

## *Lecture I*

### MIRACLE AND THE REIGN OF LAW

THE subject which I have chosen for this short course of Lectures does not belong to the class of burning questions: neither the possibility nor the actuality of the miraculous is at present a topic around which controversy is directly engaged, though as a side-issue involved in other living problems it may be regarded as a smouldering fire. It is connected, however, with several presuppositions that are of perennial interest to students of what is called 'philosophy of religion' and might more aptly be designated 'philosophical theology.' It raises ulterior questions such as the meaning of the phrase 'reign of law,' the nature of inductive science and its relation to religious belief, the compatibility of providential guidance of the physical world with a relatively settled natural order, the identity and the difference between theism and deism: and indeed a number of closely connected issues comprised in the many-sided problem of the relation of God to the world and man. It

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is partly because the subject of miracle furnishes a text for a discourse on such matters that I have adopted it. But that is not the sole reason. The long controversy concerning miracle will always possess historical interest; and inasmuch as some two hundred years of discussion by philosophers, men of science and theologians left the subject in a state of confusion, it is desirable that some straightening out be undertaken. I propose, therefore, to try to disentangle some issues that were intertwined, and to discuss them separately.

The different aspects of miracle which successively received emphasis, as external pressure obliged Christian apologetic to take on new forms, are already discernible in the primitive or pre-scientific notion of the miraculous. That notion was constructed by popular thought, and for practical and religious rather than for theoretical and scientific purposes. It is not to be expected, therefore, to be a definite and precise concept. As we shall presently see, it is when we try to make it one that our difficulties begin. The original signification of 'miracle' is a wonder; and we still use the word in this primitive sense when, in common parlance, we speak of a great work of art as a miracle. In the idea of the wonderful, we may observe, there inheres from the first a two-fold reference—the source of an ambiguity which we

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shall later be concerned to eliminate—viz. a relation to other objects and a relation to human subjects. Wonderfulness resolves itself into unprecedentedness or novelty, and sometimes connotes rarity, which are objective traits; but also into impressiveness, which is a matter of subjective attitude towards an object, and a quality which an object cannot possess unless someone is impressed by it. In the former of these elements into which wonderfulness may be resolved, we detect implicit reference to a background of the ordinary against which the wonder appears as extraordinary, and therefore the germ of the later explicit contrast between miracle and a settled order. The latter mark of impressiveness almost exclusively constitutes the wonder as it was generally conceived by the ancient Hebrew mind. When, in the Old Testament, attention is called to ‘the wonders He hath done,’ there seems often to be no hint of even implicit antithesis between the wonder and the order of Nature, no suggestion of unprecedentedness or rarity. The wonders of the Old Testament might be said to be practically equivalent to the ‘signs’ of New Testament writers if we had right to believe that for those writers any event would have been a sign had it not been also somewhat of a wonder.

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The remaining mark of the miracle, as it came to be conceived in theology, viz. divine authorship, we should not expect to find in the notion in so far as it was shaped before monotheism emerged, or theological apologetic was called for.

In the pre-scientific age, before the conception of a reign of law or Nature's uniformity pervaded common thought, there could be no difficulty about giving credence to the marvellous; and no hard line could be drawn between the natural and the supernatural. But when uniformity came not only to be explicitly recognised but also to be scientifically formulated, the mark of novelty or extraordinariness required to be made more precise. The marvellous, in order to possess evidential value as to divine interposition, needed, in a scientific age, to be conceived as the unaccountable, as evincing inexplicability in terms of natural law. Events such as the devastating earthquake, at once rare and impressive, became attributable to Nature's unaided potencies, and no longer required postulation of intrusive divine agency. If an alleged miracle, therefore, was to be regarded as proving such direct agency, while an earthquake did not, it needed to be conceived not only as marvellous but also as unique in respect of its causation, and consequently as standing in

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contrast with the ordinary or settled course of Nature, the nexus of secondary causes. Thus clarification and definition such as was started when theology became confronted with the scientific insistence on law and regularity, inevitably led to the whole issue becoming vastly complicated through inclusion of reference to causation.

We shall find that when, in more recent times, difficulties increasingly beset the characterisation of miracle on its objective side, or in respect of its abnormality and its non-natural causation, the subjective aspect of impressiveness, and the function of causing faith rather than that of proving knowledge, came again to receive emphasis. But meanwhile we may consider how the difficulties to which I have alluded emerged, as theology sought to render definite and intellectually serviceable the vague notion of miracle which it had inherited from pre-scientific belief.

It will conduce to clearness of exposition to pursue historical or chronological order as far as possible, but to deviate from it and take up the logical instead, when pursuit of the latter order becomes essential for the better understanding of any stage in the controversy concerning miracle. And it will not be necessary to go further back in time than the era at which modernity may be

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said to have begun in English theology, viz. the rise of eighteenth-century deism\*, save to indicate in few words the position, with regard to miracle, of the orthodoxy which the deists unsettled.

