
Preliminary Considerations

Why should anyone, living at the dawn of the twenty-first century, be interested in miracles? For three centuries the capacity of science to explain events as the result of natural forces has seemed to make reference to divine causes unnecessary, even harmful. In times of crisis, hoping for assistance from supernatural saviors seems a dangerous distraction from the challenge of solving our own problems. Yet, around the world stories of wondrous acts continue to be retold in religious communities where they are invested with profound meaning: Krishna straightening a woman's curved spine, Moses parting the Red Sea, Buddha levitating in the air while fire and water streamed from his body, Jesus walking on the Lake of Galilee, and Muhammad ascending into heaven from Jerusalem. Many religions were founded on accounts of miraculous events, acts of transcendent power remembered in stories that evoke transformative responses in readers. Further, belief in miracles receives fresh encouragement today in religious communities across the world with the rise of traditionalist forms of piety and action.

Meanings of Miracle Stories

What significance do contemporary readers find in these tales? The answer is complex. First, miracle stories support the hope that humans are not bound within the limits of the material world and that the future is not already fixed as the consequence of past events. For Hindus, the stories of Krishna's triumph over demons include their release from punishment for former deeds, encouraging present-day readers to hope that they too may escape karmic debt. The stories of Jesus's healings give Christians confidence that their own diseases may be cured or their addictions broken. For believers, miracles signify the ultimate freedom of the human spirit from the world of material forces. Miracle stories open narrative worlds in which what is impossible in the reader's customary experience becomes possible, even anticipated. Belief

in miracles is the confidence that, at rare and wondrous moments, grace may overcome fate.

Second, miracle stories serve to confirm the belief that there is a reality that surpasses, or is transcendent to, this world and that manifests its power by altering material conditions. Belief in the transcendent in one form or another is basic to most religions; and miracles are often cited as warrant for that belief. For Hindus, the ability of fully concentrated yogis to levitate supports their claim to have achieved a transcendent state of consciousness. For Muslims, the miracle of the Qur'an as divine revelation to Muhammad, an "unlettered prophet," is demonstrated by its "inimitability" that prevents any human poet or philosopher from duplicating its language. Miracle stories signify that belief in transcendent reality is not private fantasy, but a claim capable of public verification.

William James (1842–1910), founder of the American school of philosophy known as pragmatism, argued that religion "is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given, not a mere passion, like love, which views things in a rosier light . . . But it is something more, a postulator of new *facts* as well." He believed that this pragmatic view of religion "has usually been taken as a matter of course by common men. They have interpolated divine miracles into the field of nature, they have built a heaven out beyond the grave." Their view gives religion "body as well as soul, it makes its claim, as everything real must claim, some characteristic realm of fact as its very own."¹ For believers, miracle stories present "new facts" that could not be produced by, or deduced from, the world of ordinary experience and, thus, serve as evidence of the transcendent reality required for their explanation.

Third, miracle stories serve the pedagogical purpose of illustrating teachings or insights of a religious tradition and inspiring adherence to those teachings. When Buddha appeared to his kinsmen, floating above the river they were about to fight over, his levitation signified the necessity of rising above self-interest in order to achieve peace and bring an end to suffering. For a Muslim mystic, the truth that God is Supreme Reality is demonstrated by the ability, while in ecstatic trance, to appear and disappear at will. The mystic's passage from being to non-being and back serves to illustrate the Islamic teaching that everything is created by God from nothing in each moment. Those who witness or hear of this miracle are thus taught to maintain a spirit of unbroken gratitude to God for the gift of continuing existence.

Fourth, miracle stories give symbolic expression to a community's desire for political freedom. In the triumph of a deity or hero over demons, people often see a coded reference to their own authority to overthrow powers

that oppose their well-being, including unjust rulers. In Tibet, the belief that each Dalai Lama is a divine incarnation, a living miracle, supports a sense of national identity under his leadership and encourages resistance to Chinese rule. Jewish mystic masters often exercised their miraculous powers to protect or deliver Jewish communities under persecution in Christian or Islamic states. Miracle stories, as narratives of power, reflect the political situations of the storytellers. But miracles are instances of disruptive power and, as such, signal revolutionary desire. For discerning readers these stories are not innocent fantasies.

Stories of miracles, then, signify hope in radically new possibilities for this world, express confidence in transcendent reality beyond this world, provide visual aids to instruct believers in the values and wisdom of their tradition, and sometimes inspire political action. The abiding appeal of traditional stories and popular interest in their contemporary parallels indicate that miracles continue to have meaning for religious believers today as signs of transcendent power. That the term *miracle* (and its many variants in other languages) also occurs in secular discourse about startling events, unprecedented developments, and inexplicable healings suggests it resonates in all human speech as an echo of a common yearning for freedom. The purpose of miracle stories is to make that freedom imaginable, even realistic.

Working Definition of Miracle

This book is a study of miracles and the meanings assigned to them in five religious traditions: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The discussion will focus on a few examples in each tradition that illuminate the significance religious believers assign to miracles. To fully understand the range of meanings miracles have in these different traditions, we will also explore the wider systems of ideas about reality that provide the intellectual rationale for belief in supernatural or transcendent power intervening in the world of ordinary experience. The purpose of this broader investigation is to show that belief in miracles is not arbitrary, but is grounded in some coherent view of reality. (Of course, not all religious believers are fully educated in the metaphysics of their traditions; but each tradition offers one.) For that reason, miracles have meanings specific to each tradition; yet across traditions they are commonly regarded as rare and wondrous signs of a domain of being that utterly surpasses the laws and limits of our world. So we begin with this working definition of *miracle*:

A miracle is an event of transcendent power that arouses wonder and carries religious significance for those who witness it or hear or read about it.

There may be two surprises in this definition. First, there is no mention of divine beings because in some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism there are no divine agents. In those traditions, miracles are manifestations of the power of the human mind to transcend natural limits. Second, there is no mention of benefits in the definition. In most of the miracle stories in this book, transcendent power manifests itself in ways that are helpful to human beings, but not always. Punishing acts of the gods also fit our definition of miracles as events of transcendent power that arouse wonder, particularly in apocalyptic visions. In the well-known Bible story of the parting of the Red Sea, the appearance of dry land that allowed the Israelites to escape from Egypt was no more miraculous than the closing of the waters that drowned Pharaoh and his army. Our definition is intended to include within the category *miracle* every event of transcendent power, whether enacted by gods or yogis and whether resulting in weal or woe.

