

Miracles and Natural Law: Are They Compatible?

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“God is not dead.” This is the recent motto of an evangelical movie, trying to depict the religious debate in modern society. It is not only a motto, but could be also understood as a response to the constant attacks of neo-atheists like Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett or Richard Dawkins. Some expected that by the turn of the century, society would be free of religion, and God would be left as the eclipse of a mythological figure. However, to the surprise of many, God is not dead, nor is religion out of the picture.

Quite to the contrary, religion is alive and thriving. This can be easily confirmed by America’s growing megachurches phenomenon. Christian churches have now become hotspots in town, where people congregate to hear relevant messages, listen to golden album gospel bands, and witness miracles happening before their very eyes. Religion has been able to adapt to the cultural plurality characteristic of our globalized era. It has adapted itself to different political regimes and even used capitalism for its own benefit. It is not uncommon to hear political candidates using religious expressions in order to win a few more votes. Cities like São Paulo are swarmed with churches at almost every street corner. Religious figures, like Pope Francis, attract millions of young people to revival and Eucharist celebrations. Books on religious life, spirituality or the God debate are sold by the millions, and can now be found on the shelves of any small bookstore. Television has also played its part in the popularization of religion. It is not uncommon to find a TV channel broadcasting religious ceremonies in packed-full churches, filled with people expecting entertainment and an experience with the divine.

On the other side, however, science has never been so explicit in daily life. We are constantly reminded of a new scientific discovery, of a new

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space launch that is about to take place, or of a new multi-million dollar project that is about to discover an unknown element of this vast universe. Our computer screens are constantly updated with the latest Hubble snapshot and our smartphones periodically remind us of a better, faster, newer version that is about to be launched. Renowned scientists like Richard Dawkins, Micho Kaku, Neil deGrasse Tysson or Bryan Cox are not the lab rats of the past, but have become popular entertainers, sometimes even hosting their own show on public television.

These two realities constantly clash with each other, producing heated debates on science and religion. Is religion still allowed any space in the public square when it comes to discussions about what is reality? Has science debunked religion? Should science be the only one to tell us what is ultimate reality? Are these two “Non Overlapping Magisteria?”¹ Or could they coexist and complement each other? If so, how to explain God in a scientific age? How should we understand divine action in a universe controlled by natural laws? Can we still believe in miracles when so much scientific progress seems to point the other way?

To the frustration of many atheists, popular surveys have shown that science has not threatened the presence of religion in popular circles. A Gallup poll taken in 1990 pointed out that four in five Americans agreed with the proposition that “even today, miracles are still performed by the power of God.”² Studies have also shown that religion has not lost its grip in the scientific community. In 1916, a group of scientists were asked if they believed “in a God to whom one may pray in the expectation of receiving an answer,” meaning “more than the subjective, psychological effect of prayer.” Of the group surveyed, 41, 8% said yes. When the survey was repeated in 1996, 39, 3% said yes.³ As can be seen, a paradox seems to be happening in the everyday life of our postmodern society.

¹ Proposition made by Stephen Jay Gould in *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in Fullness of Life* (London, 2001). He states: “The magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory)? The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisterial do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry,” 7.

² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), v. 2, 520-521.

³ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999), 265.

Is It Reasonable To Believe In Miracles?

This paradox raises a few interesting questions, one of them being: with the scientific knowledge we currently have of nature, is it still reasonable to believe in miracles? By this, I do not mean to ask if people *can* believe in miracles, for we have already answered that question in the previous paragraph. My concern is about the rationality of the belief in miracles. Is it possible to think of miracles in such a way that it is rational and compatible with the current understanding we have of the universe? As it will be seen later, one's acceptance of miracles might all depend on how miracles are defined. In our globalized, postmodern world, a definition of miracles can be quite the challenge. Some would identify a miracle in the slightest change in weather, while others would deny it even when faced with a resurrection.

In its more popular sense, miracles are understood as rare, improbable events that produce admiration and awe in observers or participants. Rare events such as surviving an airplane crash, winning the lottery, or getting into an Ivy League University are commonly said to be miracles. A lucky bride may even cry out: "What a miracle! I'm finally getting married!" Yet, a miracle, in its truest sense, implies a direct divine interference in the natural order of things. Events that could not be produced naturally are said to be miraculous, for they appear to imply a supernatural cause behind the event.

