a critical review of modern life

kategoria

5

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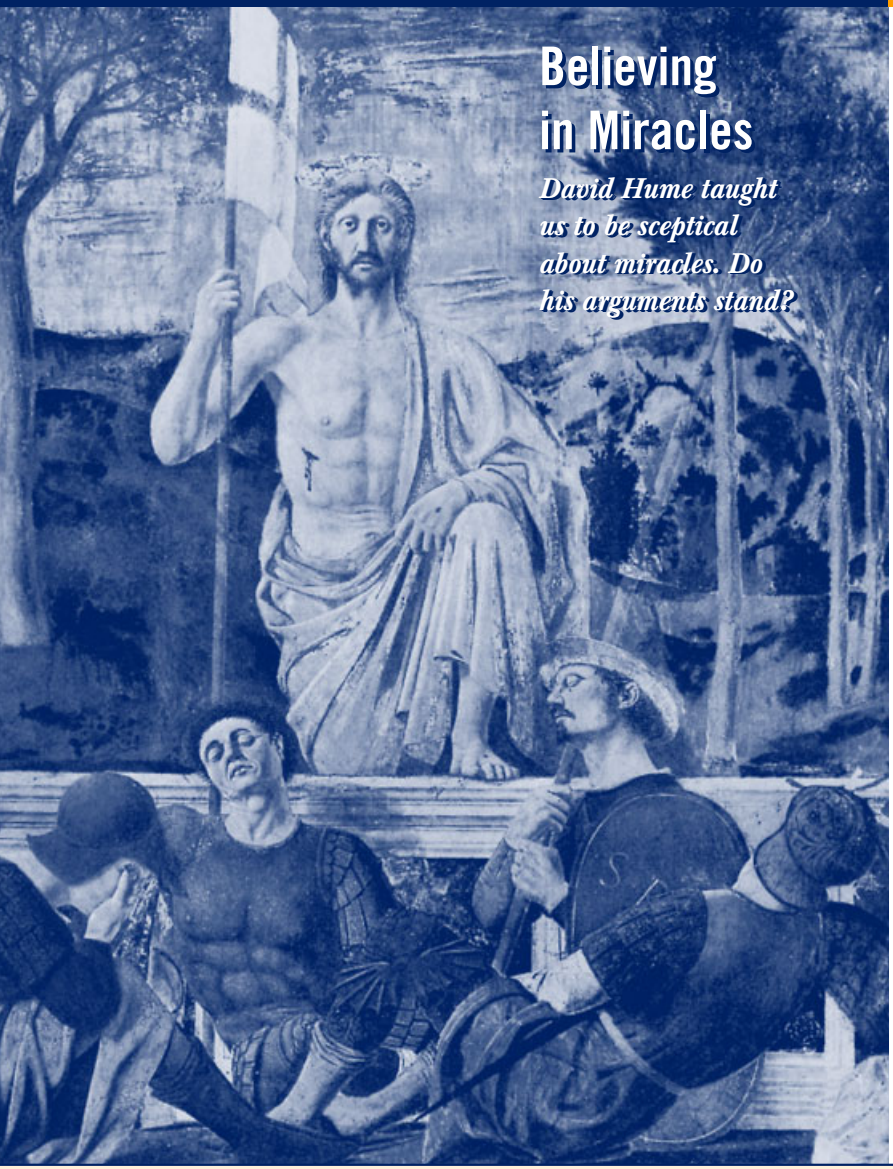
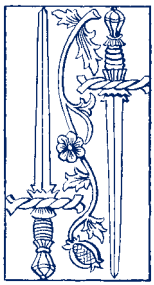


Believing in Miracles

David Hume taught us to be sceptical about miracles. Do his arguments stand?

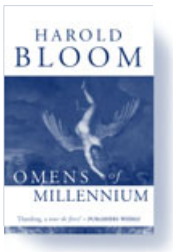
TAROT CARDS

A case of mistaken history?



HAROLD BLOOM

Gnosticism's prophet opposed



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contents

editorial

Correspondence concerning astrology has been considerable since the last issue of *kategoria,* much of it along the same lines: how does one convey the problems in astrology to a person who does not care about 'truth' as such? In what is loosely termed our 'postmodern' society, it seems that too many people do not care whether a system such as astrology has any basis in reality; if it's true for them, if it gives them meaning, that's enough.

There is indeed a part of our society so deeply impressed by alternative views of rationality that it becomes very difficult to conduct a conversation about what is real or true. There are also those who have absorbed astrology, not as a simple predictive system or a way of determining personality, but as an entire philosophy and mystical understanding of the universe. (The same can be said of tarot cards, another example of irrational belief which is examined in this issue.) The *kategoria* article was not addressed to them; it remains a future task to tackle fundamental questions of rationality itself and alternative understandings of reality. At the moment, however, we can take on a somewhat simpler task: addressing those who still believe in truth on an everyday level and are being misled by society's widespread acceptance of a basically false system. At the same time, we issue a challenge to those who publicly condemn Christianity, or the New Testament, as *false*—on little or no evidence—while remaining silent about a system that really

is demonstrably false, and which runs rampant in the publicly accepted media.

Rejection of historical Christianity still (and often) uses Hume's arguments against miracles. David Hume, eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, wrote a fairly short essay arguing against the miracles of Christianity—or at least, against the rationality of believing them—which has endured with remarkable fame ever since. As Roger White demonstrates in this issue, Hume's attack fails in basic logic. Moreover, it seems that Hume was actually attacking a particular philosophical tradition in the mistaken belief that this was Christianity. It is the philosophical deist, not the theist, who looks for miracles as evidence for the supernatural. For the deist, a miracle is the point at which the remote God puts his finger into the clockwork of the universe and makes something spectacular happen (without, we hope, damaging the cogs). The theist however—or at least the theist committed to the Bible's own description of miracles—can be much more matter-of-fact about it. If God upholds everything, then a miracle is no more spectacular, or at least no more supernatural, than what we usually describe as 'the laws of nature'. It may be significant—and usually is, in the biblical narratives—but not peculiarly supernatural.

If Christianity is to be attacked, at least let it be attacked for what it does say, not for what it does not. We may at the same time ask why Hume and so many since him have been convinced by his arguments, which fail on sheer logic and attack the wrong target. Is an atheistic bias showing, in the over-willingness to be uncritical about arguments that prove what you want proved?

The obsession with proof of the supernatural continues to this day. In the nineteenth century we had scientific gentlemen conducting tests on mesmerism and spiritualism, searching for evidence of the miraculous; today we have television shows about unexplained events. It appears to be an easy testing ground for spiritual belief. If the miraculous event can be proved to have happened, then religion is true,

if it can be proved to be false, then religion is not—all at no moral cost to us. The Bible, however, is not impressed with such games. It recognises there is no such thing as an unbiased observer, dispassionately weighing up evidence. Popular obsession with the spectacular has very little to do with God, who is not a sideshow special but a ruler who requires a certain response from us. Perhaps that is why it is so much easier to argue about proving, or disproving, miracles; looking at the Bible for what it says is far too uncomfortable.

Kirsten Birkett
Editor

David Hume

kategoria 1997 *number 5* pp. 9-26

Miracles and rational belief

Roger White

Ever since David Hume proclaimed that "no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion",[1] the subject of miraculous events has been of fascination to philosophers. Have any miracles ever occurred? It would seem on the face of it that such a question can only be answered by a careful analysis of the evidence for specific cases. Yet Hume and others argue that such inquiry is pointless from the start. It is argued that it is impossible even *in principle* to have sufficient evidence for a miracle. Moreover, even if we can establish a certain event has taken place, we can draw no supernatural conclusions, hence we cannot establish that it is 'miraculous' in any interesting sense. Rather than defend the occurrence and significance of any particular miracle, my focus will be on these preliminary philosophical issues. My purpose is to defend the appropriateness of empirical investigation of miracle reports by

1 David Hume, *On Human Nature and the Understanding*, Collier books, New York, 1962, p. 133.

arguing that we can, in principle, have sufficient evidence to establish the occurrence of a miracle, and that such knowledge can provide evidence for religious beliefs.

First we should be clear on the sort of events we are concerned with. But let's note that there is little to be gained by sceptics or believers fussing over the definition of the term 'miracle'. When all has been said and done about defining the term 'miracle', nothing has been said about what has or has not actually happened. The question of whether or not, given certain definitions of terms, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is labelled a 'miracle' is insignificant—you can call it a 'banana' if you wish—what is interesting is *did it actually happen?* And this cannot be answered by playing with words.

For instance, it is often suggested that for an event to count as genuinely miraculous it must involve the violation of a law of nature by an act of direct intervention by God.[2] This has led to much confusion and pointless discussion. For instance, you can come up against logical impossibility. You can define a miracle as a violation of a law of nature, and then argue that since true laws of nature describe what actually takes place, miracles by definition do not occur. While this very conveniently removes the possibility of the miraculous (on this particular conception of miracles) it tells us nothing about whether Jesus rose from the dead. It merely tells us that the term 'miracle' can be so defined as to be logically incoherent, like 'square circle'. Such a definition adds nothing to our discussion of whether particular claimed events really took place. I propose to sidestep these conceptual issues by focusing on a paradigm case of a miracle rather than offer any definition. The resurrection of Jesus surely counts as a miracle if anything does, and it is events of this type that we are concerned with in any serious debate about miracles.

It has been suggested by others that although miracles

2 This definition derives from Hume's classic discussion in *On Human Nature*, *ibid*. Interestingly, Hume sees no conceptual difficulties with this definition. He is concerned with our evidence for the events themselves, rather than the conceptual and metaphysical issues.

are not *logically* impossible, they are *physically* impossible. That is, it is claimed that miracles necessarily involve overriding true laws by a supernatural power. *But*, it is then argued, how can we know that any event is really an act of God, and not something which nature could bring about *unaided*, so to speak? Antony Flew presents the point in this manner:

> The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. On the contrary, the new discovery is simply a reason for his conceding that he had previously been wrong in thinking that the proposition thus confuted, did indeed express a true law; it is also a reason for his resolving to search again for the law which really does obtain.[3]

It is, however, not true that the scientist has "no ground whatever" for coming to conclusions about the supernatural in such a case. It may be that to salvage the natural law requires just too many *ad hoc* adjustments. For example, the natural law that people die and stay dead may be amended by the clause 'except when the person's name begins with the letter J, he claims to be God and founds a major western religion.' Then the scientist may proclaim, 'So there, it is not really a miracle after all, for it fits well with the laws of nature!' In practice, of course, a competent scientist will find it extremely difficult to make such a bizarre amendment; or to amend such general laws at all, without overturning vast amounts of well-established theory.[4]

3 A. Flew, 'Miracles', *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1972, vol 5, p. 349.

4 This point has been developed further by several philosophers including R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 23-33; M. Boden, 'Miracles and scientific explanation', *Ratio*, 1967, *11*, pp. 137-44; and R. H. Holland, 'The miraculous', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1965, *2*, pp. 46-51.

