

What is wrong with miracles?

Against the presumption against divine interventions in the course of nature

Many are reluctant to believe in miracles. Modernist ("liberal") theology is based on the assumption that one "cannot" nowadays believe in divine interventions. Even believing preachers sometimes say at Easter that one cannot understand Jesus' resurrection. I shall argue that there is no problem with divine interventions by explaining how they fit into the causal structure of the world and with the laws of nature. They do not conflict with reason, they do not destroy the order of nature, they do not make physics impossible, and we can understand what they are. It is crucial that we have no problems with believing in the possibility of miracles and all other forms of divine action in the world. It is crucial for resisting modernist theology, for our praying, and for our faith.

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Theologians' aversion against divine interventions

A divine intervention into the course of nature is an event brought about by God directly, which occurs instead of an event nature (sustained by God) would have brought about. E.g. God moved away the stone from Jesus' grave.

The movement that called itself (modestly) "Enlightenment" said "*We* are guided by reason, and reason says that divine interventions are impossible." Not wanting to give up religion and the idea of God they invented *deism*, i.e. the view that there is a God but that he never intervenes in the course of nature. Deism flourished in England 1700-1750 and was fought against by the Church of England.

In Germany, this idea took roots e.g. through Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Through Kant's influence on German theologians and through Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) it made its way into theology. There it is still very much alive. A classical statement of it by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976):

"It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."

I call this the "presumption against divine intervention" (PDI).

The American philosopher Peter van Inwagen's reply: "If Bultmann knew of some reasons for believing this assertion, he did not share it with his readers" (*God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 1995, 3)

Why there is no reason to be sceptical about divine interventions

What is a causal process? Example: an earthquake leading to a tidal wave; a rolling billiard ball. Are there causal processes that are deterministic in the sense that they cannot be stopped? No, in principle every process can be stopped, e.g. by another process.

What then is the difference between a deterministic process and a non-deterministic one?

How actions can initiate causal processes?

If God moved the stone from Jesus' grave, did he violate any laws of nature? Which ones? "F=ma"?

Can we "understand" Jesus' resurrection? Yes, as did the disciples. The dictum "One cannot understand the resurrection" is a burden from the Enlightenment.

For the best arguments for the resurrection of Christ see: Swinburne, Richard, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (OUP 2003)

Why it is important to be not sceptical about divine interventions

PDI entails a false conception of God. It is misleading about God's power, creation, and his causal involvement in the world. It will hinder our relationship with God.

PDI leads to false teachings about miracles and Jesus. In order to understand how God confirmed through the resurrection that Jesus is the Messiah we need to understand that he really rose him bodily from the dead.

PDI hinders prayer. The Bible is very clear that the prayer of an unbeliever will achieve little. ("Thy faith hath made thee whole." Mt 9: 22)

Conclusion

There is no good reason for the presumption against divine interventions. If one recognises this one can reject most modernist theology straight away. If God intervenes from time to time in the course of nature, this does not impede science and it does not even violate the laws of nature. We should foster our awareness of the fact that God sometimes has intervened and will intervene.

Further reading

Bultmann, Rudolf. 1958. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. [This is a classical source of the view that God does not intervene. It is a *bad* text. You can see there that Bultmann has no arguments for his view.]

Larmer, Robert A. 1988. *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of a Miracle*.

McGill-Queen's University Press. [This is a good, thorough discussion of what a miracle is and of David Hume's argument against miracles.]

Larmer, Robert A., ed. 1996. *Questions of Miracle*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP.
[This is a discussion between Larmer and some opponents.]
Swinburne, Richard. 2003. *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. Oxford: Clarendon. [Shows that
Jesus rose from the dead.]