One of the most popular definitions of miracles would be that of Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who defined miracles as "a violation of the laws of nature."⁴ A more recent definition, which still lies closely with Hume's "violation" theory, is Mackie's: "A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it."⁵

In both definitions, miracles can be understood as moments in history when the supernatural (God) violates, intrudes or suspends the laws of nature in order to bring about a new reality. When Jesus walked on the waters, for example, he would have "suspended" the law of gravitational force so that he would not sink into the Galilean waters. In his virginal conception, the genetic laws were "infringed," since there was no male

⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83.

⁵ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 20.

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counterpart in the fertilization of the egg. Hence, a miracle is understood as a *pause* of the natural *continuum* so that God may do as He pleases.

Hume's Problematic Definition

Hume's definition, however, although popular, poses a few problems for those interested in creating a dialogue between religion and science. Although Hume's definition seems to, at first, define a *real* event, by the end of the definition, Hume ends up concluding that divine action is actually impossible. He himself confessed that his definition was aimed at ending the debate on divine action.⁶ Some, to this day, think he did.⁷ As shall be seen, Hume's attack on religion lies in the view that the laws of nature are prescriptive, deterministic and control a closed universe. If miracles are ever possible, they should be taken as violations of the laws of nature; laws which, by the way, cannot be broken.⁸

Ontologically, Hume believes the universe should be treated as a closed system—a universe where God cannot intervene. With a slight turn of the handle, Hume rejects *a priori* any possibility of divine intervention in the universe. By defining miracles as violations of the laws of nature, as Keith Ward put it, Hume “presents us with the picture of a clockwork universe, a closed physical system working in a wholly deterministic and regular way.” Hence, God's only option for acting in such a system would be by “breaking some of its laws and interfering with it.” Any interference, however, would seem to those in that system as irrational and a violence against the established order.⁹

In Hume's day, the view that the world was a clock-like structured creation was widely accepted, mostly influenced by the discoveries in Newtonian physics. Through the influence of Isaac Newton, the world could now be studied as a machine with its wheels, cords, pulleys, springs, and weights. Reflecting on Hume's Newtonian background, Craig

⁶ “I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures.” Hume, 79.

⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2009), 141.

⁸ Ellen White even seems to concur with Hume when she wrote: “In the laws of [...] nature, effect follows cause with unerring certainty.” Ellen White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 84. All Ellen White quotations are extracted from *The Published Ellen G. White Writings* CD-ROM, 2008 edition.

⁹ Keith Ward, *Divine Action* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2007), 179.

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confesses, “given such a picture of the world, it is not surprising that miracles were characterized as violations of laws of nature.” These laws were understood as mathematical, immutable, eternal and *divine*.¹⁰ Hence, if God were to do a miracle in order to fulfill His will for creation, it would be a contradiction of Himself.

It has been observed by many that Hume’s understanding of natural laws also entails a commitment to determinism. Such a view promotes the concept that everything in the universe is determined by natural laws. It excludes any possibility of an “outside” influence on the system, leaving that system to be regulated and directed by its own laws (closed universe).

One of the most famous determinists was Pierre LaPlace (1749-1827). To him, the universe was so deterministic, that if it were possible to know all of the laws, states and conditions of the universe, one could actually predict what would happen next. I quote one of his most famous sayings:

We ought to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its anterior state and as the cause of the one which is to follow. Given for one instant an intelligence that could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it—an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis—it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes. The human mind offers, in the perfection which it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble idea of this intelligence. Its discoveries in mechanics and geometry, added to that of universal gravity, have enabled it to comprehend in the same analytical expressions the past and future states of the system of the world. Applying the same method to some other objects of this knowledge, it has succeeded in referring to general laws observed phenomena and in foreseeing those which given circumstances ought to produce.¹¹

Many, however, have criticized this view. While necessary for scientific research, methodological determinism seems to extrapolate when used as

¹⁰ William L. Craig, “The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective,” in David Wenham and Craig Blomberg, eds., *Gospel Perspectives* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986), v. 6, 9-40.