12

Objections such as these have led to a type of double-dealing in arguments about miracles. Broadly speaking, there have been two main arguments levelled against the belief in miracles. Firstly, there is the epistemological problem raised by Hume: that miracles by their very nature are so improbable that no amount of evidence could possibly justify belief in one (we will be examining this problem shortly). Secondly, it is argued that science is advancing, so what may now seem to be an inexplicable event will one day be explained scientifically, and shown not to be improbable in the circumstances.[5] Many philosophers have seen these problems as the two horns of a dilemma which makes rational belief in miracles impossible. The believer in miracles is thought to be in a real fix. Caught between, on the one hand, the inductive strength of scientific evidence ruling out miraculous events, and on the other, the onward march of science and its ability to explain all phenomena no matter how strange, there seems to be no place left for miracles. This leaves the sceptic with a happy 'heads-I-win-tails-you-lose' argument against the miraculous. Events which *do* seem miraculous can be dismissed as being too improbable to be rationally believed to have occurred; and if they have occurred, well, science can explain them anyway.[6]

However although either one of the above arguments may apply to a *particular* event, they cannot *both* apply to the *same* event. The following illustration should make this clear. Suppose a friend were to say to me "I saw a faith healer last night and my back is feeling a lot better!" Although I am sceptical that a supernatural event has taken place, I am hardly going to respond "No! I can't believe that your back feels better". I have no doubt that her back feels better, but I do not believe this is a miracle. Given our modern under-

5 See for example G. Robinson, 'Miracles', *Ratio*, 1967, *9*, pp. 155-66; and M. L. Diamond, 'Miracles', *Religious Studies*, 1972, *9*, pp. 307-24.

6 The heads-I-win-tails-you-lose approach is a surprisingly popular one. See for example Flew 'Miracles', *op. cit.*, pp. 347-50; Mackie *op. cit.*, pp. 13-29 and J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1956, pp. 450-54.

standing of psychosomatic illness, the event is far from inexplicable and in fact quite probable, and it is for this reason that I have no doubt that it happened. But now suppose tomorrow she says to me "I flew to the moon and back this morning by flapping my arms". In this case it would be ludicrous to say "Did you? I'm sure there is an adequate scientific explanation for that". Rather, I would be extremely sceptical that the event took place, and the reason for the scepticism is precisely that not only is there no scientific explanation for it, but it seems highly improbable that there could even be one, given our present understanding of physics. If I believed it at all likely that such an event falls under the scope of our present or future scientific understanding (in such a way as to increase its probability), then I would have less reason to be so sceptical about it.

The fallacy of the 'heads-I-win-tails-you-lose' argument should be evident. We simply cannot have it both ways. If I am to be sceptical about my friend flying to the moon, I do so on the basis that I have extremely good scientific evidence that it could not happen. As I am presented with more testimonial or empirical evidence that it did happen, I will stubbornly maintain that it is more likely not to have happened, given the scientific evidence against it. The further I am pushed with evidence supporting the event, the stronger must be my insistence that such an event could not be naturally explained, if I am to retain my scepticism. Now *if* (and this is a big if) the evidence became so strong that it was more rational for me to conclude that the event had in fact taken place, then I could not simply leap to the other end of the spectrum and say, "Well yes, so you did fly to the moon, but there must be a perfectly adequate natural explanation for it". For if it were at all probable that such an event could be explained, then I would have no basis by which to be so stubbornly sceptical of the event.

The focus on violations of physical law and divine intervention seems misguided. First, given the statistical nature of modern physical theories it is not at all clear that 'miraculous' events do strictly contradict physical laws—but this renders such events not the least bit less astonishing.

14 A person rising from the dead, or water turning into wine, is highly unusual and amazing however you describe it. Second, it is not clear what is the relevance of the notion of divine intervention. On one view of the relation between God and creation, God is continually controlling and sustaining every part of creation. On this view *every* event is an act of God. All talk of 'overriding of laws' or 'interventions into the natural order' assumes a conception of God and the world which has little relevance in this context. The laws of nature, whatever else we might say about them, can be seen as descriptions of the regular ways in which God acts in the world. A miracle, then, is not a supernatural event in contrast to 'nature'; it is God acting one way as opposed to all the other ways in which he acts. God does not have to poke his fingers into the natural mechanisms of the world to perform a miracle, he merely acts in a way different from the usual course for a specific purpose.

At any rate, we need not dwell on these matters. Christians assert first and foremost that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. The metaphysical details of how this occurred are entirely secondary. There are no interesting difficulties here to pursue. Clearly if there is a God who created the universe and gave human beings life, he would have little difficulty in giving life to a man after his death. Once again, the interesting question here is whether this actually happened and what we can conclude from it.

Objections to miracles

Let us turn then to consider our first serious objection to belief in miracles. In David Hume's classic discussion, we find an intriguing argument that we could not possibly have sufficient evidence that a miracle has occurred. Hume's argument is a matter of balancing probabilities. When we consider testimonial evidence for a miracle, there are broadly speaking, two possible conclusions to draw: (1) The person giving the testimony is lying or has been deceived, or (2) the testimony is correct and the miracle occurred. Now miracles are extremely improbable, so (2) is doubtful; but people are known to lie and be deceived, so (1) is more likely. Hence, as "a wise man…proportions his belief to the

evidence",[7] he should, on the balance of probabilities, believe (1).

But are these probabilities correctly assigned? The crucial aspect of Hume's argument is the use of observed relative frequencies of events to assign probabilities. According to Hume:

> All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments…we must balance the opposite experiments where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.[8]

Taking the case of the resurrection, we know the following two propositions:

(a) All observed dead people have stayed dead
(b) Most, but not all, people tell the truth

These two propositions give a certain probability for the following two:

(a′) Jesus stayed dead
(b′) The disciples spoke truly

Statement (a) confers an extremely high probability on (a′), whereas (b) confers a slightly lower probability on (b′). Hence (a′) is more probable, and should be believed.

This is Hume's argument in a nutshell. It is one that cannot be easily dismissed. Note that Hume's argument is epistemological (dealing with what we can know). He is concerned with the conditions under which it is *reasonable to believe* that a miracle has occurred. He is not making the silly claim that we can know that miracles such as the resurrection are *impossible*. Indeed Hume would be the first to deny this. We should also note that we all do dismiss most reports of miracles for the very reason that, all things considered, it seems more likely that the reporter is deceitful or

7 Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
8 Hume, *ibid.*

deceived than that the event occurred. The question is whether it should *always* turn out that the weight of evidence falls on (1). If that were true, then we need never again consider the evidence for a claimed miracle, as it would always be more likely that people were lying or deceived—although to conclude that we need not look at the evidence would be rather ironic after agreeing that "a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence".

How do we determine whether the balance of probabilities will always lead us to conclude (1)? We need to understand how Hume went about assigning probabilities. The idea behind Hume's approach is that in assigning probabilities to (say) the outcome of an event, we should consider the event as a member of a certain class of similar events, and ask in what proportion of the events of this class was there an outcome of the relevant type. That is, out of all the times this thing was tried, how many times did it happen? The more times it happened in the past, the more likely it is to happen again. This principle has a certain limited application. My confidence that my car will start when I turn the key, should be based in part upon the frequency with which it started upon turning the key in the past.

But Hume's claim that this is all there is to the assignment of probabilities is hopelessly simplistic. The major problem is that of finding the appropriate class of events with which to judge the frequencies of outcomes. Every event is a member of any number of classes of events. Depending on the class, there will be different proportions of a certain type of outcome occurring. So Hume's method does not give us a definite probability for an outcome of an event.

For instance, suppose I am trying to decide whether to take up hang-gliding or lawn bowls. I want to know which is more dangerous, so I determine how many people from each sport have died. It turns out that a greater proportion of people who play lawn bowls have died each year than of those who do hang-gliding. It is more probable, I conclude, that I will die if I take up lawn bowls than if I take up hang-gliding.

However I may be considering the wrong class of events. It might be pointed out that if I take a narrower class of events—namely, a person under thirty playing lawn bowls—only a small proportion of these will be accompanied by death. However, it may turn out that no one under thirty has tried lawn bowls, in which case we will have no data to work with. Of course we want to insist that *if* people under thirty *were* to play lawn bowls, most would survive. But where will our evidence for this come from? Not from statistical data of under-thirty-year-old lawn bowlers, if there are none. Even so, how do I decide that 'under thirty' is the relevant category? It may be important to note the low fatality rate among people under thirty in general, but this alone will not distinguish between the hang-gliding and lawn bowling cases. At any rate, it is not clear whether I should consider the people under thirty throughout the world, or in my house, or those with red hair, or those that don't smoke, and so forth. Clearly our judgements as to which classes of events are relevant for assigning probabilities must involve judgements about the *causally* relevant features of an event. But then of course our judgements concerning causal relations are based in part on observed statistical regularities. In any realistic case, the matter gets exceedingly complex and there is no simple formula for making judgements of probabilities.

My purpose in the preceding discussion has been merely to bring out some of the complexities involved in using observed frequencies of event outcomes to make judgements of probability. Given that there is no systematic method for drawing probabilistic conclusions from frequency data,[9] and indeed it is doubtful that there even could be, it becomes extremely implausible that a conclusion as general and as strong as Hume's could possibly be defended. At any rate,

9 Perhaps there is a notion of probability which is defined in terms of actual relative frequencies of event outcomes. But the notion we are concerned with is that of a *degree of reasonable belief* in the light of evidence, for we are in the end concerned with the rationality of belief in miracles. It is bridging the gap between frequency data and rational belief which is a subtle and complex matter.

18

Hume has certainly given us insufficient grounds for accepting it. We cannot conclude that it is always more likely for people to lie or be deceived, than for a miracle to have occurred.

How to decide whether a miracle is plausible

Hume, then, fails to show that we could not *possibly* have sufficient evidence that a miracle has occurred. That is, he has not shown it is *always* more likely for people to lie or be deceived. This is not surprising, given the strength of the claim; it is hard to prove that anything is *always*, without exception, the case. Nonetheless, the sceptic may still argue that it is extremely *difficult* to establish the occurrence of a miracle. To thoroughly address this point we would need to look at specific cases. Here I will just make some general points about how to approach the matter.

1. Is it likely that a miracle would happen?

If we are presented with a report of a miracle, can we take the report seriously? Is it ever probable that such a thing would be true? The important factor here will be our theological presuppositions. The likelihood of an event such as the resurrection varies greatly relative to different sets of background beliefs. Certain background assumptions, such as the existence of God, may raise the probability of miracles significantly. If I have reason (on other grounds) to believe that Jesus was no ordinary man, my expectancy of his fate after death will be affected. We must take this seriously, for it is often glossed over in discussions of miracles (it is not taken seriously by Hume). It is in an important sense quite unrealistic to discuss whether a miracle happened, without reference to anything else. For *if* God is real, and *if* he promised a messiah who would not be held by the grave, *then* the claim that one particular person rose from the grave becomes more likely. The background beliefs that a person holds make a real difference to assessment of the likelihood of a particular event.

It is only reasonable, then, that an atheist should consider the resurrection extremely unlikely, a theist somewhat

more likely and someone who already believes that Jesus was God incarnate should find the event plausible even before considering further evidence (note such judgements have nothing to do with statistical regularities of past events). The *truth* of whether Jesus rose from the dead is not in any sense relative to what people believe—he either did rise or he didn't. But there is an important sense in which the *rationality* of a person's belief that Jesus rose is relative to her background beliefs. Of course we might raise questions about the truth or rationality of these background beliefs—or we may want to begin to persuade a person to take on certain background beliefs. In any case, we can ask, *given* that she believes this and that, what attitude should she hold to the resurrection?