At that time, viz. about 1700, a certain kind of rational or natural theology was generally believed to be absolutely beyond question. Locke, with some reservations, had upheld it; the deists could cite pillars of orthodoxy as professing it and themselves accepted it as self-evident or at least characterised by rigorous demonstrability; and Butler treated proof of its tenets as superfluous. The scriptures were with practical unanimity regarded as sacrosanct, and their statements as admitting of no kind of doubt. The whole system of dogmatic theology was accepted by the intellectual, whether men of letters or of science, philosophers or statesmen. Accordingly, there was no question, from within the Church, as to the actual occurrence of at least the gospel miracles, and in them was seen an overwhelming proof of the Christian revelation. Suspicion that all was not well with this received theology, save the part called natural, was first expressed by Toland, Tindal, and other of those free-lances who received the name of deists; and in course of time that suspicion concentrated on

\* See Note A, p. 96.

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miracles. The earliest of this group of writers did not expressly repudiate the miraculous: but it was soon realised that their presuppositions involved its superfluousness, and indeed implied its impossibility. Eighteenth-century deism, we may note by the way, is not to be confounded with the particular theory as to God's relation to the world which received the name of deism in philosophy. Toland and Tindal, I presume, were not read by writers of the subsequent century; if so, that would explain the fact that the deists in the historical sense of the term came to be regarded as professed deists in the philosophical sense. That is a mistake; for the theory in question was expressly repudiated, and even called atheism, by them as well as by their seventeenth-century predecessors. That it was implied in their natural theology, they did not realise. Thus the deist of the early eighteenth century would be better described as a rational theist. Another mistake still current as to these writers, is that they were disciples of Locke. In so far as Locke was an empiricist, they were not of his school, though there was much in common between his theology and theirs. Indeed, such philosophical presuppositions as the deists vaguely disclose were rather those of rationalism, of the kind taught by Spinoza or the Leibniz-Wolffians.

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This is particularly evident in their conception of laws of Nature; and inasmuch as that conception involves a notion of law which played an important part during the earlier stage of the miracle-controversy, it will be well to bring it under scrutiny. Thus we may make a beginning, historically and logically, of investigation of what has been meant, and what should be meant by 'the reign of law.'

As rationalists, the early deists believed that there existed a body of truth about the actual world that had been discovered by reason, or the *lumen naturale* alone, and was characterised by the same kind of necessity as pertains to mathematical theorems, or to the relations between propositions dealt with in the pure sciences. Natural law was among the contents of this supposed knowledge; and for the deists as for their rationalistic predecessors, 'law' connoted necessity. They speak of law, physical and ethical, as part of the constitution imposed once and for all upon the world by God; and sometimes as an eternal *prius*, existing before the world was, and which it was 'fitting' for God to recognise. As it is only on this presupposition as to the meaning of 'law' that miracle and, speaking more generally, divine providence or immanence, can be ruled out as impossible, it behoves us to examine the



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logical value and the epistemological basis of the notion.

We understand what is meant by necessity, as applied to propositions, though we cannot define it because it is ultimate and irreducible to simpler ideas. The only criterion by which necessity can be recognised when present, is self-evidence to developed reason; and in the case of derived or inferred propositions, the relation of logical implication to truth that is self-evident. In pure geometry, for instance, such necessary truth is verily encountered; there we can lay foundations by positing definitions, and we can establish connexions between them possessing all the necessity of logical implication. It is quite another question, however, whether we meet with any such truth in the applied or the empirical sciences concerned with actuality. For there we do not begin by laying foundations: the foundations are laid for us already, being posited in the willy-nilly data of sense-impression, the primary reality from which physical science sets out in its construction of knowledge of the external world. There we do not start from definitions and pure concepts, but from obscure concepts fashioned for practical purposes by common sense.

Science and philosophy can only begin *in mediis rebus*. The extremest of rationalists

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really began so, though in the exposition of their systems they set out from the finished product of their thought, the pure concept. Rationalism had attained its climax in Spinoza who naïvely assumed the order and connexion of pure ideas to be identical with the order and connexion of things, and *causa* to be identical with *ratio*. Hence it was natural for representatives of the rationalistic school to assert that laws concerning actuality were characterised by logical necessity\*. And this was the more natural because

\* As an instance of logical necessity, we may take that of the proposition 'if all swans are white, no black bird is a swan.' This would be necessarily true if there were black swans, or no swans; it asserts no fact, and presupposes no empirical observation. Similarly, the laws of kinematics, etc., may assert necessary relations between concepts such as space, time and motion; they assert nothing as to the concrete filling of space and time, or as to actuality. Laws of Nature, on the other hand, do make statements as to actuality, and before any such statements can be made, actuality must be consulted. Science, as distinguished from logic or pure mathematics, can only be wise after the event. If it define matter as what occupies space, there is no *a priori* certainty that matter has inertia, as there is that in a triangle the angles are equal to two right angles. Whether stationary matter can be made to move, or moving matter be made to stop moving, can in the first instance be ascertainable only by experiment; matter, not our thought, decides such questions. Occupation of space does not imply movability; and the proposition that 'if a billiard-ball be struck, it will move,' is not characterised by *a priori* necessity independent of observation, like the proposition about