Ibid., 152.

4 Ibid., 153.

5 Ibid., 153-154.

6 Ibid., 156.

7 Ibid., 158.

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the things of God dealing with mystery. Let's proceed by looking at various models of miracle.

MIRACLES AS A VIOLATION OF THE LAWS OF NATURE.

To help advance the discussion of the miraculous in contemporary theology it may be useful to categorize miracle in three ways: as a violation of the laws of nature, as coincidence, and as transforming awareness of the divine. The philosopher of religion John Gaskin offers a nuanced definition of "miracle": "An event of religious significance, brought about by God or a god, or by some other visible or invisible rational agent with sufficient power, *either* in violation of the laws of nature (the 'violation concept') *or* as a striking coincidence within the laws of nature (the 'coincidence concept')." ⁸ Gaskin goes on to comment on various aspects of his definition. First, a miracle is characterized as "an event of religious significance." A miracle cannot be simply a sort of magical act, or an unexplained event in nature. These do not have specifically religious significance. A religiously significant event is one which illustrates a moral or religious teaching, or is in harmony with what is taken to be the character of God. A miracle reveals to us something about God, at least in Western religious traditions, and so somehow is a form of God's self-disclosure or manifestation. Second, a miracle is "brought about by God or a god." In other words, a miracle is an event that cannot be explained by reference to any natural process or power. It is an event that cannot be explained in any of the normal reasoning and analysis of science. Third, a miracle comes about "by some other visible or invisible rational agent with sufficient power." This seems a little strange on the surface, but Gaskin explains what he means by this: "It allows for the theoretical possibility ... that the spirit of a dead person, or an angel, or even an unusual corporeal being could, by itself, bring about what we would, on other grounds, want to call a miracle." ⁹ Probably he is referring to miracles that are said to have come about through the agency of a saint or an angel – both of whom would be 'in heaven' – or by a holy person, "an unusual corporeal being," here on earth. And, of course, in the Christian tradition, there are many narratives testifying to this conviction.

In Gaskin's definition a miracle may occur "in violation of the laws of nature." Without going into very specific detail, a law of nature for him means "what happens in a regular and predictable way." ¹⁰ A miracle occurs when an event violates what we know about normal processes in the world in such a way that no other

⁸ John C. A. Gaskin, *The Quest for Eternity* ((Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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explanation can be found. Of course, this invites the criticism, well-founded in the history of science, that we cannot know absolutely everything about the laws of nature. As science makes progress, what was taken to be a law of nature in the past may require revision in the present or the future. One thinks of, for example, of an atomic bomb. The explosion of an atomic bomb would have been an infringement of the laws of nature according to nineteenth-century physics, but certainly is not now. Gaskin is well aware of this and so he notes that “a law of nature will be violated by a counter-instance which is not experimentally repeatable.”¹¹ He gives the example of Jesus turning water into wine in chapter two of *St. John’s Gospel*, although he knows that in some interpretations this is taken to be a symbolic narrative rather than a factual report. Changing water into wine is not something that is experimentally repeatable, although Gaskin logically acknowledges, in alignment with his understanding of a law of nature, that “It may indeed be experimentally unrepeatable, but it is just possible that no one has yet been able to reassemble all the natural conditions which would constitute repeating the ‘experiment’.”¹²

Another difficulty occurs with the violation concept. If God is understood to be the Creator of the world, and, therefore, is somehow immanent in the world or self-expressed in the world, why does God have to interfere in it? Is God somehow not already there? Furthermore, as noted by Ninian Smart, perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek: “If somehow the creation has gone bad, why does he not interfere more often? Feeding the five thousand was good, but there are five hundred million or more who are hungry today.”¹³ Admittedly, if God was constantly interfering with the cosmos, violating the laws of nature, this would lead to certain chaos in our ordered understanding of the world.

THE COINCIDENCE CONCEPT OF MIRACLE

The coincidence concept of miracle is best illustrated from a well-known example offered by the philosopher R. F. Holland.¹⁴ An express train stops just a few feet from a child whose toy has become stuck on a level crossing. If the train had not stopped, the child would have been killed. However, the train stopped because the train driver fainted because of some medical condition and, when his hand ceased to guide the control lever, the train’s brakes were applied automatically. The child’s mother thanks God for this

11 *Ibid.*, 139.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Ninian Smart, *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 40.

14 Holland’s example has appeared in a number of places. Probably, the most accessible is in D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 155f.

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“miracle”, even when she understood the circumstances that led up to the train’s stopping.

The fundamental problem with the coincidence concept is this; while such coincidences obviously happen, there is no necessary, “objective,” religiously significant factor involved, except, of course, for the mother’s personal testimony in Holland’s example. The improbable event of the coincidence concept, seen by two different observers, may yield quite different interpretations. Staying with Holland’s example, the child’s mother observing the event “sees” it as the hand of God at work. Someone else observing the same event, may simply recognize it as a very welcome coincidence.