Like every serious book, this one is also out to get you. That is, I do have a thesis to argue—and as you likely detected in the first paragraph, I do not assume at the outset that miracles are impossible or that the people who believe in them are irrational. Rather, my thesis is this: *Despite the dominance of scientific explanation in the modern world and despite powerful philosophical criticism, belief in miracles remains strong in all religious traditions and continues to call forth official regulation and faithful dissent.* By *official regulation* I mean that miracle claims are controlled by religious institutions because they are potent sources of authority that miracle workers sometimes use to support criticism of established powers. By *faithful dissent*, I refer to the resistance that develops within each tradition by a loyal opposition whose members pose *religious* objections to belief in miracles. We shall see that not all who believe in miracles are irrational, and not all who reject them are irreligious.²

How Miracle Stories Mean

The poet and teacher John Ciardi once said that the most fruitful way to interpret a poem is to ask not “What does it mean?” but “How does it mean?”³ That is, how does the language accomplish the task of communicating the poet’s experience and insight? The British philosopher J. L. Austin called such creative use of words “performative language,” and we can say

that miracle stories are instances of such language at work. The meaning of a miracle story may vary for each listener, depending on context, language, location (in time, space, history, and geography), and imagination, the wild card in the game of interpretation. The story of a miracle performs its effect in interaction with its audience and the power of the story depends upon the audience playing the role of what the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser called “the implied reader.” That designation was invented to describe readers who can fill in the inevitable gaps in any text by means of imagination, a creative process of “reader-response.” Such a reader “must think in terms of experiences different from his own; indeed, it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers.”⁴ But that participation cannot be a full immersion in the illusion of the text, as in the effortless escape into a mystery novel. The meaning of a literary or religious text is neither the reader’s fantasy nor a transparent truth; rather, “it arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook.”⁵ Thus, even readers within a shared tradition may respond in quite different ways to a common story.

A miracle story, as performative language calling for a creative response from readers and listeners, is both like and unlike other kinds of stories. Is it like a myth or a poem or a folk tale? Are the stories of miracles like news reports or parables? If a miracle story is an enacted parable, then is its meaning limited to each individual’s response to it? Christian scholars think that Jesus did not interpret his parables, let alone assign a single meaning to each of them. We also know that Zen Buddhist masters do not interpret *koans*, the puzzling statements they assign students to meditate on, leaving it up to each individual to discern the meaning. For example, if a master assigned you the *koan*—“What was your true face before your parents were born?”—it would be foolish to search a sonogram image of your mother as a fetus for a clue because the answer is private and must be uniquely your own. The *koan* does not have a public answer that could be provided by everyone in the same way. Thus, to the extent that a miracle story is like a parable or *koan*, it does not have a normative meaning.

On the other hand, miracle stories are social narratives: *narratives* insofar as they follow a plot line; *social* insofar as the response of readers or listeners is an essential element of the story. So, while a miracle story may challenge our view of the world in the way parables and *koans* provoke us to new perceptions and values, it seems to have significance that extends beyond

individual hearers or readers. Richard Davis, teacher of Asian religious studies, notes that miracles “require an audience, a community of witnesses, who respond to the event with appropriate reactions of wonder, surprise, astonishment, and delight. Miracles also presume a set of socially shared expectations concerning what ought to happen, a common sense view of the normal way of things, from which the miraculous by definition deviates.”⁶ Miracles require witnesses for their performance, and the stories they tell must be read with attention to their construction as narratives.

Stories of wondrous events create worlds in which miracles signify possibilities of insight, action, and freedom that are not imaginable within the limits of a universe of implacable material forces. But creating narrative worlds is not an innocent enterprise. Contemporary readers are acutely aware of the layers of meaning, the strata of motives (conscious or not), and the maze of contexts (political, gendered, economic) involved in the construction of stories, let alone the worlds they project and sanction.⁷ We shall discover that narrative worlds in which miracles occur are often constructed as imaginative alternatives to the social or political conditions of the storyteller’s actual world. In these cases miracle stories are revolutionary proposals in disguise, sometimes aimed at competing views of reality within the storyteller’s religious community. Every story is told for a purpose; and every miracle story plays a role in larger contests over knowledge and power. Inasmuch as miracles are “signs” they require interpretation—and that need inevitably raises the question of authority.

That question is relevant not only to the stories in this book but also to the book itself. Each chapter constructs a narrative adapted for the purposes of this study: an overarching story of a religious tradition focused on the meaning of miracles in the tradition. Each tradition is presented primarily from the standpoint of those who perform wonders: avatars and yogis, prophets and rabbis, bodhisattvas and lamas, saints and healers, prophets and shaykhs. This approach seems to me a more productive way to proceed than to develop a typology of miracles since the same kinds of wondrous events appear in all the traditions under consideration. For example, we find cases of levitation by Hindu yogis, Christian saints, and Muslim shaykhs. The narrated acts of suspending gravity belong to the same category of miracle, but their meanings vary greatly in light of the different ways these religious virtuosi function in their traditions. The meaning of a miracle, then, is not only derived from *what* the act is but also from *who* performs it. For the purposes of this study we regard every miracle as a sign of transcendent power, but the process of interpreting its significance as a miracle requires attention to “how

it means” in the context of who exercises the power and who witnesses and benefits from its manifestation.

As a result, each tradition is by no means presented in its entirety but only in those aspects that illumine the meaning of miracles. The examples were chosen for the purpose of conducting this inquiry, so they should not be taken as representative in some general sense of the traditions from which they are drawn. Further, because each chapter tells a story in which miracle workers are central, it ignores or pushes to the background features of the tradition that many of its own adherents (and conventional historians) regard as far more significant than belief in miracles. So, while I have sketched in some of the beliefs and practices of each tradition, there was no attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of these world religions. Finally, because of the highly selective and intensely interested character of this study, the chapter narratives do not adequately account for struggles for dominance among various schools and branches of each tradition. While I have chosen a few examples of faithful dissent from each tradition, my selections serve to support my thesis that objections to belief in miracles may proceed from religious grounds as well as philosophical and ethical considerations. So, even when the analysis does consider internal discontinuities, it is guided by theoretical interests.

To focus on “how miracles mean” requires us to look at the narrative worlds in which they occur and the wider systems of signification in which the stories become credible. As the scholar Christoph Auffarth reminds us, “it is the task of the academic study of religion to examine miracles as social facts in their historical contexts, to analyze their social functions, and to seek to grasp the diverse ways in which miracles are perceived.”⁸ That task requires us to look beyond the literal meaning of miracle stories, and that method may well disappoint both believers and skeptics. The motives for the literal reading of religious texts are relative to the views of religion their readers hold. Devout Christians may insist that believing Jesus walked on water is essential to faith, while pious Muslims may hold that it is a test of faith to affirm that Muhammad rode a winged beast from Mecca to Jerusalem and then ascended into heaven. In these cases, literal readings are marks of respect for the texts as sacred revelation. On the other hand, unbelievers may insist on reading such stories literally so that they can confidently declare them absurd or superstitious and dismiss them as meaningless. Literal readings, whether by believers or skeptics, are often sadly devoid of empathy, respect, and imagination—not to mention humor. Enconced in their own worlds, literalists comfortably explain everything foreign in their terms, claiming to

know better than storytellers what their stories mean, thereby shutting the door to the narrative world the story opens.