¹¹ Pierre Simon Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (New York, NY: Cosimo Press, 2007), 4-5.

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a metaphysical presupposition. Steven Horst, while discussing methodological determinism, affirms: “*Treating* a phenomenon as a closed (and perhaps deterministic) system is *something we do* for purposes of comprehension and calculation.” In other words, much of the understanding we have of nature has come through the presupposition that we live in a closed system. The second law of thermodynamics, for example, argues for a conservation of mass-energy. This conclusion could only be obtained if we assumed that we live in a closed, deterministic system. For scientists, it is a good methodology for testing theories and applying them to problems. Methodological presuppositions, however, “should not be mistaken for a kind of *metaphysical principle*.” Scientific success, therefore, does not imply “that *these* laws we are using are the only factors really at work, or even that the universe is a closed (or perhaps deterministic) system under *some complete* set of laws.”¹²

Many have seen the fallacy of determinism and written extensively on it.¹³ It has been noted that defending determinism (or materialism for that matter), would, at the end, be an attack on our own rationality. “If all that exists is nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves. Our convictions are simply a fact *about us*—like the color of our hair. If naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that nature is uniform.”¹⁴ Our objection to determinism, however, does not mean that there are no regularities. For such a thing as a “miracle” to exist, regularities need to exist. Such regularities, however, can only exist in a universe with a Creator able to create laws that establish these regularities.¹⁵ Ellen White also critiques those who hold a deterministic view of the universe where,

¹² Steven Horst, “Miracles and Two Accounts of Scientific Laws,” *Zygon*, vol. 49, no. 2, June 2014, 341.

¹³ Anders Kraal, “Determinism and Indeterminism,” in Anne Runehov and Lluís Oviedo, eds., *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religion* (New York, NY: Springer, 2013), 617-624; Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 83-93.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing, 1960), 105.

¹⁵ John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Book, 2009), 205.

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nature acts independently of God, having in and of itself its own limits and its own powers wherewith to work. [...] The natural is ascribed to ordinary causes, unconnected with the power of God. [...] It is supposed that matter is placed in certain relations and left to act from fixed laws with which God Himself cannot interfere; that nature is endowed with certain properties and placed subject to laws, and is then left to itself to obey these laws and perform the work originally commanded.¹⁶

Hume's view entails the presupposition that we live in a closed universe—shut from any outside interference. While seemingly granting the possibility that miracles do occur, Hume quickly rejects that possibility by raising his violation theory. According to him, if the universe is governed by “unbreakable” laws, there is no space for outside interference, revelation, and input of energy—miracles. If God exists, deterministic laws would make it impossible for God to reveal Himself. Therefore, if Hume is right, we might just as well say that God does not exist.

Keith Ward critiques this view by inverse thinking. If, he argues, there is a God, a Creator of the universe, it is plainly possible that He “might perform miracles, might bring about events that no created cause has the power of itself to bring about.” It would seem illogical for God to create a universe full of rational beings, capable of communicating, understanding and maintaining relationships, and end up being left out of it. To him, “any argument that miracles are impossible simply begs the question by assuming that there is no God.”¹⁷ However, if God does exist, then “miracles could be reliably reported and justifiably believed. And if they were, they would constitute evidence that there is indeed a God.” As Ward sees it, David Hume, by defending an absolute impossibility of miraculous events, “makes an assumption of atheism to which he is not entitled.”¹⁸

Another point that should be emphasized, is that Hume's definition of miracles introduces a logical incoherence. How can miracles be a violation of things that cannot be violated? In other words, by introducing the idea of a “violation of a law of nature,” Hume is applying also a “hyperinflated sense of ‘law,’” forcing the idea that these laws of nature are unbreakable and “govern the occurrence of each and every possible event in the history

¹⁶ White, *Testimonies to the Church*, v. 8, 259.

¹⁷ Ward, “Believing in Miracles,” 742.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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of the universe.”¹⁹ Hence, Hume is introducing defects into an already perfect system. Hume’s miracles are, in reality, imperfections of a perfect world. Many will see here the incoherence.