MIRACLE AS TRANSFORMING AWARENESS OF GOD

In thinking about miracle in this context miracle is, first of all, awareness of the divine. For the religious believer certain events and experiences can lead to a deepening awareness of the presence of God, and an awareness that can be transforming for the subjects concerned. These events and experiences are usually very ordinary, for example, a glorious sunrise or sunset, the changing seasons of the year, the sheer beauty of the natural world in all its profuse generosity, the birth of a baby. The religious believer may be led through such experiences to the conclusion that the natural world/creation, including himself, is in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ “charged with the grandeur of God.”¹⁵ If one adds to such experiences a developing understanding of the workings of science, such experiences are not reduced in wonder but rather expanded. Philosopher Michael Novak writes: “For those who feel gratitude to their Creator for the wonders with which he abundantly sprinkles his creation, greater scientific knowledge of the elaborate workings of his artistry does not diminish their gratitude.”¹⁶ This approach is most valuable. However, the Enlightenment has happened and other more probative questions concerning the miraculous will not go away. For many people “miracle” must mean something more than what is religiously significant to the believer, something more than a deepening awareness of the divine.

A CONTRIBUTION FROM ROWAN D. WILLIAMS

In a small but excellent book, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* Anglican theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has a brief but helpful treatment

15 ‘God’s Grandeur’ in W.H. Gardner, ed., *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manly Hopkins* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 27.

16 Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Tell Me Why* (New York and London: Pocket Books, 1998), 170.

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of miracles. He opens his discussion with an experience: “Why are some prayers apparently answered and some not? I remember a vivid example from years back, when someone who had been involved in a very upbeat and confident charismatic prayer group asked why God should be thanked for finding parking spaces for members of the prayer group when he couldn’t be bothered to sort out the conflict in Northern Ireland.”¹⁷ Williams remarks that it is a very good question, but also that, if a genuine answer is to be found, some further thinking about God’s almightiness must be undertaken. Without going into all aspects of Williams’s model of God’s almightiness, we may grasp the essence of it in these words: “I have been trying to suggest the picture of a God whose almighty power is more of a steady swell of loving presence, always there at work in the center of everything that is, opening the door to a future even when we can see no hope.”¹⁸

Williams goes on to paraphrase/summarize some thinking of St. Augustine on the question of miracle – “that miracles were really just natural processes speeded up a bit, ‘fast-forwarded.’ This may be a bit too simple; but Augustine had got hold of something that many thinkers of the Middle Ages followed through in different ways. If God’s action is always at work around us, if it’s always ‘on hand,’ so to speak, we shouldn’t be thinking of God’s action and the processes of the world as two competing sorts of thing, jostling for space. But what if there were times when certain bits of the world’s processes came together in such a way that the whole cluster of happenings became a bit more open to God’s final purposes? What if the world were sometimes a bit more ‘transparent’ to the underlying action of God?”¹⁹ Williams’s way of thinking is especially helpful. For Williams “God has – mysteriously – made a world in which what human beings do can help or hinder what he achieves at any point in the world’s history; when we give him space, through our prayerful consent to and identification with what he wants, things may happen that were otherwise unpredictable. A prejudice against any sort of miracle may be a buried uncertainty about the unfailing presence and action of the Creator, about that burning intensity of divine action that is always around us.”²⁰ Williams points to past miraculous occurrences. He points to the virginal conception of Jesus and to the resurrection of Jesus as illustrative of his integrated point of view. Though he does not develop this point of view at any great length, his remarks are worth noting. “Just what would the trust of Mary have had to be like for the door of life itself to open

17 Rowan D. Williams, *Tokens of Trust: And Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 43-44.

18 *Ibid.*, 44.

19 *Ibid.*, 44-45.

20 *Ibid.*, 48-49.

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in her body? What must the faith of Jesus and his closeness to God have been that death was unable to close its doors on him and relegate him to the past?"²¹ What excellent questions, stimulating us to further probing at the beginning of Jesus' life and at his end, as it were? The problem is not so much the past but the present. Prayerful people, genuinely committed to be disciples may open themselves to the miraculous activity of God, but the miracle for which they were hoping, making space for God's transparency to emerge, does not actually happen.

THOMAS JAY OORD

Thomas Jay Oord is a process theologian. His ultimate terms of reference, therefore, are to be found within the metaphysical categories of process theism, that form of theological thinking built upon the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Fundamental to his point of view is that God is never a God of coercion, but a God who persuades and invites through self-emptying/kenotic love. If the word "intervention" means that God enters into history or creation from outside, for Oord this is impossible. "An omnipresent God never needs to intervene, because God is always already present in every situation. God is never 'outside,' in the sense that creation functions independently of God's continual creating and sustaining. The God already present to all things at all times does not need to interrupt creation to act miraculously."²² If this impasse is to be avoided, it is necessary to find a more adequate way of thinking about God's love and power than that which is or traditionally has been widespread.