In our examination of miracle stories, we will try not to reduce the worlds their narratives create simply to the social and political conditions of the cultures in which the stories were performed. That method would miss the point of envisioning novel prospects for changing life under those conditions. We will also assume that even the most traditional storytellers are aware that theirs is an imaginative enterprise, an exercise in interpreting events rather than simply reporting them. Because the process of interpretation involves relating stories to the ever-changing conditions of their audiences, storytellers produce adaptive revisions of miracle stories that sustain the relevance and credibility of new possibilities for personal and social life, while constraining disruptive or fantastic elements of the narratives. The meanings of miracle stories, then, emerge from the interplay among popular wonder, official regulation, and faithful dissent.

Popular Enthusiasm: Miracles in Religious Resurgence

Miracles occur only in worlds of belief and practice where miracles are possible. You may not be located in such a world, but billions of our neighbors on this planet are. If you think that claim an exaggeration, consider that among the six billion people on earth, there are one billion Roman Catholics whose Church teaches that a miracle occurs every time they participate in the ritual of the Mass, transforming bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; one billion Muslims who believe that a miracle of divine revelation created the Qur'an; a half billion Christians who believe in miraculous physical healing; and another half billion Hindus who pray to personal deities for intervention in their lives. By this rough count, believers in miracles of one sort or another constitute half the world's population—and their presence in those areas with the highest birth rates and where traditional forms of religion are flourishing indicates that confidence in miracles will continue to be a central feature of global religious life for the foreseeable future.

That fact may surprise those who continue to believe in the myth of secularization, the narrative of modernity that projected the inevitable success of science (and more importantly, technology) to meet every human need and the corresponding erosion of belief in divine beings. Of all the dramatic developments of the late twentieth century, however, the least anticipated was the resurgence of traditional religions across the world. Since the mid-nineteenth century it has been fashionable in some intellectual circles to predict

the end of religion: as the illusion of false security in a world of primal desires (Freud), as the narcotic that dulls the pain of exploited workers and the ideology that sanctions the profits of capitalists (Marx), as the mythic endorsement of human uniqueness that must yield to the evolutionary account of the origin of all species (Darwin), as the oppressive morality that constricts human creativity (Nietzsche), as the symbolic representation of societal values (Durkheim), or as the desperate claim to purpose in a meaningless universe (Russell). At the opening of the twentieth century, the philosopher A. J. Ayer famously issued his confident proclamation of “the end of metaphysics.” His obituary notice was premature, despite recent strident denunciations of theism as irrational.⁹

What underlies recent attacks on religion is the assumption that return to traditional faith necessarily entails delusional beliefs and fanatical behavior. For Sam Harris, an independent scholar whose books criticizing religious faith have made best-seller lists, the connection is clearly demonstrated in the implacable opposition to modernity among Islamic traditionalists who insist that the Qur’an is the comprehensive and infallible guide to social and political life. As he sees it, the only hope for a truce in the “war” between Islam and the West is for most Muslims to abandon their loyalty to tradition the way liberal Christians have. “A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do.”¹⁰ For Harris, who began writing his book called *The End of Faith* on September 12, 2001, religious faith must come to an end if global civilization is to have a future. Unfortunately, there are many aspects of the resurgence of traditional religion that provide ground for Harris’s concern. But do they justify his charge that tradition is necessarily opposed to modernity?

Talal Asad, professor of anthropology, argues that the charge rests on a false dichotomy, as demonstrated by hybrid societies that are part modern and part traditional. He continues, “I think that one needs to recognize that when one talks about tradition, one should be talking about, in a sense, a dimension of social life and not a stage of social development. In an important sense, tradition and modernity are not really two mutually exclusive states of a culture or society but different aspects of historicity.”¹¹ For example, Islamic traditionalists are not so much returning to the past as adapting elements of their heritage to the present. Asad helps us to see that tradition and modernity do not describe successive epochs in the historical development of culture, but that tradition is always being reconfigured according to pres-

ent needs and, in that sense, becoming modern. As he put it in an influential work: “Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless.”¹²

We live in a time marked by the revival of old beliefs in new forms. Billions of our contemporaries continue to find religion the source of primary guidance in personal and social life and the ground of hope for a future radically different from the present. In the past fifty years, religious communities across the world have given rise to what are called “fundamentalist” movements, committed groups of believers demanding the restoration of traditional beliefs and practices identified through what historians of American religion Martin Marty and Scott Appleby call “selective retrieval of the past.”¹³ Among the beliefs so retrieved is that of divine intervention in human affairs. For some traditionalists that belief drives political action as they identify divine interest with human leaders and movements, often tied to specific national identities. Nevertheless, belief in miracles can also draw religious communities together, as when Hindus, Muslims, and Christians meet at a common shrine of healing power.¹⁴

While the conflicts generated by religious beliefs play out in complex relations among nations created by global communications, economic exchange, and political negotiation, a primary provocation in contested arenas is the claim to divine intervention. God cannot be “on our side” and remain inactive in heaven. To believe in divine agency exercised in the course of history for the purpose of establishing one political order or another is to believe in miracles. If a deity acts to cure a patient’s illness, then that same deity could presumably determine the outcome of an election or a revolution. Thus, testimonies to miraculous healing and claims of divine authorization of a political program are different species, so to speak, of the same genus, that is, belief in divine intervention. This connection is one reason why miracle claims are viewed as potent grounds of authority and so subject to regulation in all traditions by established political and religious institutions.

Official Regulation: Test of Miracle Claims in Roman Catholicism

Belief in miracles is not, as many skeptics assume, merely unthinking acceptance of fantastic stories as a way of escaping hard realities of existence. On the contrary, no religious tradition encourages sheer gullibility but rather tests and regulates claims to miraculous power; and every religious founder warns against basing faith on miracles alone. Miracles are interpreted events,

signs of transcendent power that acquire meaning from the response of witnesses, readers, or listeners; they are not performed for their own sake alone. They point beyond themselves, serving a revelatory or pedagogical purpose. To discern that purpose requires critical reflection and prudent judgment, not blind faith. The authenticity of miracle claims is, then, always in question, even among the faithful. Nowhere is that religious doubt more clearly exercised than in the process of canonization in the Roman Catholic Church in which miracle claims on behalf of candidates for sainthood must withstand rigorous criticism.

Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005. On June 2, a young nun in France, who had suffered for years from premature onset of Parkinson's disease, suddenly found that she was free from debilitating tremors and able to resume her work of caring for newborns. The other sisters in her community, at the direction of her superior-general, had been praying to the departed pope on her behalf. According to the monsignor charged with verifying the miracle, "Exactly two months after the death of the pope from one minute to another, the nun didn't show the symptoms of the illness any more."¹⁵ Her healing was dramatic and entire. One moment she was shaking violently, and the next her hands lay calmly in her lap ready to receive, with delicate control, an infant. She was released from the power of the same degenerative nerve disorder that enclosed and defeated the body of John Paul, freeing her to continue the same vocation of nurturing life that sustained his soul. Restored to her role as surrogate mother, the celibate nun could resume her faithful imitation of the supreme virgin mother, Mary, to whom John Paul was deeply devoted. Through simple acts of caring for children on earth, the nun sustains reverence for the mother who is in heaven. The parallels are striking, and could be seen to suggest that John Paul chose to heal this nun, so close to him in flesh and spirit, as his first exercise of miraculous power from heaven. Seen in this way, the event was a sign confirming what most Catholics already praise as John Paul's heroic virtue.

At the funeral of the pope, thousands of the faithful in Vatican Square raised the chant, "*Santo Subito, Sainthood Now!*" Most in the crowd knew, however, that their enthusiasm alone could not carry their beloved *Papa* immediately into perfect sanctity. Saints may be discovered on the ground among the people, but they are made by higher authorities through a process that requires critical scrutiny of their blessedness. In the Roman Catholic system that scrutiny is conducted by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and among the evidence examined are claims of miracles performed posthumously. According to an official explanation of the process, two miracles "of

the first class are required in case the practice of virtues in the heroic degree has been proved.”¹⁶ While there is no question among millions of Catholics that John Paul II is both an exemplar of virtue and a miracle worker like Jesus Christ whom he represented, their popular enthusiasm on both counts is subject to official constraint.

The procedure for declaring someone a saint is designed to be so rigorous that no candidate can be presumed to pass its tests beforehand. Thus, since the decrees of Pope Urban VIII in 1640, Catholics have been forbidden public veneration of people under consideration.¹⁷ Popular piety, however fervent, cannot presume to run ahead of the careful evaluation of the claims to virtue and power of local favorites by the established leaders of the Church Universal.

Constraining proliferation of local cults of the saints is an old strategy for maintaining central authority and the integrity of hierarchical leadership. Accordingly, John Paul II insisted that the authority to canonize resided solely in the papal office: “The results of the discussions of the Cardinals and Bishops are reported to the Supreme Pontiff, who alone has the right to declare that public cult [veneration] may be given by the Church to Servants of God.”¹⁸ The act of declaring someone a saint has far-reaching effects on the worship of the faithful: every new saint adds a feast day to the Church calendar; statues and other images are commissioned; another name may be addressed in petitionary prayers; and hagiographical literature is written to inspire believers with details of the new saint’s life and examples of his or her intercessory efficacy. Because canonization obligates the entire church—especially under contemporary conditions of global communication where not only the faces of John Paul II and Mother Teresa are recognized worldwide but also images of local priests and religious are quickly posted on the World Wide Web by their admirers—it is an enterprise that must be undertaken by the head of the Church Universal.

Religious traditions, including Roman Catholicism, also generate within their own communities loyal opposition to claims of supererogatory merit and miraculous power. For that reason, the process of canonization not only allows for, but insists on, including expert consultants who can establish the “scientific value” of any miracle claim and “a board of medical experts in the Sacred Congregation whose responsibility is to examine healings which are proposed as miracles.”¹⁹ Further, bishops are instructed to include any witnesses who have credible objections to the candidate.²⁰

The ongoing cause of sainthood for John Paul II demonstrates the dynamic tension between faith and doubt in the case of miracles. The position of reli-

gious authorities requires balancing competing interests: to identify with the confirmatory power and community prestige of miracles and, at the same time, to constrain and regulate popular claims to that power and prestige. In earlier times, the balance had been struck at different points. For example, the medieval veneration of relics of Christian saints to whom miracles are attributed is often interpreted as the product of superstitious popular piety; but the historian Peter Brown demonstrated that the “cult of the saints” arose with enthusiastic support from educated classes and religious authorities in the early Church. He wrote, “In western Europe, the power of the bishop tended to coalesce with the power of the shrine.”²¹ By embracing wonder-working saints, Church authorities both appropriated their power and limited their range of influence.

Faithful Dissent: Objections to Miracles for Religious Reasons

The third element in every tradition that comes into play when miracles are at issue is the call to abandon belief in miracles altogether. These are the voices of faithful dissenters, a type similar to those the American cultural analyst Michael Walzer calls “connected critics.”²² It may seem paradoxical to talk of faithful doubt, but we hear in many traditions voices of protest against, or at least caution about, belief in miracles on religious grounds. Neither dispassionate stranger nor estranged native, the connected critic re-reads the tradition in ways that exclude belief in or reliance on divine intervention. The first usually requires a metaphysical interpretation; the second, a moral argument. The connected critic is more likely to convince the community to change than an outsider, provided the dissent is firmly grounded in the bedrock values of their shared tradition. While a social reformer may appeal to universal human rights or principles of just war that transcend the particular interests of an offending society, and a few sensitive consciences may respond, a religious critic must speak the common language of his or her tradition and appeal to its specific authorities, whether sacred texts, exemplary figures, or ritual practices. As connected critics, faithful dissenters from belief in miracles face a formidable and thankless task—even though they can often cite the founders of their traditions for support.

Buddha forbade his disciples to perform miracles in public; Jesus refused to demonstrate miraculous power on occasion and pronounced blessing on those who believe without seeing; and Muhammad taught that the only sign of God humans require is the miracle of the Qur’an itself (each verse of which is *‘ayat*, “sign”). Faithful to these original restraints, later dissenters

in each tradition argue that reliance on divine intervention distracts believers from responsibility to serve their neighbors or fulfill their social duty or act with compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh, founder of “engaged Buddhism,” writes, “When we take refuge in Buddha, we must also understand ‘The Buddha takes refuge in me.’ Without the second part, the first is not complete.”²³ Far from passively resting on the hope of supernatural assistance, one who takes refuge in Buddha accepts responsibility for becoming the incarnation of Buddha’s compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh insists that a Buddhist extend the embodiment of Buddha for the sake of others. As we observed earlier, not all who object to miracles are irreligious.