There are two consequences to this. First, while consideration of the views of others is important in any inquiry, ultimately your judgements must be based on your own background beliefs not anyone else's. This might seem trivial, but one implication is that your success or lack of success in convincing others of your own views should have little bearing on what you come to believe. In special cases, such as when everyone around disagrees with me on one point while we agree on so many others, I might be forced to wonder if my reasoning has gone astray. But this is not the case in most discussions. I might have available to me more information than those around me. We typically find that there are a wide variety of views and people are coming from vastly different backgrounds. It is sometimes insisted that the *burden of proof* rests on those who affirm that miracles have occurred. It is not clear just what this amounts to, but if it entails that one should be able to convince others of a view before one accepts it then this is clearly wrong. My inability to convince someone may be due to a failure to find points of agreement on which to begin discussion. I may simply not know of any argument for my position which begins from assumptions which others accept. Either way, this is of no concern to me in figuring out what is true.

We often speak of *objectivity* as a virtue in inquiry. If by this we mean not being swayed by prejudices and emotions

which we know are not aimed at the truth, then this is good advice. But there is an important sense in which an appropriate line of reasoning is relative to the subject who is reasoning. My judgements are formed by integrating new data into my own view of the world and having it face the tribunal of my own set of background beliefs. These background beliefs are certainly open to revision, but such revisions are made in the light of my overall view of the world. If I believe there is a God who created and controls all of nature, if it strikes me that Jesus was no ordinary man, these claims can and should play a role in my judging the likelihood of Jesus' resurrection. It may be appropriate to question these beliefs, but we should be under no illusion that my judgements of the likelihood of a miracle should take into consideration only those facts that are uncontroversial.

The belief that the world was created and is continually controlled by an almighty being not only makes the occurrence of a miracle more probable, it provides one with an entirely different framework in which to consider the case. For when we are dealing with the actions of a *personal* agent, and not merely the blind forces of nature, such features as the *purpose* and *significance* of the event become relevant. If I were to hear that a friend has quit university and has been living in a tree for some weeks, I might find the story too hard to believe. The problem is not that she could not do this, it just seems unlikely given her behaviour in the past. But when I hear that she is protesting the logging of rain forests, the story makes more sense and is far more plausible. The analogy is loose, but in a similar way God has no difficulty in bringing about any event at all, but an understanding of the *purpose* that God might have in bringing about a miracle, can make such an event far more believable.[10]

The second point to draw from the relativity of rational belief which I have been stressing, is that we should have a modest view about the force of our *arguments*. On the one hand we have Christian evangelists insisting that they can

10 For further discussion on this point see C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, Fontana Books, London, 1967, pp. 111-67.

prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, and on the other, sceptics insisting that they can completely demolish such a claim. Both have an unrealistic view of the issue. Sometimes our arguments fail to convince others due to their stubbornness, ignorance, irrationality or fear of the consequences. But often it is just that considerations that we find compelling are not so to someone with a radically different set of background beliefs. We might try to challenge these other beliefs but we will face the same problem again. This is not to suggest that discussion on these matters is not worthwhile. Arguments help draw our attention to logical relations between various propositions and hence guide us in adjusting our overall view of things in a coherent way. The cumulative effect of such discussions, together with various experiences and learning, may be that someone changes her views in a radical way (such as to believe in the resurrection) but we should not overestimate the significance of a set of arguments alone.

2. Can we have evidence that a miracle happened?

Let us turn now to the other side of the evidence: the testimonies and other external historical details which support the occurrence of a miracle. I want to consider the force of such evidence even for someone with no prior belief in God and hence for whom miracles are extremely improbable. According to Hume, the probability of the miracle having happened will be low, and the probability that the witnesses were wrong will be high. Is that true?

First note that we cannot afford to be too sceptical in general about knowledge based on testimony, for so much of what we believe comes to us this way. Indeed even our evidence that miracles are improbable is largely based on what we have been told. Very few of us have directly observed what happens as people die, nor do many of us understand the biological process of death. What we do know comes largely from what our parents or our teachers or our textbooks told us. So any general scepticism about the reliability of testimony would tend also to weaken the case *against* miracles.[11]

22

Moreover, we must be aware of the relevance of different pieces of evidence. It is true that a great many bridges have collapsed throughout history and throughout the world, yet this does not make me doubt the reliability of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Knowledge of features specific to *that* bridge might support an extremely low probability of it failing. Similarly, factors specific to a particular set of reports might give them much greater credibility than reports in general. In determining how likely it is that a report is accurate, it is often useful to consider what it would take for the report to be false, in *this* particular case given the specific details we know. Might the reporters have lied? Did they have a motive to, or did they have a motive not to (say, if they were under threat of persecution)? Were they just mistaken? How might such a mistake have come about? It is not that we must be able to tell a convincing story about *how* the reports could be false, in order to conclude that they are. But by focusing only on the improbability of the miracle we can fail to notice just how improbable the alternative is also.

Furthermore, there is not only testimonial evidence to consider, but further historical facts which require explanation. One example often cited in the case of the resurrection is the astonishing emergence of Christianity in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus' crucifixion—a faith which seems to have been founded on belief in his resurrection. Events such as these (about which there is no doubt at all) may lend support to the overall case for a miracle. For such an event is improbable on the assumption that the miracle did *not* occur—but it is to be expected on the assumption that it did. That is, if there was no resurrection, the emergence of Christianity is highly improbable; but if there was a resurrection, the emergence of Christianity is very likely. What we have overall is a complex web of facts and hypotheses,

11 C. D. Broad makes a similar point in 'Hume's theory of the credibility of miracles', in A. Sesonske and N. Fleming (eds), *Human Understanding: Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume*, Wadsworth Publishing Co., California, 1965, pp. 95-6.

with various evidential links of the form 'if A happened, then it is most likely that B'. So each hypothesis we consider will be in tension with other elements of the web.

We might reason for instance that if it were the case that Jesus' body was still rotting in the tomb, then it is most likely that the authorities would have displayed it in order to crush the Christian faith (for they had every motive to). And if they *had* produced the corpse, then it is almost certain that Christianity would have been destroyed (for the early Christians believed in nothing less that the literal bodily resurrection). Given that the faith was not destroyed, it is implausible that his body was still in the tomb. Of course there is a whole lot more to consider than this. Our inquiry should aim at achieving a theory with the best overall explanatory coherence. Looked at in this way, we can see just how inadequate was Hume's account of the balancing of probabilities.

A final point to note concerning evidence is just how powerful the cumulative effect of independent pieces of evidence can be. It is a familiar point in the case of forensic evidence, that while the individual facts considered in isolation lend only meagre support to a case, their combined effect may be great. There are good theoretical grounds for the phenomenon. A crucial factor in the force of a piece of evidence for a hypothesis is the *prior* likelihood of that evidence. The prior likelihood is how likely it is that the evidence would have happened in any case, whether or not the hypothesis is true.

When we are considering eye-witness accounts as evidence for an event, we need to ask how likely it is that the account would have been made if the event actually did not happen. If the reporter has a reputation for always saying the same thing regardless of the truth, then his reports have a high prior likelihood. That is, the reporter would have said what he said anyway, regardless of what actually happened. On the other hand, if there is no reason to think he has lied, or if it is extremely unlikely he would have lied, then the report has a lower prior likelihood. The same goes for any piece of evidence. If it would have happened anyway, we

don't take it as evidence for the event. If it is extremely unlikely it would have happened without the event, then we take it as strong evidence for the event.

Now whatever the prior likelihood of each particular piece of evidence may be, the prior likelihood of *all* of them obtaining (say, of several people reporting the very same event) will often be extremely low.[12] That means if there are several independent pieces of evidence, they can add together to make a very strong case for the event.[13] Contrary to Hume, then, there is no guarantee in advance that the probability of the miracle, given our total evidence, will be low. If we want to be sure whether a miracle occurred, we have no choice but to look carefully at the evidence.

Can a miracle provide evidence for religious belief?

Finally, we turn to consider whether the occurrence of a miracle can provide evidence for religious beliefs. If we can demonstrate that a miracle happened, does that give us grounds for accepting (say) Christianity? Much of the discussion about violation of the laws of nature which I earlier dismissed addresses this point. It is argued that if miracles are not in some way contrary to natural laws, then they are not significantly distinguished from everyday events, and there is no special reason to believe that a supernatural power is involved. Even if we could demonstrate that this

12 This will depend of course on how independent we take the various pieces of evidence to be. If there is some suspicion that the reports were copied, their combined effect is diminished.

13 Using the calculus of probabilities we can see why this is the case. If for simplicity we assume that the elements of our set of evidential statements $\{E_1, E_2, \ldots, E_n\}$ are entirely independent, then the probability of a miracle M on this total evidence is given by the formula

$$P(M|E_1 \,\&\, E_2 \,\&\ldots\&E_n) = \frac{P(M) \times P(E_1|M) \times P(E_2|M) \times \ldots x(E_n|M)}{P(E_1) \times P(E_2) \times \ldots \times P(E_n)}$$

The crucial point here is that the value of the denominator $P(E_1) \times P(E_2) \times \ldots \times P(E_n)$ will become very small very quickly as we increase n, regardless of the individual probabilities of the evidential statements. Hence the value of the expression will increase dramatically as we obtain new pieces of independent evidence.

'miracle' happened, there is no reason to say it is supernatural; it is just another (albeit strange) instance of the natural world. Antony Flew argues that

> It is only and precisely insofar as it is something really transcendent—something, so to speak, which nature by herself could not contrive—that such an occurrence could force us to conclude that some supernatural power is being revealed.[14]

In a similar vein, J. L. Mackie[15] argues that the believer in miracles is stuck with the awkward task of not only arguing that a particular event occurred, but also that this event violated a genuine law of nature, if he is to claim that the event is of some supernatural significance. And these two tasks are difficult to achieve together.

First of all, we note that both Flew and Mackie are assuming a dichotomy between natural and supernatural that is not necessary, as already discussed above. Moreover, regardless of whether we are "forced", what we want to know is what conclusions the occurrence might *support* and how it might support them. And if we step back for a moment and consider a specific case, the objections of Flew and Mackie are not compelling. Surely it is just plain obvious that *if* we were to know that Jesus rose from the dead, this would provide some support for the truth of Christianity.

Ironically, the fact that miracles provide evidence for religious hypotheses follows directly from a principle which Mackie himself has defended, and requires no assumptions about violations of natural laws.[16] The principle states that a piece of evidence raises the likelihood of a hypothesis

14 A. Flew, 'Miracles', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., vol. 5, p. 348.
15 J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, pp. 13-29.
16 J. L. Mackie, 'The relevance criterion of confirmation', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 1969, *20*, pp. 27-40. More concisely, the principle is P(H|E) > P(H) if and only if P(E|H) > P(E). This discussion is about the philosophical principles concerning evidence as support for hypotheses; it does not address the biblical issue of whether miracles were meant to provide evidence for the supernatural (see 'Addendum', p. 29).

whenever that evidence is more likely given the hypothesis. The principle follows from the axioms of probability and is central to commonsense reasoning. Footprints in the dirt confirm that someone has been walking there since the footprints are more likely to be there given that someone did walk there. The sound of the siren suggests that there is a fire nearby, for a siren is more likely to be heard when there is a fire nearby.

Flew and Mackie both agree that while miracles are extremely improbable, their occurrence is more likely on the assumption that God exists. And as we discussed above, more specific religious beliefs may raise further the likelihood of a miracle. So it follows from Mackie's criterion of confirmation that the occurrence of miracles may confirm religious beliefs. For instance, since the resurrection of Jesus is far more likely on the assumption that he was divine, the resurrection, if we knew it to have occurred, would confirm Jesus' divinity. Of course it does not *prove* it, but it does provide substantial support.