Let us take it a step further. How are Christians supposed to accommodate this view when they consider God as the creator of these laws? It would seem, then, as an imperfection in God’s work if He were to interfere in an already perfect system, which He himself devised. In other words, how could God violate something that He made to be inviolable? This is, indeed, a logical incoherence.

Now, let us suppose that, by some unknown reason, God did actually create the universe with a set of prescriptive, deterministic laws. If it is assumed that miracles are violations of these laws, a question could be raised: Would God be able to “violate” a law that He himself established? By this question, we do not mean to say whether he would actually have the power to do so, but if He would be *willing* to do so. Take, for instance, God’s moral laws. Would he be willing to break his morals laws? I believe that many would be quick to deny that possibility. God would not be able to commit adultery, lie or covet. After all, Ellen G. White herself declared that these laws were a “reflection of His character.”²⁰ If God broke one of the Ten Commandments He would be going against His own character—another incoherence.

But when it comes to natural laws, established by the very same Legislator, it seems that many don’t have any difficulty affirming that God “violates,” “interferes,” “intrudes,” and “breaks” the laws of nature when he parts the Red Sea, multiplies bread, brings the dead back to life, or heals the blind. For these, “violating” a single law of nature, with the purpose of healing or bringing salvation, may not seem too problematic.

Nevertheless, consider a more complicated case, like the story of Joshua at Gibeon (Js 10:7-15). In answer to Joshua’s request, God made the sun stand still for almost a whole day (v. 13). Although the Bible portrays this miracle quite simply from a human perspective, it is accepted now that it is not the sun that circles the earth, but the earth that rotates around its axis, giving the illusion of a rotating sun. Hence, God did not make the sun stand

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 596; “In the works of nature they now beheld... a revelation of His character,” White, *Patriarchs and Kings*, 47.

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still, but made the earth stop its rotation for about 24 hours just so that Joshua could finish his battle against the five Canaanite kings.

Now, when taking a closer look at this miracle, considering what is now known of natural laws and phenomena, it would be easy to recognize that God was not just “suspending” one law, to make this miracle happen. To start with, God would have to stop the earth’s rotation. An observer standing at the equator, although still, is actually traveling at 1,674.4 km/h, following the earth’s rotation. If the earth suddenly stopped to rotate, at that speed, major crust displacements would be produced. The shock between tectonic plates would create massive earthquakes around the globe, followed by tsunamis greater in intensity and height than the ones that probably occurred during Noah’s flood. Once the rotation resumed, the same effect would be created, but this time, in the opposite direction. God’s miracle most certainly “violated” natural laws, for it completely canceled the principle of conservation of angular momentum of rotating bodies—a fundamental law. In addition, the kinetic energy of a rotating body like the earth could not just disappear, where did it go? It should not be forgotten that our atmosphere also has momentum, and if the earth’s rotation suddenly stopped, winds of hundreds of kilometers per hour would cause devastation around the globe. Basically, this miracle would affect every single atom on the planet.

Another important aspect of this story that should not be left out is that the moon’s rotation around the earth was also affected. Just as the sun, the moon also stood still (v. 13). The distance between the earth and the moon is sustained due to the combination of the earth’s gravitational pull and the centrifugal force of the moon’s orbit. If the moon did interrupt its orbital motion, this would only leave earth’s gravitational force to pull on the moon. A sure disaster! Yet, the Bible simply describes this miracle by saying “and the sun stood still, and the moon stayed” (v. 13).

If a miracle is to be defined as a “violation of the laws of nature,” think of how many laws God would have to “violate” in order to answer Joshua’s prayer. To many, this view is absurd and furnishes a distorted view of God. To them, only “petty and capricious tyrants break their own laws: good and wise kings obey them.”²¹ And they are right to believe so.

Polkinghorne also sees in this a theological problem, for it touches on the topic of divine consistency, presenting God as an inconsistent being—one

²¹ Lewis, 95.