Miracle as Transcendent Event: A Response to Hume

As we have seen, religious significance is determined by a complex response to a miracle made by individuals in the context of a believing community. Even those who claim the benefit of a miracle in their private experience have already interpreted the event for themselves by placing it under that verbal sign. What others may see as luck or coincidence the believer names *miracle*, thereby declaring faith in its meaning as a transcendent event requiring a transformative response. For example, a miracle may initiate a radically new sense of moral duty: because God healed me of a disease the doctors called incurable, I give all my goods to the poor. The practical response is the enacted interpretation of the cure as miraculous. By my donation I declare that my interpretation of the event as a miracle is not a private fantasy, but a public act. To acknowledge an event as having religious significance, then, is not a theoretical exercise but a practical commitment.

So, on that basis, can *any* event be called a miracle? Most believers do not regard every stroke of good luck as miraculous. One may thank God for having an evening meal or winning the lottery, but those events do not require transcendent power. The odds may be better that one will have a satisfying meal than that one will awake tomorrow millions of dollars richer; nevertheless, both events are routine in the sense that millions of people have enough to eat (while other millions do not) and someone wins a lottery every week. While devout people may acknowledge that every good thing they experience is a divine gift, they do not regard every benefit as a miracle.

To take a sensitive example, some folks gush over a birth as “the miracle of life,” but there are reasons to be more reserved. Human procreation is a natural process that adds another helpless resident to the planet thousands of times a day. The profligacy of nature hardly seems, at the current level

of global overcrowding, evidence of divine wisdom. On rare occasions an individual may be born whose coming into the world is of religious significance: Krishna descended to teach eternal wisdom in a dark age, Buddha enlightened to lead the deluded to wisdom and compassion, Christ incarnated to save humanity from sin and death, and Muhammad chosen to bear the words of divine guidance to a disordered world. These births are events interpreted as miracles, manifestations of transcendent power and goodness. But most of us enter the world in far less glorious fashion, in births that do not require transcendent power and in conditions that do not reflect divine benevolence. If most births do not count as miracles, can we specify more closely what does?

We begin by turning to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in which *miracle* is defined as:

A marvelous event occurring within human experience, which cannot have been brought about by human power or by the operation of any natural agency, and must therefore be ascribed to the special intervention of the Deity or of some supernatural being; chiefly, an act (e.g. of healing) exhibiting control over the laws of nature, and serving as evidence that the agent is either divine, or is specially favoured by God.

True to its conventional meaning in English, *miracle* is here defined in theistic terms, specifically as an act by an intelligent and purposive being that exerts “control over” the laws of nature assumed to be the rules of the customary operation of physical forces. The editors avoided the older phrase “violation of” laws of nature indicating supernatural intervention that “breaks the rules” in order to fulfill a divine purpose. The philosophical problem with calling a miracle a violation of a law is that it seems incoherent to say that a law has exceptions. For example, if gravity can be occasionally suspended, then is it really a *law* that bodies cannot float in air? Further, defining a miracle as a violation of law seems to beg the question whether a miracle is an illegitimate intrusion.

In his classic criticism of belief in miracles, the Scot philosopher and skeptic, David Hume (1711–1776), was not as judicious: “A miracle may be accurately defined, a *transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.*”²⁴ The background for Hume’s understanding of miracles is the central premise of eighteenth-century science, inherited from Isaac Newton: that the world is composed of physical objects and forces that operate according to exception-less laws,

either imposed on matter by a divine Creator or inherent within matter itself. Hume did not assume this premise was true a priori because then miracles would be impossible by definition (a violation of an exception-less law constitutes a logical contradiction) and further argumentation would be unnecessary.²⁵ But he did consider a miracle to be a disruption or subversion of the customary order of things that would require extraordinary testimony to establish as a fact. He used language of *transgression*, closely related to *violation* or forcible and unlawful assault on the integrity of another. For Hume, a miracle is an act of violence committed by God against the body of the world: the rape of Dame Nature by her capricious Maker. In his definition of *miracle* Hume registered a sense of outrage that a willful deity, by “a particular volition,” could subvert the system of nature which Hume and his colleagues had just secured within their intellectual grasp. After all, if God could transgress the boundary between heaven and earth and interfere with the rationality of natural order, then where would science and philosophy be? What would become of their joint enterprise to master the secrets of physical forces and human actions?

By calling a miracle a transgression Hume was saying, in effect, that God had no lawful right to act in the world. The world belonged to human understanding, and any event that defied that understanding was a trespass into a forbidden region. As God once expelled humans from paradise, so Hume exiled God from the world. God can transcend, *pass beyond*, but God can not trespass, *cross over*. By means of his deceptively simple definition, Hume put those who accepted miracles in the position of advocating transgressive acts on the part of God. That is, after Hume, to defend the occurrence of miracles one had to defend the *violation* of nature, the significance of *irrationality*, and the value of *disruption*. Then as now, believers in miracles were cast at best as gullible, at worst as fanatical or deceptive.

This unfortunate characterization is the result of Hume’s literal reading of miracle stories. He seems incapable of imagining a miracle claim that does not constitute a pious fraud because he assumes that all miracle stories must be either erroneous reports or outright lies. Hume explicitly limited his criticism to miracles that purport to confirm the truth of a religion. In those cases, he insisted, the probability an event was caused by supernatural agency will always be lower than the likelihood that the event has a naturalistic explanation, no matter how numerous or reputable the witnesses. Hume asked, “And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a suffi-

cient refutation.”²⁶ In Hume’s calculus, when proof of religious miracles from human testimony is “subtracted” from proof of laws of nature established by experience, “this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, 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.”²⁷

While Hume could not rule out miracles in advance, he did dismiss the testimony of believers as always fully accounted for by “natural principles of credulity and delusion.” Hume’s assessment of religious testimony as invariably the product of deception or gullibility may not be *a priori*, but it is prejudicial. He was certain that testimony to a miracle is always tainted: “As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles, than in that concerning any other matter of fact; this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony, and make us form a general resolution, never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretence it may be covered.”²⁸

Hume’s distrust of religious motives was matched by his confidence in the reliable order of nature, and at times he wrote as if he believed that natural laws were apodictic prescriptions of the geometry of the universe. With the advent of quantum physics, however, we lost certainties of that sort. At the level of packets of energy in the nucleus of the atom we enter what the Christian writer C. S. Lewis called disapprovingly the arena of “lawless Subnature.”²⁹ Here legal order has little authority; as on every frontier, there is wild insecurity and unpredictable creation. We now speak of “laws of nature” as statistical probabilities, descriptions of what is most likely to happen under given conditions. But if natural laws are descriptive rather than prescriptive, then a reversal of what would be most probable in a given set of circumstances may be highly unlikely but not impossible. It is a simple logical conclusion: statements of probability can never constitute necessary truths. If the universe is not governed in every detail by laws that inexorably regulate all events, then some events may be produced by the trespass of transcendent power. As Lewis failed to note, Hume recognized that problem and shifted his critique from defending the invariability of nature to attacking the integrity of religious witnesses.