To sum up then, the philosophical objections to miracles fail. We can, in principle, have sufficient evidence to believe that a miracle has occurred. And if we did, this could provide evidence for religious beliefs. Nothing I have argued should increase our credulity about miracles in general, before considering specific evidence. It may well turn out that there is insufficient evidence for miracles. Or it might not. I have merely sought to remove some of the philosophical mistakes which can impede a serious investigation of the evidence. As to whether any miracles have occurred—let the reader be the judge.

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Crossing of the Red Sea
Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh
Rosselli

kategoria 1997 *number 5* pp. 29-32

Addendum
miracles as evidence for Christianity

Archie Poulos

Arguments about miracles have historically formed a large part of debate about the truth of Christianity. Hume's arguments are still discussed as part of the basic syllabus in university philosophy courses and are quoted as reason not to accept the reliability of Christianity's historical accounts. It is a sad reflection on the proponents of this tradition that it survives, and that the arguments ever convinced Hume (not to mention his followers since). For even if the arguments were philosophically valid, they fail to impinge upon the truth of Christianity, for they are based on ideas that fail to take the Bible on its own terms. A very cursory glance at the New Testament demonstrates that the Bible does not argue for what Hume considers he disproved. Miracles are not presented in the New Testament as proof of the truth of Christian doctrine, nor even of the existence of the supernatural; on the contrary, Jesus Christ himself threw doubt upon miracles as a basis of faith. That is, the assumption that in Christianity miracles are meant to authenticate or create faith is quite wrong, according to the Christian documents themselves.

This can be seen at several places in the New Testament,

30 but a few examples suffice to demonstrate the point. For instance, consider the parable told by Jesus in Luke 16 about the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus. The rich man who in the afterlife is in torment, calls to Abraham to send Lazarus back to the rich man's brothers to warn them so that they might not meet the same fate. Abraham's reply to the rich man in the parable is instructive: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead". The analogy with the miracle of Jesus' own resurrection is quite plain. Even if seen face-to-face, those who wish to deny it will not be convinced.

A similar reaction occurred even among Jesus' own disciples, who could be said (and have been said by those arguing against Christianity) to be predisposed to believe. As described in Luke 24:36-49, they were confronted with the risen Jesus, touched him and saw him eat, but still did not really believe what they were seeing until Jesus explained the meaning of his resurrection from the Old Testament. Without the background information to make sense of the astounding event before them, they could hardly credit what they were seeing. Even those expected to be most prone to wishful thinking were more inclined to doubt the evidence before them than to accept that such a counterintuitive event could have taken place. A similar event is reported in Matthew 28:17: "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted".

As well as these occasions in which it is not expected that a miracle would convince those who did not understand the significance of the event, there are examples in the New Testament of people who do believe on account of miracles, but who are hardly presented in a positive light. For instance, we have the intriguing words of John 2:23-24: "Now while he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men." Those who believed because of a display of supernatural power were not necessarily trustworthy; they may have been merely credulous, or impressed by the sensational, with no depth of understand-

ing. In fact in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 the "lawless one" who is doing the work of Satan is able to perform miracles, signs and wonders—an indication that the miraculous is no guarantee of the presence of God. (Compare also the warning in Mark 13:22-23: "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard.")

In the New Testament, miracles are not presented as the authentication of the truth of the message, nor as a good basis for faith. Spectacular supernatural displays of power could even be the work of the enemy of God, and simple credulity is never encouraged. Like all other events in the Bible, miracles on their own are taken to be mute. Without proper context and explanation, they prove nothing either way. The miracles of Jesus are only taken as significant in the context of Old Testament prophecy, which gives the background understanding to explain the miracles as the work of the promised Messiah. Without the background knowledge, miracles are presented as dubious sources for faith at best. The only sense in which they provide some sort of ratification of Christian doctrines is when they are fully explained in the context of Old Testament theology. Without this interpretation, the human who sees the miracle is not expected to have grounds for believing that the doctrines of Christianity are true.

This helps to explain why at times the Bible *appears* to advocate belief on the basis of miracles. "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me", says Jesus in John 14:11, "or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves". A similar Old Testament passage is found in Isaiah 42-48, where God points to his works as proof that he is the only God and protector of his people. Such passages must not be misread to contradict what has been said above. In each of these incidents, the miracle is given an explanation which provides the reason for belief; the miracle does not stand alone. The parting of the Red Sea is explained as God's action in looking after his people, and Jesus' miracles as the work of the Father. Jesus also states that the disciples should believe because they trust his word;

but if that is not enough, they have the miracles, which now have his word of explanation. In each case the word is the authentication of the miracle, not the other way around. Moreover, *what* people are to believe in both of these cases is not that the supernatural is real; rather, the objects of belief are particular pieces of information—that there is only one God, and that Jesus identifies himself with the Father.

It is worth adding a comment on another general misunderstanding of biblical miracles. That is, miracles in the Bible are not always presented as necessarily violating natural laws or being without secondary causes. For example, the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea is said in Exodus 14:22 to have been accomplished "with a strong east wind". While this event was certainly very unusual, it involved natural elements; the real miracle was in the purpose and timing of the event. The Bible does not present God as outside and remote from the world, with miracles as evidence of supernatural intervention. The biblical picture is of a God who controls all natural forces; a miracle, then, is a particularly significant act of God, not a particularly supernatural one. Indeed, in the Bible the very natural/supernatural distinction on which Hume based his argument is overturned. The 'supernatural' event is accomplished by natural means.

It was not unusual for Christian apologists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to be concerned with demonstrating the truth of Christianity by appealing to the historicity of Jesus' miracles and resurrection. Hume was opposing a type of argument with which he was no doubt familiar; but whether or not he realised it, in doing so he was not opposing New Testament Christianity, merely some of its apologists. While the debate is interesting, and it is worthwhile demonstrating the flaws in Hume's arguments, we should also realise that those arguments were in any case based on a false impression of Christianity.

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Early sixteenth-century
playing cards

kategoria 1997 *number 5* pp. 35-39

Tarot cards
an example of irrational belief

K. R. Birkett

Tarot cards, mysterious with tantalising hints of hidden wisdom, have a reputation for mystique in western culture. Occasionally appearing in movies and novels (usually in the hands of gypsies who have an inherited talent for things mysterious), they are presented as a means by which people have for centuries gained insight into the future and hidden knowledge. While perhaps not as widespread a belief as astrology,[1] the use of tarot cards is a related phenomenon with similar assumptions of sympathetic influence. It is becoming increasingly popular; we now have radio stations holding phone-in psychic tarot readings, as well as numerous advertisements in local shopping centres. Even if you don't believe in them, you could be excused for thinking that they had a long history of gypsy-related magical use. That widely held impression is challenged by a quick glance at the history of tarot cards. This is by no means an exhaustive study, but some of the information revealed by the history of tarot is surprising enough to draw

1 See K. R. Birkett, 'Starry eyed: the lure of irrationalism', *kategoria*, 1997, *4*, pp. 11-28 for discussion of astrology.

attention to it.

Readers with an historical background might have the vague impression that there is an ancient and occult tradition of tarot, and that our ordinary pack of playing cards is its sanitised descendant. It is often said or implied that the tarot came first, but through cultural filtering we have now turned the mystical tradition into a mundane popular game. This is certainly an impression easily gleaned from general reading in fiction, and a theory overtly proposed in pro-occult books on tarot. The question is, to what extent is it supported by documented sources? Far less has been written on tarot cards than astrology, and the overwhelming majority is pro-occult literature resting on poor, and more often no, research. However some useful histories are available to give the background to this sadly overrated occult 'tradition'.[2]

The occult legend about tarot cards gives them an ancient origin. They are supposedly linked to the ancient Cabbala—the occult Jewish magical system connected with numerology—and secret knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. There is a general belief that the gypsies used them for fortune telling and brought the cards to Europe. Eventually, the legend goes, people forgot the cards' occult significance and they became more widely popular as a game. The original 78-card pack was reduced to 52 cards, which meant losing the twenty-two 'major arcana'[3]—picture cards, which apparently had the most occult significance.

The history of playing cards, however, is fairly well documented and shows nothing of the sort. There are

2 The information here comes from Roger Tilley, *A History of Playing Cards*, Studio Vista, London, 1973; and George Beal, *Playing Cards and their Story*, David and Charles, London, 1975. These are not works of original research; they collate other research. This makes the information slightly harder to evaluate, but I have only included information agreed upon by most scholars. Most books which I was able to locate on the history of playing cards were written at too popular a level to be cited.

3 And four extra court cards called 'knights'.

no records of Egyptian origins; in fact, there is no mention at all of playing cards in Europe before the fourteenth century. While the ancient Chinese and Persians had types of card games, it is most likely that European cards arose independently and quite late. The first reference to them is in 1377, when a monk called Johannes writes of cards as a game that has newly come to his city of Basle in Germany. He is not happy about this, and roundly condemns them. He does not do so, however, for any occult reason, but rather because they promote unsavoury activities such as gambling and drinking.

Several other records follow in the same year of prohibitions on playing cards in the cities of Florence and Basle. In 1378, Regensburg, another German city, condemned them; there is record of other prohibitions. It seems that this new game caused quite a storm, and there is little reason to doubt that this was a new phenomenon. To add to this impression, it is significant that earlier writers do not mention cards at all, although they had the context in which to do so. For instance, the copious writer Petrarch (1304-1374), although he wrote of dice and gambling, did not mention playing cards; neither did Boccaccio, author of *The Decameron*, which deliberately included a wide variety of vices. There is similarly no mention of cards in a Church prescription of games of chance in 1363 and Charles V's decree forbidding specific sports and leisure pastimes in 1369.[4]

The first known packs are three bought by Charles VI of France in 1392. If the remains of a pack of cards surviving in the French National Library are the actual ones commissioned by Charles (they are certainly fourteenth- or fifteenth-century), this is the first known example of a 'tarot' deck. The name probably came from the French 'atouts'; in English 'triumph', later 'trumps'; in Italian 'attuti' or 'tarocchi'. These 'trump' cards were combined with the fifty-six

4 There are some other documents, none of them original manuscripts, which give different dates; see Tilley *op. cit.*, p. 19. Tilley sees no reason to change the standard view about the date of invention of the game. Beal mentions a possible connection with Islamic culture, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

cards in four suits of cups, swords, coins and batons, to make up the full deck for the game of tarocchi which was most popular in northern Italy. The twenty-two trumps may have been invented separately; if they were, they were even later than the suit cards. They were, as far as anyone can tell, playing-cards intended for card games.

There is no evidence at all for an ancient Egyptian origin of the tarot deck. Furthermore, the gypsies could not have brought playing-cards to Europe. The first Romanies did not appear in Europe until 1398, by which time cards were already well known. They were a popular recreation, and with the invention of printing, the cards were more widely disseminated and became cheaper, which increased their popularity.[5] Some packs included the trumps; some did not, depending on the game meant to be played with them or the constraints of expense. The trumps often included educational pictures, depicting historical, geographical or biblical information. Where, then, did the idea appear that tarot cards were to be used as occult tools for fortune-telling?