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moment building something, while the other, tearing it apart. “The real problem is theological. It is theologically inconceivable that God acts as a capricious magician or conjurer, doing something today that God did not think of doing yesterday and will not be bothered to do again tomorrow.” To him, what makes this problem more pressing is that what is being dealt with is the consistency of a divine Being—a moral, rational, and divine Creator—and “not the unrelenting regularity of a force, such as the force of gravity.”²²

An Alternative Understanding

Hume’s problem presses us to look for different ways of understanding the cosmos—different forms of understanding the interconnections and interactions between the natural and the supernatural. New ways of understanding the laws of nature, divine action and miracles, need to be presented. Our society has an increasing need of experiencing the divine, and it is increasingly aware of the underlying fundamental laws that govern the universe. Do these two realities need to be in contradiction? The answer seems to be a negative.

Many have struggled to find ways of presenting possible ways of seeing the world in such a way that both realms can coexist. Miracles do not need to be seen as violations of the natural realm by a supernatural one. Actually, Steven Horst is not the only to have noticed that Hume’s definition of a miracle presses for the need of a different definition of miracles: “Such a definition—or indeed any definition that does not define miracles as exceptions to exceptionless laws—would be sufficient to avoid Hume’s argument against miracles.”²³ Therefore, rather than maintaining a view of distinctiveness, where natural laws are in opposition to divine action, a view of *cooperation* between the natural and supernatural could be proposed.²⁴ If God is the Creator of the universe, it is quite reasonable that He created the universe in such a way that He could interact with it. A closed universe, as Hume and LaPlace proposed, would leave no space for such interaction.

Therefore, if the universe was to be treated as an open system, Hume’s “violation” theory would be unnecessary, for divine action would be made

²² John C. Polkinghorne, “The Credibility of the Miraculous,” *Zygon*, vol. 37, no. 3, September 2002, 753, 754.

²³ Horst, 325.

²⁴ White, *The Great Controversy*, 525: “the natural cooperates with the supernatural.”

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possible and even welcome. A good way to understand the differences between a closed and an open system could be through the analogy of software programs. Software programs can be divided into two categories: proprietary and open source softwares. Proprietary softwares are those that, once concluded the programming, the owners of the software “seal” it and sell it to their clients. This is done in order to avoid people manipulating with the program codes. If you are a client who bought a “proprietary software,” you will be able to do only what the program was designed to do. On the other hand, “open source softwares” are programs that were designed to do specific tasks, but which its creators left it “unsealed”—its source code is accessible—so that clients could get in, change the codes, improve that program by adding features or fixing parts that do not always work correctly. An open universe could be compared to an “open source software,” in the sense that it is open to outside causes or influences. New laws or “codes” do not violate the already established set of laws; they only contribute to what is already there.

Once this point is understood, “a commitment to any set of [natural] laws is quite compatible with a commitment to miracles,”²⁵ if it is assumed that this is an open universe. However, as it has been pointed out earlier, just as determinism (or closed universe) is a metaphysical assumption, so is the idea being proposed. There is no proof, only a philosophical presupposition.

If this open universe proposition is to be maintained, then natural laws lose their predictive power. As Steven Horst has convincingly argued, an open universe perspective fits better with our understanding of nature, for natural laws do not have a predictive or explicative capacity, only a descriptive one. To him, natural laws cannot prescribe what will happen, but only describe the forces and factors involved in a process that led to a certain event. This seems to concur with Wittgenstein: “the whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.”²⁶ According to him, natural laws only deal with regularities—they say nothing about irregularities. Hence, when you add new forces or new causes, the outcomes

²⁵ Horst, 342.

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 85.

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could most certainly be different.²⁷ In a certain sense, it could be said that causes interact with each other, to produce new results. The outcome may depend on how each force contributed to reach the event in question. If you want to create different events, you need to add new causes.

If God is understood as a supernatural causal agent (not to be confused with natural causes), his interaction with the universe could quite well change the outcome of natural events. This new outcome, therefore, should be understood as the adaptation of natural causes and forces to the new supernatural cause. Thus, there is no “violation” of laws, only adaptation. Now, by *adaptation*, we do not mean that laws are changed or distorted to accommodate a new agent. Rather, the result is to be understood as the accommodation between all the forces and causes in play.