Richard Swinburne, a Christian philosopher of religion, is willing to play Hume’s game on Hume’s terms. Swinburne defines a miracle as “an event of an extraordinary kind brought about by a god and of religious significance,” but he is also willing to defend the more abbreviated definition: “a violation of a law of nature by a god.” Swinburne specifies “a ‘violation’ of a law of

nature as a ‘nonrepeatable counterinstance’ to it, *i.e.*, an exception that would not be repeated under similar circumstances,”³⁰ and so does not disrupt the general operation of natural law. Rather, Swinburne proposes, a miracle introduces a novel event into the system of nature the explanation of which is the personal will of God. As an example, take the case of healing from a terminal disease. A scientist might explain the physical processes that reversed course and turned from cellular destruction to restoration. But that account would not answer the question: why did this particular patient recover at this time? The medical category, spontaneous remission, is not an answer to that question. For religious believers, the answer requires reference to personal intention and agency. Moved by infinite love and mercy, God acted to heal this person. Thus, Swinburne concludes, the event has a personal, but not a scientific, explanation.

Swinburne’s claim that personal agency constitutes a type of explanation is highly problematic, not least because it assumes the existence of the divine agent whose acts it is supposed to explain. We might better think of what he calls personal explanation as a form of interpretation. While Swinburne may object to making subjective response an integral feature of a miracle, the element of interpretation is inescapable. Inasmuch as Swinburne defines a miracle as having religious significance, it must be viewed as a highly interpreted event—a point he illustrates by viewing miracles as intentional acts of a personal deity, moved by love and justice. That description is more a confession of Swinburne’s Christian faith than an explanatory hypothesis, but it is, to him and his fellow believers, a deeply meaningful interpretation of what they consider acts of divine intervention. The element of interpretation in understanding the meaning of miracles is often overlooked by critics like Hume and believers like Swinburne, but it is essential in identifying the transcendent. Let me demonstrate the point by an unusual example.

Example: Kant’s Noumenal Freedom

Let us consider a modern example of human experience interpreted as transcendent: the sense of moral duty as analyzed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the chief philosopher of the European Enlightenment. According to Kant, every event we experience is determined by universal and necessary laws of nature. But our moral decisions cannot be so determined if they are truly free. Therefore, the choices of moral agents represent genuinely new achievements of value. Good acts, then, spring from nothing but the agent’s free will. The problem is that the origin of free moral decisions, whether for

good or evil, remains for Kant a mystery because human freedom cannot be demonstrated in the world of material forces. In Kant's technical language, as material beings we are *phenomenal* (what appears to the senses), but as moral agents we are *noumenal* (what is known only by rational inference). We cannot see freedom, but we can postulate it as a "necessary belief of reason."

It is our noumenal freedom that bestows upon us our dignity as persons. Because we each possess autonomy, the capacity to legislate rules of behavior for ourselves, Kant argued, every person should be treated as "an end in himself" and not merely as a means to serve someone else's purpose. In Kant's account, what is often overlooked is that autonomy is an attribute of the human person that draws its power from beyond the natural world in which every effect is the necessary consequence of an antecedent cause. Inasmuch as the freedom of a moral agent cannot be accounted for by reference to empirical forces or immutable natural laws, it is a miracle. While Kant would be scandalized by that conclusion, his category of the noumenal designates a domain of reality that is separate from the world governed by natural laws. Further, by participation in the noumenal human beings realize their distinctive capacity to act apart from the determined order of the material world. In these ways the noumenal functions in a way remarkably similar to the transcendent in religious language. Thus, it is appropriate to say that a free moral decision, in Kant's reflection, is a transcendent event—and to the extent that he infers from freedom the postulates of immortality of the soul and the being of God as supreme moral judge, that transcendent event carries religious significance.³¹

Even though Kant acknowledged that human beings labor under "radical evil," making it practically impossible to form a morally good disposition, and he insisted that we must do our best to pursue moral duty while "hoping that in his goodness God will supplement our weakness,"³² he refused to accept the necessity of divine grace. Rather, he listed grace among four ideas he identified as "abutting" on moral religion, but vulnerable to such distortions that belief in them is practically dangerous and, given their resistance to rational explanation, theoretically useless. The four are grace, miracles, mysteries, and sacraments. The sanction of grace, Kant charged, leads to fanaticism; and belief in miracles leads to superstition.

The irony is that, on Kant's own analysis, every virtuous act is a miracle—in the sense of an instance of novelty, of genuine creativity, in the natural world. That is the deep connection between morality and miracles: each requires a rupture in the tight grid of natural order. The free moral agent acts without compulsion; thus, every act of virtue is original, that is, has its origin

in the individual will. In that sense every act of virtue is creative and constitutes an effect that cannot be accounted for entirely in terms of precedent causes. Kant is very clear that any act in accordance with moral duty that arises from inclination or self-interest or antecedent temporal conditions does not qualify as good. Virtue is entirely symmetrical with evil: both are radical, arising from unconditioned freedom birthed in the noumenal realm beyond the reach of empirical observation or speculative explanation. Every moral act is an anomaly in the order of nature.

After all, if one can explain *why* the Samaritan in Jesus's parable stopped to help the man who fell among thieves, then one has demonstrated the necessity of his good deed and thus evacuated it of virtue. Every natural explanation derives its persuasiveness from the evidence that the event could not have been otherwise. But there is no merit in doing what one must do, just as there is no blame in doing what one cannot help doing. That is why moral philosophers, even those without religious interests, object to the view that all our actions are the result of material causes. They insist that what one ought to do cannot be deduced from what is. To put the point in other terms, moral acts require transcendent origin as much as miraculous events.

Miracles disrupt order and that subversive effect is precisely their attraction, especially to those for whom "order" is too often a code word for limitation, even suppression. Popular enthusiasm for miracles does not distinguish neatly between natural and moral order. If my spirit can be transformed, in an ecstatic moment of conversion, so that my addictive desires are forever stilled, why can I not also expect my withered optic nerve to regenerate and my lost vision to be restored? Why should the disruption of engrained habit, enforced by physical craving and worn neural pathways, be any less miraculous or require any less power of transcendence than the sudden reversal of organic deterioration?

Either everything is entirely explicable by the operation of natural forces or much is not. If the autonomy of moral agents in Kant's sense is utterly free from empirical conditions, its origin is beyond natural explanation. Yet the good and evil acts of moral agents are observable events in the world of common experience. So they are effects whose causes are not natural. If unconditioned virtue and radical evil emerge from the noumenal, that which is not seen, then why not other manifestations of the supernatural? This question, systematically suppressed by the very thinkers whose arguments give rise to it, is the recurrent underground inquiry of the modern era that finds affirmative answers in continuing popular interest in miracles.