This leads Oord to think of miracles as "moments or events in which the loving activity of an almighty God dramatically affects a creature or situation. We should deem these dramatic moments 'miracles,' because they promote overall well-being and remind us that God sometimes works in spectacular, but non-coercing, ways."²³ We need, he believes, the ongoing witness of God's miraculous love constantly to remind us of God's being at work in creation and thus to engender human hope. God's love varies both in intensity and form and should not be understood as "a steady-state, impersonal, or homogeneous force." Alternatively, "God lovingly interacts with creatures, gives and receives, and influences and is influenced by others."²⁴ Thus, Oord argues that God's loving activity "oscillates," that is to say that "God's will is more or less expressed as creatures respond well or poorly to God's freedom-

21 Ibid., 48.

22 Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 153.

23 Ibid., 147-148.

24 Ibid., 148.

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providing love.”²⁵ To some extent his meaning is coincident with that of Williams. This takes Oord to his understanding of miracle. “When creatures promote overall well-being in an extraordinary way, God’s love, which inspired and empowered this extraordinary behavior, is most evident. We witness a miracle... While God always loves, some events display that love spectacularly and others do not.”²⁶

Of course, this seems to lead us to a dilemma. Does God choose to love some persons and situations more than others so that miracles occur? Oord naturally eschews this point of view. God’s nature as love is simply never absent. But God’s loving causal effectiveness “oscillates as creatures cooperate to greater or lesser degree... God’s oscillating and diverse love depends in part upon God’s own essence as love, in part upon the particular forms and expressions God chooses when loving to the utmost, and in part upon creaturely responses.”²⁷ Given this understanding, then, “Miracles reveal the profound love of God and profound creaturely cooperation.”²⁸ As examples he points to the following gospel miracles: Mark 5:34, Matthew 9:29, Mark 8:22-25. In each instance there is an element of creaturely cooperation in the narrative. So, Oord concludes that “Lack of creaturely cooperation keeps miracles from occurring.”²⁹ The supreme gospel instance that demonstrates his conclusion is afforded by Matthew 13:58, in which Jesus cannot do many miracles in his hometown because of the lack of cooperation, that is to say, “because of their unbelief.”

Thinking and reflecting within the ambience of process theology, Oord maintains that, however difficult it may be empirically to observe, all creation has a measure of freedom, of creaturely cooperation with God. This is how he puts it: “Being lovingly present to all things means that God is also present to bodily organs, cells, non-humans, and less complex creatures. Just as God lovingly provides freedom/agency to humans, God also provides freedom and agency to other complex and simple creatures and organisms. Of course, the agency and perhaps freedom of simple organisms and cells is vastly less than what humans are given. But even at the micro level, God does not coerce. When simpler organisms, cells, and other creatures respond well to God’s loving activities, miracles can occur.”³⁰

One has to respect the care with which Oord has laid out his theological perspective, based on the ever-present but non-

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 149.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 149-150.

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coercive and non-interventionist love of God. The freedom of humans in cooperation with this loving God makes much sense in understanding the miraculous, and yet it is not free of problems. Insofar as one can make a judgment “from the outside,” as it were, in a given set of circumstances, one can find human persons seemingly fully cooperative with the love of God, and hoping for a miracle, for example, in life-threatening illness situations. Usually that hoped for miracle does not happen. Is it the case that “simpler organisms, cells, and other creatures” necessarily present in such situations are not responding well to God’s loving activities? This is very difficult to accept.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOHN MACQUARRIE

The Scottish Anglican theologian John Macquarrie (1919-2007) was one of the most respected and influential English-language theologians of the twentieth century, and not only in his own Anglican Communion. He had a profound influence on generations of Catholic theologians and seminarians.³¹ His approach to theology is both accessible and fairly readily intelligible.³² His theology also has some family resemblances to process theology of which Thomas Jay Oord was our example.

“In a minimal sense, a miracle is an event that excites wonder.” With this opening remark Macquarrie is referring to the linguistic origins of the English word miracle, that is, to the Latin verb *mirari*, meaning “to wonder, to wonder at.” In a religious context, however, there is more to it than simply the excitement of wonder. “It is believed that God is in the event some special way, that he is the author of it, and intends to achieve some special end by it.” In other words a miracle is understood in Christian terms as “an act of God.”