This idea was proposed by C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, when he affirmed:

If God annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter, He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born.²⁸

In a universe, where nature cooperates with the supernatural, nature does not need to feel “incommoded” by the supernatural. “Be sure she will rush to the point where she is invaded, as the defensive forces rush to a cut in our finger, and there hasten to accommodate the newcomer.” God may produce new events in nature, but the moment it is incorporated into the space-time fabric of the universe, it follows the course of nature. “Miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but a feeding new events into that pattern. It does not violate the laws proviso, ‘If A, then B’: it says, ‘But this time instead of A, A₂,’ and nature, speaking through all her laws, replies, ‘Then B₂’ and

²⁷ Horst, 335-336.

²⁸ Lewis, 59.

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naturalizes the immigrant, as she well knows how.” “Nature,” Lewis defends, “is an accomplished hostess.”²⁹

Ellen White on Nature and the Divine

At this point, it would be important to focus on how Ellen White proposed this interaction between the natural world and divine action. In contradiction to what Hume presumed, Ellen White laments: “many teach that matter possesses vital power,—that certain properties are imparted to matter, and it is then left to act through its own inherent energy; and that the operations of nature are conducted in harmony with fixed laws, with which God himself cannot interfere.” “This,” she defends, “is false science, and is not sustained by the word of God. Nature is the servant of her Creator. God does not annul his laws, or work contrary to them; but he is continually using them as his instruments. Nature testifies of an intelligence, a presence, an active energy, that works in and through her laws. There is in nature the continual working of the Father and the Son. Christ says, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work’ (John 5:17).”³⁰

To her, God was not in opposition to natural laws, but was, through His energy, “upholding the objects of His creation.” Ellen White understood God as the “foundation of everything.” Although He should not be seen the direct Causer of every natural phenomena, He was deeply involved, through the mechanisms He set in motion, with everything that happens in the universe.

The hand of God guides the planets, and keeps them in position in their orderly march through the heavens. [...] It is through His power that vegetation flourishes, that the leaves appear, and the flowers bloom. He “maketh grass to grow upon the mountains,” and by Him the valleys are made fruitful. All the beasts of the field seek their meat from God, [Psalm 147:8; 104:20, 21] and every living creature, from the smallest insect up to man, is daily dependent upon His providential care. [...] His word controls the elements, He covers the heavens with clouds, and prepares rain for the earth.³¹

Hence, natural laws do not have an autonomy of themselves.

²⁹ Ibid., 59-60.

³⁰ White, *Christian Education*, 194-195.

³¹ Ibid., 195.

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God has laws that He has instituted, but they are only the servants through which He effects results. It is through the immediate agency of God that every tiny seed breaks through the earth and springs into life. Every leaf grows, every flower blooms, by the power of God. The physical organism of man is under the supervision of God, but it is not like a clock, which is set in operation, and must go of itself.³²

Hence, nature does not work in opposition to the supernatural. To Ellen White, nature works in cooperation with the divine.

Once established the rational possibility of miracles, one must define how they occur in the universe. What would be the best way to make miracles understandable to today's society, considering the possibility of an open universe? This is an area where caution is necessary, because many, in trying to make them "acceptable" to the modern, scientific mind, have done great injustice. One of the great disservices done to religion by religious people is the attempt to turn miracles more "acceptable" to the scientific mind by explaining them through or comparing them to extraordinary natural events. This has been done, for example, in the case of Jonah. Some have asked whether Jonah could have been swallowed by a fish and survived for three days. As an attempt to make Jonah's story more probable, many have cited the example of two men who were swallowed by whales and actually survived the event.³³ Other examples could be given, such as the flood, the parting of the Red Sea or the Jordan, the quail incident in the desert, and even Jesus's resurrection. By doing so, many, with the intention of turning miracles more "believable" have actually undermined the credibility of these extraordinary events.

Francis Collins also warns us of a second problem that arises in the religion/science debate. Claiming the miracle status for everyday events for which natural explanations are readily at hand, he argues, can "kill the possibility of miracles more quickly than a committed materialism." Hence, "it is crucial that a healthy skepticism be applied when interpreting potentially miraculous events, lest the integrity and rationality of the religious perspective be brought into question."³⁴

³² White, *Medical Ministry*, 9.

³³ Edward B. Davis, "A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalist Fish Stories," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, v. 43 (1991), 224-237.

³⁴ Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007), 51-52.