Of course, believers' claims to have witnessed miracles do not require anyone else to accept their formulations of their experience or to agree that their experience requires a transcendent reality for its explanation. But believers in miracles must adopt some interpretive schema in order for the miracle or vision to be intelligible and thus "experienceable." What cannot be made intelligible cannot serve as a sign, cannot carry meaning beyond itself, and such communication of religious significance is a primary element in our definition of miracle. For that reason a miracle must stand out from ordinary routine and yet remain familiar enough for us to recognize it as part of our experience. That recognition begins with the shock of wonder.

Miracles as Occasions of Wonder

We now come to the third main component of our definition of miracle. We have considered what it means to call a miracle an *event of transcendent power*, and we have seen the central role of interpretation—both theoretical and practical—in assigning the event *religious significance*. Now we turn to the peculiar sort of response miracles evoke: *wonder*. The purpose of a miracle, the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) wrote, is to gain attention, not to create faith.³³ A miracle is an event that startles us into considering an expanded view of reality; it does not by itself bring us to believe in, much less regulate our lives by, that reality. Because a miracle introduces a radically new element into our experience, our initial response is sheer wonder: a response embedded in the etymology of the term.

The word *miracle* originates in Middle English and enters our vocabulary via Old French from the Latin *miraculum* or "object of wonder," derived from the root *mirari* ("to wonder"). From this linguistic background we note that in ordinary usage the word *miracle* denotes an act or event, but it emerged from a matrix of meaning that connoted a human response to particular acts or events: a sense of wonder. Thus, what we use as if it were a verbal sign pointing to an objective state of affairs points instead, reflexively, to our own subjective impressions and responses. So the question arises, is a miracle made wondrous by the one who performs it or by those who declare the performance wonderful? The question is a variation on the old philosophical chestnut: if a tree falls in a deserted forest, does it make a sound? If a miracle occurs in an empty theater, is it a miracle? If sounds require an audience, do miracles require spectators? From what we have argued so far, spectators are not only required, they must also do more than observe. Witnesses to

miracles must respond to what they see—or imagine through the proxy sight of reading—with wonder.

But what sort of response is “wonder”? The word *wonder* is a variation on the Old English noun *wundor*, based on the verb *wundrian* and related to Dutch *wonder* and German *Wunder*. Beyond that, the trail grows cold; we are informed the word is of unknown ultimate origin. Perhaps it is appropriate that a term indicating amazement at what defies understanding should itself be occluded, but no words are more in need of demystification than those that refer to mystery. In the New Testament, miraculous acts of Jesus are described as “powers and wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22), a description that combines the elements in our view of a miracle as an event of *transcendent power* that *arouses wonder* and *carries religious significance*. A miracle is an occasion for discovering something about oneself (as subject capable of wonder) and about the world (as object with unexpected possibilities).

Richard Davis points out that beneath the cluster of meanings associated with *miracle* in Western languages there lies a root term from Sanskrit, the classic language of India: “The word ‘miracle’ itself derives from terms of response: Greek *meidian*, ‘to smile,’ and Latin *miraculum*, ‘to wonder.’ Etymologically, these are related to the Sanskrit root *smi*, also meaning ‘to smile,’ from which derives one of the most common Indic terms for an astonishing, wondrous event, *vismaya*.”³⁴ Other Sanskrit terms specify more precisely the nature of a wondrous event:

Some Sanskrit approximations stress the unusual character (*alaukika*) of an event, some emphasize the response of wonder and astonishment (*adbhuta*, *ascarya*, *vismaya*) it evokes, and still others might be chosen to point to divine or non-human agencies (*daiva*, *apauruseya*, *amanyusya*) believed to cause the marvel . . . for ancient Indians as for modern Westerners, things that departed from the normal way of things (*alaukika*) as they defined it would create surprise and wonder.³⁵

Davis concludes that miracles are social acts because they can be acknowledged as disruptions in natural order only if there is a company of witnesses who share a common understanding of what constitutes ordinary reality. Davis argues that a miracle requires an audience and that this feature of a miracle is cross-cultural. In this sense *miracle* is the same in different cultural worlds: it designates an event that evokes wonder.

The rationalist philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) characterized wonder as “a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with

attention the objects that seem to it unusual and extraordinary.”³⁶ Descartes laid out the etiology of wonder as a linear process: the object impresses the brain as unusual, the brain transmits that impression to the spirits, and they in turn flow back into the brain and pass into the muscles in a way that preserves the original impression. But here the line curves back and the circle is closed; the object evokes the passion, and the passion sustains surprise at the object.

The question raised by this circuitry of reflection is whether wonder is evoked by a quality of the object or by a disposition of the subject to wonder at unusual events rather than, say, investigate or analyze them. One person’s miracle is, after all, another’s coincidence or illusion. Regardless of one’s interpretation of an alleged miracle, however, believer and skeptic share a common initial relation to a surprising event: the shock of anomaly. That is what Descartes calls “wonder” and which he distinguishes from other passions by its amoral character: “it has as its object not good or evil, but only knowledge of the thing that we wonder at” (II.71). Wonder is a “primitive passion” because it precedes moral interest in the object, and scientific curiosity about it as well. For Descartes to call wonder “primitive” means that in a state of wonder we are unaware of what benefit, if any, the object might yield us, or what knowledge of it we might gain. Wonder is sheer surprise at an object that is unusual and extraordinary. Like an unexpected blow, the wondrous is striking. But unlike a blow, it is without moral inflection.

This point is of considerable importance to our use of the term *wonder* in defining miracle. The response of wonder is more primitive, to use Descartes’ term, than worship or admiration because those responses carry strong moral overtones and thus are already shaped by values attributed to the object rather than intrinsic to it. The etymology of *worship*, for example, suggests that its object is worthy and what we admire elicits our sense of its superior value. Wonder, however, is closer to what the Protestant theologian, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, called awe or dread: the ambivalent, amoral, and arational response to the *mysterium tremendum* (tremor-inducing mystery) that he argued is the source of all religious experience. Considerations of good and evil do not arise in response to the uncanny.

There is much in Otto’s account that is vulnerable to criticism; but he was right to see that religious communities develop ethical categories to interpret a more primitive passion, just as we associate various forms of music with specific emotions, such as erotic desire, martial fervor, and lament. The audi-

tory vibrations mean nothing in themselves, but their interpretation along a range of significance is remarkably consistent as a specific cultural pattern. Because the initial perception of a novel event or object carries no intrinsic meaning, Descartes insisted that wonder is without rational content and consists of “only knowledge of the thing that we wonder at.” By wonder we grasp *that* the object is, but nothing about *what* the object is.³⁷ If wonder is aroused before observers determine whether the event brings them weal or woe, many miracles are simply shocking, causing the witnesses as much distress as comfort. It is for good reason that angels are often said to introduce themselves with the words, “Do not fear.” That assurance is the beginning of the move from wonder to interpretation.