In earlier sections of his *Principles of Christian Theology* Macquarrie recognizes that “God is present and active in the whole world-process,” and, therefore, “it is clear that some happenings count for more than others, or are more important or significant than others.” He does not wish to affirm that somehow everything is somehow miraculous. He puts it quite succinctly: “Even if all events belong within a continuous series, some stand out within the series as critical moments in its unfolding.” To describe every event as somehow miraculous is to evacuate the concept of the miraculous of any genuine meaning.

Equally, Macquarrie does not want to endorse a view of the

31 For general background see Owen F. Cummings, *John Macquarrie, A Master of Theology* (New York-Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002).

32 All references will be to John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner’s, 1977), especially to pages 247-253. To avoid the tedium of constant reference to this text in endnotes, no other page references will be made.

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miraculous as a break in the natural order and due to supernatural intervention. He regards such a view as mythological. A modern understanding of science and history makes such an interventionist view of the miraculous incredible. Inevitably, the Christian theologian comes up against “problematic events” which, though well attested, cannot be accounted for in terms of “immanent causal factors.”³³ Reports of healings, for example in the New Testament, are a good illustration of such problematic events. Macquarrie regards the healing miracles of the New Testament as more likely and credible than the so-called “nature” miracles. “The reason for our assigning the healing miracles this higher degree of probability is that the same kind of events are reported today from Lourdes and elsewhere....” Macquarrie offers some elucidation; “We cannot, in our present state of knowledge concerning nature and man, explain how these events come about.” He consistently refuses to see them as “the irruption of a supernatural agency.”

He comes at his understanding of miracle, then, not “in some extraordinary publicly observable event, but in God’s presence and self-manifestation in the event. This is not something publicly observable, nor is it something that requires some prodigy, or breach of nature, for its occurrence.” The essence of the phenomenon is this presence and self-manifestation of God. Since God’s acting or presence cannot be proved by publicly observable events, miracle has a certain ambiguous character. “From one point of view, the event is seen as a perfectly ordinary event; from another point of view, it is an event that opens up Being and becomes a vehicle for Being’s revelation or grace or judgment or address.” Immediately, of course, this raises the question whether a miracle really is reduced to someone’s “subjective apprehension” of it.

As he goes further into the matter, Macquarrie introduces the notion of “focusing.” This is what he means by focusing: “God’s presence and activity are everywhere and always; yet we experience these intensely in particular concrete happenings, in which, as it were, they have been focused.” Again, “focusing” raises the question of whether the “subjective apprehension” of miracle is the all-determining factor. Macquarrie, however, recognizes both the objective and the subjective factor. “As revelation is a movement of Being in us, and as symbols are genuinely kin to what they illuminate, so miracle is the approach and self-disclosure of Being to us in and with and through the focusing event, bringing grace or revelation or judgment as the case may be.”

The supreme miracle in Christian faith for Macquarrie is the

33 For details of an alternative approach to Macquarrie’s, including a critique of Macquarrie, see Joseph Houston, *Reported Miracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83-102.

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incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. From one point of view, Jesus was simply another human being. But he was so much more for the disciples and for those who followed him. "But to the disciples, this life was the focusing of the presence and action of God. Faith perceived the dimension which is not publicly observable, and could not be." While faith cannot be proved or disproved simply by observation or argument, in this instance of the incarnation "it is confirmed in the community's subsequent life of faith, where the miracle of incarnation interprets the community's existence, lends meaning to it, strengthens its being." In other words, he suggests that the ongoing, deeper, continually enriched life of the community "confirms" the reality of the miracle of the incarnation. "The sacraments, for instance, are such *foci*." Through the example of the Eucharist which he goes on to offer, the community finds its life ongoing, deeper, and continually enriched. This is why "talk of the 'miracle of the Mass' is not just superstitious talk but points to the focusing of the divine presence of the Eucharist." "Miracle is not magic, but the focusing of holy Being's presence and action amid the events, things, and persons of the world, and this has the highest reality."

CONCLUSION

Understanding miracles is problematic. In this all too brief essay we have looked at various modern ways of thinking about miracles, trying to weigh the advantages and challenges of the varying perspectives. The one thing that is clear from the analysis is the almost uniform rejection of an interventionist model of God's action in creation. God is present in his creation and so he does not come to act where he was not already active. This is especially the case with Küng, Williams and Oord, though they articulate God's active presence in creation in somewhat contrasting ways. In my judgment the point of view of John Macquarrie is the most adequate. Not only does he eschew the model of interventionism or supernaturalism, but in his notion of miracle as "focused" expression of the divine presence he combines, in a non-reductionist fashion, a subjective appreciation of miracle with objective occurrence, even when that admits of no cogent "natural" explanation. Macquarrie's understanding invites theologians and pastors to a much more nuanced perspective that can only be rewarding for the churches and people whom they serve.