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On the other hand, we should not be so skeptical as to define miracles only because they are extremely rare events. Despite how often a miracle may occur (e.g. the daily portion of Manna),³⁵ many only deem extremely rare, difficult to explain, and highly improbable events as miraculous. It must be emphasized, though, that in these cases, the event's apparent miraculous nature is due, not to the spiritual significance of the event, but only due to our lack of information on natural phenomena. Once enough information is acquired, that event ceases to have its miraculous nature and becomes simply a rare event. Eclipses could be a good example of that.³⁶ In this sense, miracles should not be explained by using a God-of-the-gaps mechanism, that is, where an unknown law of nature or cause ends up becoming God's action in the world. Miracles should not become a substitute for our lack of knowledge and inability to explain natural phenomena. Truly, a theology that relies on humanity's lack of knowledge of the natural world will find itself constricted as science progresses. That, I must admit, has happened quite too often in the past centuries.

Miracles are better defined as phenomena that could not be explained by natural laws at all. They should be understood as events that are naturally impossible for they cannot be produced by natural causes.³⁷ Keith Ward suggests that a miracle should be characterized as "an event beyond the possibility of physical law-like explanation." To him, "the notion of an event beyond the natural powers of objects is more satisfactory than Hume's idea of the violation of a law, since it does not carry the connotation of arbitrary interference, but rather of a temporary elevation of powers beyond the natural."³⁸ Its cause, therefore, should be seen as a supernatural one, that is, from outside of the natural realm. To believe that miracles can be produced by natural means, no matter how intricate they may be, is, actually, to go against all that Christianity has taught so far. As

³⁵ It should be pointed out, at this moment, that many discard a miraculous event based on its reoccurrence. To them, for an event to earn the miracle status, it needs to be singular and unique. One such example can be found in Anghel's article, "Hume on Miracles and the Lourdes Phenomenon," *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies*, year 3, no. 5, 31. Although I agree with his conclusion, his dismissal of the miracle, based on one other reoccurrence, seems to me to be unfounded.

³⁶ Mark Littmann, Fred Espenak and Ken Wilcox, *Totality: Eclipses of the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39-48.

³⁷ J. P. Moreland and William L. Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 568.

³⁸ Ward, *Divine Action*, 172.

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Polkinghorne suggested, “no one supposes that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, never to die again, by some clever exploitation of quantum theory or of chaos theory.”³⁹

Rather than viewing miracles as violations or freaks of nature, a proposition that fits better with the religious and scientific knowledge acquired so far would be that of a singularity carried with spiritual meaning which wouldn’t be able to come about through natural laws, whether they be known or not. Although not belonging to creation, God, as Creator, can interact with creation in such a way as to produce natural effects. In other words, since He can create matter and molecules, He can also interact with them, creating processes that are natural in their operation but supernatural in their origin.

In this sense, God should not be confused as another natural causer, such as an unknown law, or, as proposed by Alvin Plantinga, an event at the quantum level⁴⁰—but wholly other, supernatural. For, if God is to be understood as working through unknown natural methods, we fall back into the God-of-the-gaps fallacy. Using unknown natural laws, Alexandru Anghel warns, “amounts to no explanation and can make a miracle out of any event, which defies the whole idea of a miracle—its uniqueness.”⁴¹

Miracles and Religious Significance

Another important aspect of miraculous events that should be considered is its “religious significance,” as Swinburne puts it.⁴² In other words, it “should be closely connected with revelation.”⁴³ When identifying a miracle, one should question: “Does it contribute to the realization of a good and intelligible purpose that points to a transcending of physical conditions as their fulfilling destiny? Or is it just an odd even that seems to have no particular spiritual point?”⁴⁴ Here scientific knowledge can prove

³⁹ Polkinghorne, 752.

⁴⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91-128.

⁴¹ Anghel, 27.

⁴² “To start with we may say very generally that a miracle is an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by a god, and of religious significance,” Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1970), 1.

⁴³ Ward, 177.

⁴⁴ Ward, “Believing in Miracles,” 748.

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to be quite useful, for it is the appropriate element to determine whether a given event transcends the normal operation of the laws of nature.