It was a French scholar, Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725-1784) who invented the occult associations. He already had an interest in the occult, and was captivated by the idea of playing cards as repositories of information. In a book published in 1781 he developed a theory that tarot cards were actually remnants of the doctrine of ancient Egyptian priests, conveying mystical information to initiates. 'Tarot' was, he claimed, from the Egyptian words 'Tar' meaning road or way, and 'Ro' meaning king. France at the time was undergoing a wave of interest in the occult, and de Gébelin's ideas gained popularity. In particular, a Paris wigmaker called Alliette who had an interest in arcane subjects

5 As an interesting sidelight, one study presents evidence that a famous copper engraver who produced many early card packs was actually developing with Gutenburg a system of reproducing miniatures mechanically; but when Gutenburg's workshop went bankrupt the engravings were used for cards. See Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Gutenberg and the Master of the Playing Cards*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966.

took up de Gébelin's theory. He eventually proclaimed that through his study he had discovered that fortunes could be told by means of the cards. In 1783 Alliette published a book describing his 'discoveries', and also designed his own packs of cards specifically meant for fortune telling.

The occult aura surrounding tarot cards began to grow. It was given a boost in 1856 by the self-proclaimed magician Eliphas Lévi, who claimed to have found a connection between the trumps of the tarot pack and the Hebrew alphabet, thus linking tarot with the ancient Cabbala tradition. At the same time the regular cards used for playing games were changing. As the truncated 54-card pack became more common than the full 78-card pack, and the French suits of hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs took over from the traditional Italian cups, coins, swords and staves, the original tarot deck became more mysterious simply through being less common. Lévi's theories took hold of occult literature, and the mystique grew. Gradually even those occultists who did not know Lévi's theories, or rejected them, still accepted tarot decks as primarily occult objects.

It is unlikely that knowledge of this history will dissuade a believer in tarot cards.[6] Those who accept an irrational universe, or a different system of rationality in which sympathetic influence and telepathy are real, are likely to consider the particular historical roots of the cards irrelevant. For the general public, however, it does remove a lot of the mystique, and I hope this simple knowledge helps readers feel less threatened by the impenetrable aura of tarot cards. The cards are not hard-core occult tools; they are playing cards, burdened with the fruit of the overactive imaginations of an eighteenth-century scholar, a credulous wigmaker and modern occultists. Like astrology, the story of tarot cards is based on basic misinformation.

6 Danny L. Jorgensen, 'Social meanings of the occult', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 1982, *23*, pp. 373-389, describes some of the social forces which hold together communities of believers in tarot cards.

BOOKS & IDEAS

It has become increasingly plain over the last few issues that the *kategoria* 'reviews' section has begun to outgrow its confines. We wish to publish more than just individual book reviews; we look also for a discussion of the ideas being presented in books and how we might interact with them. For that reason, the 'reviews' section has been expanded to 'books and ideas'. It will include review essays and reflections on recent books, as well as shorter, more traditional reviews. We hope you enjoy this development.

kategoria 1997 *number 5* pp. 43-53

The world imagined: Harold Bloom's recent religious writings

Greg Clarke

Omens of Millenium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection
Fourth Estate, London, 1996

The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation
Simon and Schuster, New York, 1992

H. Bloom and D. Rosenberg
The Book of J
Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1990

> Light the first light of evening,
> as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small
> reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good[1]
>
> *Wallace Stevens*

Beginning to critique Harold Bloom's recent work, I feel like David trying out his slingshot, and hope for similar mercies. Bloom has not one, but two, professorial chairs—at Yale and at New York University. With Frank Kermode, he is the most influential literary critic of our time. His twenty-odd books, including *The Anxiety of Influence*, *A Map of Misreading*, *Ruin the Sacred Truths* and *The Western Canon* have helped to shape responses to literature in the second half of this century. He is a polymath whose range of reading is positively frightening.

As Bloom's status as a literary critic has heightened, he has broadened the subjects of his writing to become something of a prophet on culture, religion and society. This review focuses on three

1 From the poem 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour' in which Stevens also writes "We say God and the imagination are one/How high that highest candle lights the dark..."

books, *The Book of J* (1990), *The American Religion* (1992) and *Omens of Millenium* (1996), which make an unofficial trilogy addressing the shape of contemporary religious life. Together, these books push a common thesis: that Gnosticism is the oldest faith—the 'natural' faith of humankind, as it were. Gnosticism is an approach to religious thinking which champions the development of the 'higher sense'. It is a pursuit of the mind more than the body; some Gnostics go so far as to denigrate the body. But its defining doctrine for the purposes of this review is that *knowledge* is the human means of transcendence, the way to God. It refers not to knowledge of something or someone, but to a deep, inward assurance and peace—the kind of thing which is being expressed when someone says that they "just know". Ultimately, Gnosticism is the religion of the self, for the person who has knowledge 'within' has no need for a belief in a God 'without'.

Bloom provides a summary of Gnosticism near the end of *Omens of Millenium*:

> The experience of Gnosis is a varied phenomenon: your knowing may be prompted by a moment of utter solitude, or by the presence of another person. You may be reading or writing, watching an image or a tree, or gazing only inward...Gnosis grants you acquaintance with a God unknown to, and remote from, this world...You yourself, in knowing and being known by this alienated God, come to see that originally your deepest self was no part of the Creation-Fall, but goes back to an archaic time before time, when that deepest self was part of a fullness that was God, a more human God than any worshipped since (*Omens*, p. 183).

Bloom's arguments for his high view of Gnosis are not primarily historical (although he does look at the history of doctrines) but *literary*. He interprets a wide range of religious texts, from Kabbalah to the Books of Enoch to Ellen G. White's *The Great Controversy*, as different expressions of gnostic yearnings. He uses tools of literary study such as typology, intertextuality and 'misreading'[2] to make a case for the primary value of what he calls the "imaginal world"—the mental construction of

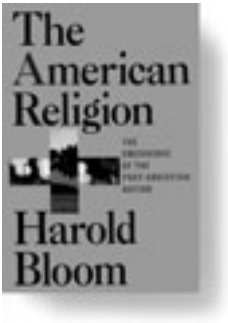
2 One of Bloom's important contributions to literary theory has been the idea that literature continues down the ages through 'misreading' the authors of the past. In order to succeed creatively, new writers must reinterpret, distort, transform and eventually overpower, the writers of the past. Bloom has pursued this idea since the publication of *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973.

reality, where, in the words of the American poet Wallace Stevens, "the world imagined is the ultimate good".

This article suggests, through a review of Bloom's three recent books of religious criticism, that his thesis is underscored by three features: a personal distaste for traditional religion, especially Christianity; an insufficient view of Christ incarnate; and the attraction of a spirituality which leaves no obstacles to individual liberty.

The American Religion

In *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (henceforth *AR*), Bloom argues that Gnosticism is the primary mode of Western religious life. He examines contemporary American religions and sects, their propagators and their texts, from Billy Graham to Joseph Smith to Jimmy Swaggart. To generalise, he discovers that Americans hold a *doctrine of experience*—"as oxymoronic a phrase as even I can imagine"—which leads them into Gnosticism. So, Christian Science seeks to escape the empirical world by denying the reality of sickness, suffering and evil. Ellen G. White manages to sustain Seventh Day Adventism, long after its prophecies have gone unfulfilled, by their reinterpretation along more Gnostic, inward lines. And Pentecostals focus upon internal miracles—speaking in tongues, psychological healing,



unspeakable joy—by which they seek shamanistic[3] ecstasy. Each of these belief systems turns out to be a religion of the inner self.

In intriguing chapters on Southern Baptists and Fundamentalists, Bloom construes the Southern Baptist doctrine of inner illumination of the Spirit-filled Bible reader (known as 'soul competency') as a form of Gnosticism:

> The awakened, indeed spiritually resurrected, Baptist will read the Bible by an inner light kindled by the experiential fellowship with Jesus. That reading, by the economic principle of soul competency, will be a justified interpretation... (*AR*, pp. 210-211)

The Bible is thus internalised by the spirit and even the process of Bible

3 A shaman is a priestly/magical figure found in a number of religions, who uses ecstatic prophecy to make contact with the world of spirits. See later discussion to link this with Gnosticism and Christianity.

reading becomes a search of the inner self. Bloom sees the image of a Southern Baptist, sitting alone with his Bible, "talking with Jesus, his resurrected friend" as a powerful image of Gnosticism.

Mormonism is the quintessence of American religion, Bloom claims. Joseph Smith's originality, his self-belief (to the point of divinity), his degree of influence without natural abilities in speaking or writing: these qualities make Smith an American prophet and, to Bloom, "one of the great figures of our fiction" (*AR*, p. 127). Smith had "drowned in the Bible", and resurfaced with his own fantastic, complex imaginative world in which the Kingdom of God was to be set up in America. Clearly, Joseph Smith meant to rule in this kingdom, and was secretly crowned its king shortly before his death in 1844. Bloom predicts that this rise will actually take place, that Mormons will gain in economic and political power until, in 2020, Mormons make up one-eighth of the American population.

It is all based on an imagined world, derived from ancient religion. "The American religion", Bloom writes, "is neither a Christian 'believing that' nor a Judaic 'trusting in'; it is a knowing" (*AR*, p. 264).

Omens of Millenium

Bloom's confidence in his gnostic thesis has grown by the time he writes *Omens of Millenium*. In this book, he looks specifically at the kind of religious activity he sees in the West as we approach the third millenium. He is upset both at the deadening, unimaginative strictures of institutionalized religions and at what masquerades for Gnostic thought under the banners of New Age, pentecostalism or 'counter-culture'. *Omens of Millenium* is a call to repent of all this. He refers to his book as "a kind of gnostic sermon"; indeed, it concludes with a painfully elegant Coda entitled "Not by Faith, Nor by the Angels: a Gnostic Sermon". Bloom appeals to us to recover a love for genuine Gnosis instead of the debased, commercialized religion that is currently popular.

Omens is a work of esoteric religious criticism which provides an explanation for why phenomena such as angels, dreams and 'near-death expe-

riences' are in vogue.[4] Through complex discussion of Gnostic works such as *The Book of Enoch*, Bloom makes the startling claim that angels represent to us an image of the "primordial person, at once male and female, earlier than Adam and Eve, unfallen and quasi-divine, angelic and yet higher than the angels... it also may be the ultimate basis of all those religions [Judaism, Christianity and Islam]" (*Omens*, pp. 9-10). Angels are images of an ultimate being to which we appeal, and to which we aspire. That, at least, is what pure Gnosis would yield. Instead, to Bloom's despair, we currently have parades of New Age angels who care for our every wish. He juxtaposes Daniel's mortifying vision of the angel Gabriel with a currently popular angel manual which reveals the existence of cat angels—angels who manifest as moggies: "The domestication of angels has made them dull and saccharine" (*Omens*, p. 74).

Similarly, Bloom considers 'near-death experiences' to be akin to prophecy in that they suggest the future—he had such an experience himself when receiving treatment for a badly bleeding ulcer. However, like every aspect of contemporary life in Western culture, the near-death experience has been commercialized. With wry pleasure, Bloom notes the existence of IANDS, the International Association for Near Death Studies, which offers conferences, worskshops and maroon T-shirts with a logo of the ubiquitous 'dark tunnel' combined with the yin and yang.

To escape the commodification of everything, even death, Bloom calls us to the idea of the shaman, the sorcerer who draws together the celestial realms and earth. He calls Jesus "the universal shaman", since he went down into the depths, returned, and was raised to the heights, experienced torture and death, and was raised up to hold "earth and heaven open to one another again" (*Omens*, p. 140). The shaman, Bloom claims, is a universal figure and a primal one. He represents the human attempt to escape being earth-bound. He is our dream of approaching the outer realm —death. 'Near-death experiences' are consumer society's poor attempt at shamanism.

Bloom sees the phenomena he discusses as expressions of the uncanny, the mystical and the visionary. But he believes that only a very few are able to develop the experience of the uncanny into genuine, profitable religious experience. Few people will have the privilege of lasting spiritual sustenance through angelic visions or dreams; most people's dreams are incoherent and their visions merely the face of

4 *Omens of Millenium* contains prolonged discussion of Christian Gnostic, Sufi and Jewish Kabbalist texts. Its lucid argument makes discussion of these unfamiliar works readable.

Mary in their pizzas. Spiritual vitality belongs to but a few; the rest of us are condemned to the supermarket spirituality of the New Age or the deathliness of orthodox religions.

In summary, *Omens of Millenium* presents a bold, elitist and abstract thesis: that genuine spiritual knowledge (Gnosis) is available to only those beings who possess the spiritual wherewithall to discern it.

Two controlling influences

To put all of Bloom's speculation into perspective, we must consider his approach to research—his methodology. What informs his criticism? How does he set boundaries for such speculative work? How can we assess his claim that Gnosticism is the essence of human spirituality? I suggest there are two controlling influences for Bloom: his low view of New Testament Christianity and his high view of the imagination.

Paul, the poor and the problem of evil

I find Bloom's attitude towards Christianity smarmy and insincere. He claims to have the highest respect for the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible,[5] but he passes judgement upon it at almost every point. How could Bloom not give even a chapter of his bestselling book *The Western Canon* to the Bible, be it the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible or Bloom's own *Book of J*?[6] If any book ought to have a place within that canon, it is the Bible. And yet, the Bible and Christianity are present, unavoidably, throughout *The Western Canon*, quietly informing a vast range of judgements on writings from Shakespeare to Tolstoy to Kafka. The Bible's primary importance cannot be escaped.

Bloom dislikes the apostle Paul, who "distrusts angels" and is largely responsible for their diminished status among Christian believers. An anti-Pauline vein runs through *Omens of Millenium*:

> ...I have never understood why Christian scholars almost invariably incline to Paul, rather than to the Church of Jerusalem, headed by James the Just, brother of Jesus and clear inheritor of his legacy. Scholars, themselves dogmatists, seem to worship the winning side in history, and Paul won (*Omens*, p. 160).

Bloom calls upon Nietzsche and G. B. Shaw for support in his condemnation

5 The Hebrew Bible is the Jewish arrangement of the Old Testament. It organizes the prophets, the history books and the wisdom writings quite differently, ending with 2 Chronicles.

6 Bloom's reconstruction of the Pentateuch: see later in this review.

of Paul, who highlighted the distance between Christian faith and Jewish law. To Bloom, "the God of the organized Western faiths is an impostor" (*Omens*, p. 246) and a latecomer; Gnosticism, which he also wants to identify with the defunct Jerusalem church of James, is the genuine and original human spirituality.

Like Nietzsche, Bloom seems to have a problem with the compassionate nature of Christ and Christian faith. He insists on the elitism of religious vision. He cites Aristotle in support of his view that only the elite ought to receive transcendental visitations: "it is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be god with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons" (*Omens*, p. 93).

The contrast between 'mere Christianity' ("one of my least favourite books") and Bloom's preferred Gnosis is sharp at this point. Bloom is elitist, claiming that "spiritual imagination is hardly a universal endowment" (*Omens*, p. 182). Compare this with the angels heralding Jesus' birth to 'mere' shepherds, Jesus' love for little children, Paul's letter to the 'unwise', 'unscholarly' Corinthians, and the intellectual ease with which people can come to know the Christian God.

At the end of his sermon in *Omens of Millenium*, Bloom reveals the extent of his problem with Christianity. It isn't history—although Bloom believes the Christian Bible is corrupt; it isn't Paul—despite all the protestations; it is the problem of evil:

> If you can accept a God who coexists with death camps, schizophrenia, and AIDS, yet remains all-powerful and somehow benign, then you have faith, and you have accepted the Covenant with Yahweh, or the Atonement of Christ, or the submission of Islam (*Omens*, p. 252).

Bloom's tone is disdainful. He cannot believe in a God who is "held culpable for the invention of death". In *The American Religion*, he is damning of Jehovah's Witnesses, seeing them as anti-intellectual and weak, slaves to a tyrannical Jehovah. He sees their apocalypticism as cruel and childish, a means by which to keep others in fear and bondage. Why is Bloom so offended by what, after all, seems to me to be just another manifestation of American religious obsession? Perhaps it is to do with the Witness' exclusivity—that so few will be granted a place in heaven. But we have just seen Bloom's own elitism. Most likely, I think, it is the problem of evil returning to the surface. The JWs seem to relish Armageddon, the destruction of the wicked and the Last Judgement. Bloom cannot accept

a God that would punish for evil for which he is ultimately responsible. No wonder he prefers the Gnostic world, where death and resurrection are internalized and the question of God's mercy in the face of human depravity is brushed aside.

The world imagined

So how does Bloom construct a framework upon which all the speculations and fragments of gnostic thought can hang? His solution is to claim that we live in 'the imaginal world'. This is not the transcendent realm; it is not the world of the senses; it is in between:

> We are in an intermediate realm between pure matter and pure spirit. Empiricists and supernaturalists alike may dismiss this middle sphere as a fiction, but imaginative men and women, whether literary in their orientation or not, will recognize that the imaginal world exists, and is not fantasy or wish fulfilment (*Omens*, p. 167).

Bloom describes a realm where one can be "spiritual flesh" (his phrase). It is a realm in which cognitive forces work upon a person with power, changing them, enlightening them, 'resurrecting' them. It sounds a lot like the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration which, of course, Bloom would like to subsume within his gnostic thesis.

I suggest that Bloom has not confronted the incarnation of Christ sufficiently at this point. The imaginal world Bloom is seeking is there, in Christ. For all the fulness of God was in Christ, the world was made through Christ, believers are in Christ, we are married to Christ: all images of profound union between the physical and spiritual realms. The "fusion of self and angelic soul that truly is the Resurrection Body, and that guarantees a survival of individual identity" (*Omens*, p. 172) can be found in union with Christ the creator, redeemer and friend. I, at least, find that overwhelmingly satisfying. But the attraction of Gnosis is that it entails no repentance, no obedience to anyone, and it is a religion of the Self. As one philosopher has put it, "Imagination trades reliability for risk; the information it gives us is low grade, but the cost of getting it is minimal."[7]

Religious criticism such as Bloom has undertaken is made possible by this exaltation of the imaginal world. It likewise exalts the imaginative reading of religious texts. If you want to 'get religion', start reading a religious text and

7 G. Currie, 'The moral psychology of fiction', *Australian Humanities Review,* April 1996, http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR//archive/Issue-April-1996/home.html

start dreaming, experiencing, imagining, knowing. This suits the postmodern intellectual climate. If you don't trust history; if you're sceptical about metaphysics and claims to represent reality; if science doesn't satisfy your mind's cravings; if you value highly the imagination, then you adopt the purely literary approach to research and criticism. All evidence is "purely internal and subjective" (Bloom's words, *Western Canon*, p. 7).

This enables Bloom to describe Judaism, Christianity and Islam as "the worship of a literary character, J's Yahweh"[8] (*Western Canon*, p. 6). It also enables him to pass judgement on religious truth according to the literary merits (style, story, imagery, effect, etc.) of its sacred texts. By taking this approach, Bloom assesses ancient Gnostic writings as spirituality most valuable: "...I am interested, in this book, in the spiritual superiority of older Gnosis to our debased contemporary modes, whether cultic or popular" (*Omens*, p. 197).

The Book of J

Such an approach is also the basis of *The Book of J* (henceforth *BJ*), Bloom's reconstruction of the Pentateuch into what he considers to be its oldest form.[9] In order to do this, Bloom and co-author Rosenberg must make a series of startling assumptions. These are as follows:[10]

- J lived near Rehoboam's court (Rehoboam was Solomon's son);
- J was not a scribe, but a sophisticated society figure;
- J was a woman who wrote her work for other women.

8 See the review of Jack Miles' *God—A Biography,* which presents a study of God as a literary character (*kategoria,* 1997, *4*, pp. 47-51).

9 One of the theories to explain the origin of the Pentateuch is the 'documentary hypothesis'. It identifies four major source documents which were used to construct the Pentateuch as we have it, and names these sources after their proposed authors: 'J' the Yahwist's narrative, 'E' the Elohist's narrative, 'D' the Deuteronomist's document and 'P' the priestly document. Bloom, therefore, seeks to reconstruct the Yahwist's narrative, a task of textual disentangling which many other critics think is impossible.

10 In *The Book of J*, Bloom doesn't go so far as to name his preferred candidate for J, but in *The Western Canon* he names her as Bathsheba the Hittite, the woman with whom David committed adultery. He revels in the irony that a Gentile might be behind the book of the Jews.

Not being inhibited by biblical scholarly understanding (Bloom's own words), Bloom's argument for J's construction as author and woman consists of just this: female characters are the champions of her book; she does not mention David (her possible grandfather), since "royal decorum" would have excluded him as the subject of her fiction; and, finally, in the Book of J there are six possible plays upon Rehoboam's name.

But his primary defence is his doctrine of the primacy and reality of the imaginal world:

> Since we cannot know the circumstances under which the work was composed, or for what purposes, ultimately we must rely upon our experience as readers to justify our surmises as to what it is that we are reading (*BJ*, p. 9).

> Since I am aware that my vision of J will be condemned as a fancy or fiction, I will begin by pointing out that all our accounts of the Bible are scholarly fictions or religious fantasies (*BJ*, p. 10).

> I myself do not believe that the Torah is any more or less the revealed Word of God than are Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or Tolstoy's novels, all works of comparative literary sublimity (*BJ*, p. 11).

Bloom's final appeal for his out-on-a-limb theory is to personal experience:

> I have read the Hebrew Bible since I was a child, with the growing sense that there is a great authorial voice in Genesis, Exodus and Numbers that is very much at variance with the composite voice all too frequently heard therein (*BJ*, p. 21).

It is frightening that a great many readers may not need much more convincing than this, their preference being for the kind of Thieringesque scholarly dust which is being tossed in their faces. A novel reading is a welcome escape from the moral imperatives of normative approaches. In other words, it's great to find out that all those stories from Sunday School need affect your life only in ways which ring true to your imagination.

The problem is that Bloom is so eloquent, such a good compiler of suggestive ideas and such an attractive liberal humanist that one feels oneself drawn into these books. Their aesthetic power acts as an argument in favour of Bloom's speculations. Perhaps the author of the Book of J was a woman; it certainly has its attractions and is an intriguing proposal. But its very inscrutability as a theory makes it dangerous and leads us away from the search for the story of God's dealings with his people and

towards a story of our own making.

But such fanciful imaginings are what Bloom values most highly:

> When script becomes Scripture, reading is numbed by taboo and inhibition. Even if imagining an author and calling her J is an arbitrary and personal fiction, something like that imagining is necessary if we are to be stirred out of our numbness (*BJ*, p. 35).