Because of its supernatural origin, miracles should not be seen as merely physically inexplicable events, but astonishing and spiritually transforming signs of Divine presence, purpose, and power. As Keith Ward believes, God brings such miracles about by a special intention to “enable creatures to come to a more conscious and dynamic relation with Him.” Miracles, contrary to what Hume proposed, are “intended to be disclosures of the Divine presence and foreshadowings of the Divine purpose for creation.”⁴⁵

Because miracles are phenomena with a deeply religious significance, product of non-natural causes they may come in various formats and meanings. This can be seen by the way the Bible identifies miracles. The New Testament, for instance, uses different words to refer to miracles: “signs” (*semeia*), “wonders” (*terata*), “mighty works” (*dunameis*), or sometimes just “works” (*erga*). As Harrison explains, “the absence of a distinct terminology for the miraculous suggests that the authors of the Gospels were not working with a formal conception of ‘miracle’—at least not in that Humean sense of a ‘violation of the laws of nature,’ familiar to modern readers.”⁴⁶ Therefore, as we seek to understand the place of miracles in our universe, it is important to keep in mind the plurality of ways through which God may interact with creation, in order to bring salvation and the end of suffering.

However, if God’s intention is to bring salvation and end suffering, why don’t His miracles occur more often? Or even constantly? As Hebblethwaite suggested, “If it really is God’s way to intervene miraculously to bring about His purpose... then why does He not do so more often and to greater effect?”⁴⁷ Such a conclusion, however, lies in the false assumption that miracles occur solely for that purpose. While it is true that God intends to end human suffering, the methods He chooses to employ are not always fully understood by us. Miracles, while playing a significant part in God’s intent to bring creation back to Him, are not the full picture. They do, however, reveal and effect God’s purpose in history. And their scarcity, for

⁴⁵ Ward, *Divine Action*, 180.

⁴⁶ Peter Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, vol. 75, no. 3, September 2006, 493.

⁴⁷ B. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 89.

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that purpose, should lead us to consider not only how God wills to make His purpose for the world known, but also how to effect it without “compromising the relative autonomy of rational creatures.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, wouldn't more miracles help autonomous rational creatures believe in God and in His plan? After all, aren't atheists begging for some sort of divine manifestation to prove God's existence? Wouldn't more spectacular signs and miracles make God's existence undeniable? Jake H. O'Connell, argues to the contrary. To him, even if God would perform miracles on a more frequent basis, miracles would not make people believe in God's existence or, if they actually accepted the evidence, accept to follow God.⁴⁹ Many do believe that a God exists, but do not necessarily feel the need to obey or follow His commands. This concept echoes the biblical teaching of Luke 16:31: “If they hear not [...], neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Conclusion

Atheists have long argued that ever since science has discovered the laws of nature, the belief in miracles is no longer plausible. David Hume, for example, advocated that miracles “abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.”⁵⁰ While it is true that the advancements in scientific knowledge have demystified many of the phenomena previously thought to be miraculous science does not rule out the possibility of miracles, nor does it need to be in opposition to religious belief.

We have tried here to bring together the contribution of many who saw the incoherence in Hume's violation theory and have proposed a different view of the universe, where the natural and the supernatural cooperate with each other, maintaining the possibility of miracles. By avoiding Hume's proposition, they were able to present a worldview of a universe open to divine action, turning the belief in miracles into a reasonable option.

Miracles, although naturally impossible, do not need to be understood as opposing natural laws, but can be interpreted as events in nature produced by a supernatural cause, having a spiritual significance that transcends the cause/effect realm of nature. Miracles do not need to be

⁴⁸ Ward, *Divine Action*, 183.

⁴⁹ Jake H. O'Connell, “Divine Hiddenness: Would More Miracles Solve the Problem?” *The Heythrop Journal*, v. 54, n. 2, 2013, 261-267.

⁵⁰ Hume, 86.

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taken as gaps in our understanding of the natural world, but phenomena originated in a supernatural cause. They can be taken as evidence of the openness of creation to its Creator.

Therefore, living in a scientific age does not entail the abandonment of religious beliefs about reality. In actuality, interpreting the world as a reality created by God, open to divine action, can offer a better explanation of reality than the one proposed by Hume.

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