Bloom's work is replete with speculation, to the point where his methodology becomes the aspect of most interest. All in all, he promotes mysticism over rationality, speculation over evidence, literariness over realism and internality over externality. He redefines the quest for knowledge in ways which are deeply disturbing to anyone who is seeking to reconcile the world of objects, the world of the mind and the world of the spirit. Ultimately, for Bloom, it is only the world of the mind that matters.

Naturally, there is much to like in Bloom's assessment of Western religious life and in his imaginative reconstructions of biblical events. He writes fascinating books. But the methodology he is using is far more tenuous than that of traditional biblical interpretation. Where biblical scholars have taken immense care in interpreting a text, hesitantly edging towards a conclusion, Bloom (not for want of scholarship, but by methodological conviction) exercises an imaginative flourish and offers a new reading. If only this were as responsible as it is attractive! Only a critic with the status of Bloom could tell us that "clearly" Enoch, whom Genesis records as walking with God, was God himself, the Divine Man, equal to God and the major celestial being of Western religions. Clearly. But what a marvellous thing it is to a rebellious soul to discover that God is the Self and its highest imaginings.

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Watching the media

Dominic Steele

Stuart Littlemore
The Media and Me
ABC Books, Sydney, 1996

Stuart Littlemore, ex-journalist, now barrister and media watchdog, has written a book. Those familiar with his weekly program *Media Watch* on ABC television, in which he reviews media reports and reveals mistakes, lapses and outright cheating in news reporting, will be eager to hear what this devastatingly cynical critic has to say about the media in general. Errors, plagiarism and careless editing are all fair game for the eagle eye and penetrating wit of Stuart Littlemore. As one familiar with the electronic media from the inside, having worked for ABC, in London for the BBC, and commercial television—with the added precision of legal training and a successful career as a Sydney Q.C.—Littlemore is more than adequately qualified to assess the quality of media reporting today.

His diagnosis is not positive. The BBC comes off rather better than the ABC, as does British (and US) legal regulation of the media over Australian. Nevertheless, Littlemore believes that the news media have unprecedented power in our society, with astonishing and culpable lack of accountability and regulation. News reporters exist as unqualified self-appointed judges, political campaigners and social theorists. Not only is there no effective regulation of their activities, but (as a result) there are frequent, and sometimes horrifying, breaches of truthful reporting.

Littlemore's thesis is that "some of the most important questions this society has to ask about itself are questions about its mass media".

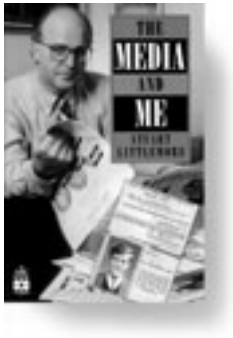
> What are the ethics of journalism? Will we ever have enforceable rights to truthful information, or balance, or fairness?
> What confidence can we have in the honesty or objectivity of mass media reporting when it concerns the commercial activities of its tycoon owners?
> Has not the time come for legislative regulation of the mass media?
> If not by legislation, how can we make those media accountable? (p. 155).

He argues that mass media are "capable of more harm (and more capable of harm) than negligent surgeons, dishonest lawyers or overcharging plumbers" (p. 157) and that the "influence of what they write and construct has profound effects on how the country votes, how it perceives itself, how it spends its money…" (p. 156). He argues (I thought convincingly) for more media regulation and the establishment of a media standards tribunal which could standardise entry qualifications, review journalists' ethics, see to continuing education for journalists and adjudicate on complaints. The proprietors, too, need more scrutiny.

Yet the problem is not deciding upon ethical standards, as Littlemore points out. Media ethics exist, at least in theory, and can be broken down into three duties. First, to make full disclosure (to tell the whole story, to reveal any gift or benefit provided for writing a story, to indicate a particular interest the writer may have in a story). Second, to be honest, not distorting a story through improper emphasis, or because of the influence of commercial or advertising considerations. (Why, for instance, was it necessary for the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* to go on the streets with a poster boasting that it offered 'the only unbiased coverage' of the Packer vs Murdoch battle for Rugby League in Australia? Is it too much to ask that newspapers should normally give unbiased coverage?)

Third, journalists have a duty to respect privacy and confidentiality. Littlemore says that privacy concerns are repeatedly ignored by journalists. At the same time, journalists are very interested in defending the confidentiality provision "which has been interpreted as meaning that the whistleblower must be granted confidentiality" (p. 163). Littlemore says the essential difficulty with the concept would appear to be that professional privilege depends on a professional relationship. In his opinion, "[i]n journalism, there is no such relationship: no contract, no responsibility…no profession, even" (p. 163).

These are real concerns.



However, there is more to this book than Littlemore's comments as media watchdog. The first twelve chapters are autobiographical, telling the story of his career from school to present barrister and *Media Watch* days. We are presented with the media from the inside—with all its politics, technical difficulties, and various levels of disorganisation. Here we have Littlemore's own testimony to the highs and lows of news-gathering and telling. Littlemore does not just sit as the judge; he is the story-teller, drawing us into the media through his own experience. In his own metaphor, he is the gamekeeper who was once a poacher, and so has a particular insight into the problems and strengths of the media world.

At the same time, the story is Stuart Littlemore's, and his personality emerges from the start. Littlemore was never one to bow easily to authority. *The Media and Me* begins with an account of an incident in which the author, then a rookie cadet at ABC News, gives cheek to the news controller Wally Hamilton. Littlemore says the 1962 incident "set the tone for the career that was to follow" (p. 6). This was during a four year cadetship with ABC News, in which Littlemore illustrated some of the more flexible attitudes towards news-gathering. "My maiden ABC news contribution was to the State bulletin, about floods on the Western fringe of Sydney…I had included a line about 'floodwaters lapping at the verandahs of houses', which was pure fabrication…" (p. 5). He goes on:

> Duncan Ellis was the cadet with the biggest motorbike…Duncan and I lied to the chief of staff in order to attend the motorcycle races at Oran Park, some distance out of town. We promised to be back in time to write the weather for the seven o-clock bulletin, and some other essential stories. There was never any chance of our getting back as promised. We rang from a public phone at about 6.30. 'Sorry, Peter, we're caught in a huge traffic jam—there's a semi-trailer overturned, and it's dropped its load.' 'Then you'd better file a few pars', he said. 'Hang on, I'll just switch you to copy'. The police and residents of Liverpool must have been confused to hear

> a detailed report on the ever responsible ABC about a significant emergency that never happened. Fortunately the truck driver had escaped without a scratch (p. 33).

Similarly, while on secondment to Orange, cityboy Littlemore unwittingly broadcast on the regional ABC station that there had been an outbreak of anthrax. His defence was "I was only a towny" (p. 39). (One shudders to think what the *Media Watch* Littlemore would do today to a similar case!)

Littlemore is full of praise for the newsgathering services of BBC television, where he spent some time working. His career there began with brash self-confidence in an interview with editor Desmond Taylor. "He asked me if I could direct. Confidently, I asserted that I had six month's experience, though it would have been more accurate for me to tell him that, in the previous six months, I had occasionally directed the weekend bulletin at ABC TV" (p. 50). At the BBC, Littlemore writes that he found an efficiency and professionalism lacking in his Australian experiences: "The BBC did two things I had not experienced before: it staffed the place as if it took news very seriously, and it trusted the expertise of those staff" (p. 51). Unlike the Australian system in which senior personnel used their privilege to take weekends off—resulting in poorly-covered weekend news—the BBC had instituted a general rostering system. "The view had been taken that news is no respecter of weekends" (p. 53). High-quality, accurately reported news coverage was the goal. Littlemore unfavourably compares the Australian unwillingness to break a system of privilege management.

Littlemore returned to Australia, having been offered a job on the ABC's new current affairs program, *This Day Tonight*. Unfortunately for him it was to be two years before he received his promised employment—the 'Talks' people (those from a non-journalism background) and 'News' people were having a war, and 'Talks' were winning. Littlemore was given casual work on the news bulletin and did his best to scoop *This Day Tonight* on their stories. As Littlemore comments of himself a few pages later, "Audacity is essential to journalism" (p. 62).

'Audacity' could be Littlemore's byword. During his first stint in commercial television, Littlemore interviewed the then Opposition Leader:

> (Gough) Whitlam was difficult to handle…Diana Ward had invited viewers to ring in with questions and stacks of cards were distributed to panelists as the interview went on, purport-

> edly containing those matters people wanted raised with the Opposition Leader. The ones handed to me were blank. It was my turn.
> 'This one's not so much a question as a comment,' I said, looking at the blank card on top. 'It says Mr Whitlam is far too smooth'.
> Whitlam was sitting next to me. He could see the card was blank.
> 'Any response, Mr Whitlam?'
> 'Oh', he said, 'I'm not smooth at all. At least, not as smooth as Mr Littlemore' (p. 62).

Littlemore's frustration with inflexibly imposed and poorly thought out rules also emerges. In the run-up to the 1973 election (won by Gough Whitlam) Littlemore and other ABC sub-editors were required to make sure that the bulletins were politically balanced, the test being that equal numbers of lines were given to reports about each party. "In one of my bulletins as chief sub, I 'balanced' twenty lines of a Whitlam speech on the defects in Australian foreign policy with twenty lines about Billy McMahon being pelted with flour bombs at the Adelaide Town Hall. Perfectly satisfactory" (p. 109). (Later, Littlemore assisted the political parties in state and federal election campaigns. Amongst other things, he prepared five-minute pre-election television 'freebies'. Littlemore says he discovered "how easy it is to manipulate journalists into seeing the issues from the perspective that best suited the political party", and that "it was a disconcertingly simpler matter to divert attention from one's weak points by going on the attack" (p. 133).)

Littlemore's time with *This Day Tonight* ended with a change in national politics. The election of the reformist Labor Government meant the program's main antagonist—a politically conservative government—was gone. Littlemore's story of his career with the media finishes with a sense of disillusionment.

We are left with a picture of an audacious journalist, frustrated by complacency and inefficiency, and fed up with his industry. Littlemore does not write with much respect for the media industry—although, with the confessional tone of the autobiography he shows himself at times to be a pot attacking black kettles. It is perhaps with irony that Littlemore writes unabashedly of his own career in the media, which now he polices so fiercely. It appears that youthful audacity eventually led to a more mature method of trying to change the media. Littlemore turned to the law.

No longer a poacher, Littlemore the gamekeeper is now brutal in his criticisms of the media. He laments that the concentration of ownership of mass media, and power relationships between media owners and political leaders, means that none of our parliaments will have the political will to introduce needed changes. He despairs that things are getting worse and that the influence of the media is increasing daily. Particularly under fire are the radio 'tin-pot demagogues', the tabloids, and commercial television's current affairs programs. Proud of his own past work in *This Day Tonight*, Littlemore contrasts commercial TV and radio, accusing it of being anti-educative, anti-intellectual, anti-cultural, anti-democratic and anti-minority.

Although Littlemore has little love for the high-powered media owners, he nevertheless claims that the poor standards of commercial broadcasting are not the employers' fault, but the fault of the individual journalists. He concedes they may be "victims of a Murdoch culture or a Packer culture, but it couldn't happen if they didn't make it happen" (p. 147). I am inclined to disagree: the owner or manager sets the culture and direction for each paper, publication or program in a much more significant way than Littlemore indicates. For example, the recent decision by radio 2MMM in Sydney to broadcast regularly in news bulletins the locations of police radar speed traps (so drivers could slow down in those areas) was a decision of station management rather than individual journalists. However, there is no doubt that both owners and journalists bear some level of responsibility.

Littlemore calls for a general lifting of standards. He condemns the attitude that media owners have the right to broadcast while the public bears the duty to consume in silence. It should be the other way around: the public has the right to accurate information, and the media outlets bear the duty to take all care in newsgathering to get their facts right and to foster informed debate. He criticises the journalists' code of ethics, which "does not prohibit invasions of privacy but purports to give practitioners the right to commit them in pursuance of some 'right to know'" (p. 149).

Littlemore is also concerned with what he says is an overemphasis on crime reporting. He says journalists are systematically misinformed and disinformed by police. On the one hand he attacks the media for invading privacy and on the other laments a remarkable timidity on the media's part. "Risk-taking of the kind essayed by *TDT* simply does not happen…Nuts and bolts journalism is unattractive. Not for today's journalists the drudgery of painstaking research, inquiry, checking and recheck-

ing" (p.153). Littlemore does however rather unfairly fail to point out that in many news outlets this is often the result of lack of staff rather than lack of willingness.

As Littlemore says, the problem is not in deciding upon fair media ethics. The problem is in making journalists follow them. Littlemore, the barrister, looks to the law to solve the media's problems so that the "human rights of the community and the duties to the community of its mass media can be litigated" (p. 164).

It is at this point that Christians might interact with his thesis. Littlemore's book demonstrates that the media problems (as in every area of human effort) basically boil down to two issues: a lack of competence and a lack of morality (or what the Bible calls 'sin').

Littlemore thinks as a lawyer in proposing his solutions. In the area of combating the problems of incompetence, his proposals are good. Teaching journalists better and paying them better will help improve their competence level. Regulations about staffing levels will make sure media outlets are properly resourced and able to provide a proper 'news service'.

Littlemore's ideas for establishing a media tribunal are probably worthwhile, however it is clear from the Scriptures and experience that no end of law and legislation will change human hearts. Nor can legislation alone combat the pragmatic morality of the press. Sensationalism and invasion of privacy in the name of journalism works in attracting an audience. What Littlemore is arguing for is a morality that rises above the pragmatic. Littlemore sees the need for ethics, but does not tell us how to instil them. Blatantly unethical journalism should not be considered acceptable until it is exposed by *Media Watch*. "Ethics are not a set of rules to be consulted only when someone lodges a complaint; they should represent a philosophy inseparable from the daily task" (p. 155). Journalists as individuals need a more responsible attitude.

It is a pity that while he reveals at several points his dislike for 'fundamentalist religion', Littlemore has evidently not realised that Christian teaching is in agreement with him and it is only by the work of the Spirit of God that human hearts can be changed and a truly moral media brought about.

Littlemore's diagnosis of the media, and his description of how the industry works in practice, is disturbing. We applaud his current work in intelligent commentary and exposure of incompetence and fraud. In a society where we are increasingly consumers

of information, those who provide the information have immense power over our thoughts and our lives. As Littlemore says, "the public does not wish such power to reside in people whose honesty, ability or personal standards are questionable" (p. 156). Certainly we do not. In the meantime, may the cynic and wit in Littlemore continue to amuse us as he shows up media error for some time to come.

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Places of mythology

Michael Jensen

Canberra Cosmos: The Pilgrim's Guidebook to Sacred Sites and Symbols of Australia's Capital
Guy Freeland
Primavera, Sydney, 1995

Landscape and Memory
Simon Schama
Harper Collins, London, 1995

Places, whether landscapes, cities, rocks or rivers, are inevitably given meaning by human beings. Nostalgia, nationalism, war and future hopes are all projected on to places. Even in our age, places are still deemed worth killing and being killed for.

Given the significance of places in the Biblical record, it is interesting that Adam is not given places to name in Genesis 2 in addition to the animals. Perhaps this is because places are named as memorials to events. The Patriarchs often seem like explorers, naming places as if they have discovered them. The names of a place symbolise something worth remembering in the opinion of the namer. Jacob is a great namer of places. At Bethel ("place-of-God") he had his dream of a ladder to heaven. He also set up a stone monument. In Deuteronomy, the promise of life in the land "flowing with milk and honey" receives its full expression as a locus of the hopes of Israel, both spiritual and material. Yet life in the land never met these lofty expectations.

In projecting our myths and symbols onto geography we may be guilty of a more static version of what critics Wimsatt and Beardsley called the "affective fallacy"[1] (projecting our moods onto the weather—rain at funerals, falling in love in spring). However, the permanence of landscape and the semi-permanence of architecture allow them to carry

1 W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, Methuen, Lexington, 1954.

a sense of history and myth and aspirations unmatched by almost any cultural artefact. The English Romantics of the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth for example, were enraptured by the spiritual possibilities that places possessed. For Wordsworth, it was England's Lakes District that inspired him. In the 1860s Walt Whitman powerfully configured the democratic symbolism of the American landscape.

In contrast, Australians experience the problem that they are at odds with their place. They don't have a strong sense of civic religion like that which imbues the monuments and architecture of Washington D. C. This may be no bad thing: Nazi Germany was big on symbolic architecture, as was Imperial Rome. Monumental architecture can stand, Babel-like, as a nation's symbol of its self-worship.

Further, unlike older nations, European Australians have no mythological past with which to fill the vast open spaces of their country. Their cities, "like five teeming sores" as A. D. Hope wrote,[2] suck the life out of the mainland. They do not and cannot appropriate the symbols of their Aboriginal neighbours. They are struck dumb by their place—unable to adequately name it.

I came to Guy Freeland's *Canberra Cosmos* with the cynicism that many Australians feel toward Canberra itself. 'Soul-less' is the adjective most commonly applied to the capital. Yet Freeland's charming book, subtitled 'The Pilgrim's Guidebook to Sacred Sites and Symbols of Australia's Capital' has proven my ignorance. The book takes the form of a travel guide, and takes us to all the sites and sights of the city—and for that reason is written for the visitor as well as the Australian. But more than that, Freeland reads the city like a work of art. Canberra is a canvas on which Australia paints itself with characteristic insecurity. The grandiloquent and the banal coexist.

The book raised two issues that caught my imagination. The first is that Christianity and such civic religion as Australians have, are incompatible. This came out for Freeland at the War Memorial. It is, he observes, a shrine—the cloisters of the Courtyard and the cross shape of the Hall of

2 In his poem 'Australia'.

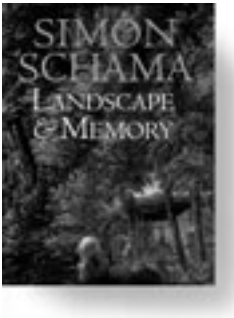
Memory raise that expectation. But

> ...the prolific symbolism of the Hall, though intensely religious in character, was almost totally devoid of any Christian content. The shrine was no Christian chapel, but a temple to some yet-to-be-identified religion. But what religion? (p. 74)

The religion of the Hall, and of so many Memorials like it, is not personal, like Christianity—it is civic religion. As he goes on to point out, the Australian War Memorial is akin to the pagan Greek shrine of Delphi. Australia, then, possesses a "strongly felt religious cult centred on Anzac" (p. 78)—remembering the tragic-heroic defeat of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps at Gallipoli in World War I, a key moment in Australia's sense of national identity. Indeed, as Freeland notes, "the cult of Anzac encompasses a body of mythologised history from which a civil theology has been spun" (p. 78). Charles Bean, the prodigous war historian, is the "great theologian of Anzac" (p. 79).

The failure of the churches to lead the nation well in its time of crisis is the cause of this separation. Freeland rightly points to the great loss of faith in a personal God and sectarian divisions as the reason this cult has not been contained within the walls of the churches. The secularisation of European Australia at the level of its self-identifying myths is not a new phenomenon at all, but stems from before the Anzac era to the goldfields and even beyond to convict days. Neither the Roman Catholic church nor the Protestant churches have ever been able to claim hegemony over this place. Neither has captured the national imagination.

Secondly, Freeland documents the haphazard course of European civilisation of Canberra, and its mishmash of genius with dullness. For example, from the Red Hill Lookout he observes the curving femininity of the landscape, with the "perfectly moulded" Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain (p. 4). Freeland notes how, in contrast, many of the man-made landmarks are protuberant, seeking to dominate the landscape rather than complement it. In particular he singles out the Telecom Tower on Black Mountain—it has been allowed to "deface the splendour of the primal vision" (p.5). It struck me often in Freeland's book (again, for example, with his chapter on the New Parliament House) how humankind is capable of soaring creativity that can beautifully complement the work of the Creator; but is also capable of creating ugliness, blandness and grossness which desecrates the landscape.



Simon Schama's magnificent *Landscape and Memory* is a very different book, but it too touches on the theme of sacred place. Part art-history, part history, Schama unravels the various great myths of place in Western culture. It is erudite, quirky and exhilarating. Schama writes:

> ...although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are in fact indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.

Schama divides his work into four sections: one each for 'Wood', 'Water' and 'Rock' and a final synthesis. He writes of Lithuanian bison, the German forest, the oaken woods of England and the sequoia redwoods of California. The fountains of Renaissance Italy, the Thames, Mount Rushmore, and the Yosemite Valley—all receive the Schama treatment. His aim is to explore the places that places have in our cultural imaginations. He draws on art (there are many superb colour plates in the book), poetry and historical sources—diaries, published records, photographs. In his section on the great German forests he uses the disturbing work of artist Anselm Kiefer, noting his aggressive historicism, born, I believe, from an authentic determination to explore the modern fate of landscape myth.

There are of course many demons in the German psyche, and Schama finds them in the German landscape. Neither is the American self-fashioning blameless; nor the English, nor the French. Imperialism, Fascism, environmental degradation and genocide are results of such national self-mythologisation.

An interesting episode Schama records is the hunt by Nazi ideologues for the "birth certificate of the German race" in the writings of the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus. The barbarian ancient Germans, obdurate foes of the Roman legions, were "children of nature", a nature "for the most part bristling forests and foul bogs"(p. 76). They contrasted with effete and decadent (although civilised) Rome. In 1936 Hitler requested that the Codex Aesinas manuscript of Tacitus' Germania be given to the Reich. SS attempts to seize

the document were thwarted by the determination of Count Belleani. The Nazi fascination with racial beginnings Schama calls "one of the most tenacious examples of the obsession with a myth of origins" (p. 81).

The chapter entitled 'Sir Walter Raleigh Loses His Drift' is a fascinating narrative of Raleigh's attempt to navigate the Orinoco. It is an unusual piece of writing—biographical, anecdotal and historical. Of Raleigh he writes:

> ...whenever disaster knocked him down, up he rose again like the Phoenix of his own verse, borne aloft, his damnable optimism bubbling away in the blood (p. 308).

It was Raleigh's strong blood that sustained him; and even at his execution the blood flowed richly into the Thames soil. This writing is not quite the history of facts and figures. Rather it is a mapping of the landscape of culture and art, a travel guide to the Western mind.

The promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, became part of Israel's national mythology, partly because the promises of Deuteronomy were only briefly, if ever, fulfilled for them. Christianity, however, will always seem at odds with such national cults of landscape and memory. Our past is always Jesus'; our hopes are always heaven-bound. In our two simple rites we remember the death of Christ. It is also Christianity's radical cross-culturalism that will mitigate against the mythologisation of a particular space. The presence of our living Lord will counter the worship of monuments to the dead.

Michael Jensen is a graduate in English literature and has taught at Sydney Grammar School. He is currently studying theology.

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