The utility of wonder, then, lies in its power to attract us to new objects of knowledge, simply because they are new to our experience. Without the promiscuous interest of wonder, we would remain ignorant of everything that did not directly serve our interests. Even more lamentably, we would be unable to entertain radically new events or objects—the way some people rejected reports of men walking on the moon because they had no way of understanding that possibility in their view of the world.

For all of Descartes’ praise of wonder, however, he was quick to add that we should avoid “excessive wonder” lest it “entirely prevent or pervert the use of reason.” For Descartes, wonder is good inasmuch as it arouses attention in the object, but bad to the extent it blocks rational investigation of the object. The problem of indulging in the habit of excessive wonder is that one loses the ability to discriminate between the trivially novel (“no two snowflakes have exactly the same crystalline structure”) and the rarity that signals an important departure from our routine state of affairs (“men walking on the moon”).

In sum, without wonder we move dully through a world of repetitive sameness, a wholly predictable round of events powerless to evoke the “surprise of the soul.” On the other hand, with too much wonder we go through life agape at every object or event as if it were worth our full attention and intellectual respect. As a rationalist, Descartes was skeptical of miracle claims; but believers in miracles are also wary of excessive wonder and its power to overwhelm critical faculties of the mind. In religious traditions where belief in miracles is strong, there are also many methods of testing and questioning claims to them and many cautions against gullibility. In the case of a miracle, wonder serves to provoke interpretation, leading to assigning religious significance to the event.

If wonder at unusual events is a universal feature of human perception, it may explain why, in one recent definition of *miracle* we read, “Belief in

miraculous happenings occurs in all cultures and is a feature of practically all religions.”³⁸ Why? At the very least because people everywhere are attracted to the unusual and, under the influence of sheer wonder, tend to interpret what does not belong to the usual order of things as having a source in another order of reality. As Davis shows in the Hindu context, for example, there are many worlds in operation at the same time, “each adhering to different standards of normalcy.” Thus, he writes, “What might seem wondrous to humans in their world could be perfectly expectable in the divine worlds of Indra or Brahman. Traffic between worlds, too, was relatively common, if we judge by classical Indian texts.”³⁹ While Davis regards the cosmology of multiple worlds as a point of contrast between Indians and Westerners, believers in miracles in many cultural locations are committed to at least two worlds: the one of ordinary experience and the one of transcendent power that impinges upon ordinary order. Miracles occur when there is “traffic between worlds.”

The greater range of vocabulary for describing this traffic in India, and the greater number of worlds which can meet in cosmic exchanges, requires the expansion of the meaning of *miracle* beyond its use in Western monotheisms to indicate an act of God. In Indian imagination a wondrous event may result from the initiative of a deity or from the power of a yogi, but in neither case is the event a violation of nature. The Western dualism between Creator and creation requires miracles to disturb or suspend the natural system, but in some Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies wondrous events are rather manifestations of one world, with its own laws of operation, in another. Perhaps all that is common across these cultural sites is the wonder with which such events are initially entertained.

Miracle as Category of Cross-Cultural Comparison

This observation will guide our use of *miracle* as a category of cross-cultural comparison. What people seem to mean when they designate an event a miracle is, at the least, that it evokes wonder. But we also observe that people add to that initial perception interpretations based on their understanding of the religious significance of the event. My argument is that the process of forming the judgment that an event qualifies as a miracle is similar across religious traditions. Wonder is the primary response that identifies an unusual event as transcendent and leads to interpreting the event as having religious significance. As we proceed along this line of perception and interpretation, we also move from a common human response to increasingly more specific designations of the event in the distinctive terms of a given religious community or

tradition. For example, almost anyone would look twice at a person hovering unsupported in the air, but a Hindu might interpret the event in the vocabulary of yogic powers, while a Muslim might employ the terms of demonic possession and a Christian use the categories of saintly virtues. Thus, we employ our definition of miracle as a category of cross-cultural comparison with the important proviso that the wondering response to miraculous events may be universal, but the meaning assigned to them is shaped by the broader view of reality in the religious tradition in which they occur. This reservation constitutes what the influential scholar of comparative religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, calls a “rectification” of the comparative category.

In his recent collection of essays, *Relating Religion*, Smith recommends a method of comparison based on historicized morphology.⁴⁰ Smith’s preference for morphology over phenomenology is grounded in the belief that there is a shared shape of things that makes comparative understanding possible. The formulation of that shared shape is not inherent in the data as such, but is a scholarly creation in the interest of some theory. While Smith insists that every religious phenomenon must be investigated with meticulous attention to its cultural and historical particularities, comparison of disparate phenomena is an inescapable component of human cognition. The trick is to keep in mind that comparisons are artificial, invented by scholars in order to illumine differences—in light of which hitherto overlooked similarities may be seen. He makes the point in one sentence: “Relations are discovered and reconstituted through projects of differentiation.”⁴¹ Finally, comparing religious phenomena requires *rectification* or correction of the academic category initially employed in identifying the examples as comparable (in our case, the definition of *miracle* by which we will recognize examples in different traditions). The study of miracles across traditions is an appropriate test case for Smith’s method because events that are the same in appearance are assigned widely different meanings. That is precisely the condition that calls for rectification of the category to insure it does not obscure or distort distinctive features of the examples under comparison. We will seek to trace the shared shape of miracles across traditions by attending to the common process by which people identify and interpret events as exhibiting transcendent power.

Miracles as Responses to Universal Human Needs

There is another feature to the shared shape of miracles across traditions, not indicated in our definition, that we must also acknowledge: hope for miracles

and the stories that nourish that hope are grounded in universal human needs and sustained by primary human aspirations. Miracle stories that appear in different cultural contexts consistently reflect concerns about illness, death, birth, and food.⁴² Mahatma Gandhi famously remarked, “The only form in which God can appear to a starving man is as a loaf of bread.” So Jesus said to the famished crowd he supplied with nourishment out of thin air, “I am the bread of life.” Feeding miracles recur in religious texts because holy figures satisfy body and spirit. But the fundamental threat, of which hunger is the mere portent, is death. It is the universal anxiety that marks and haunts us as human, and against its inexorable necessity religious traditions tell and retell stories of levitation and resuscitation. Saints and sages float above the earth, free from the dust to which all lesser beings return. Saviors and gods, crucified, flayed, burned, and buried, arise from the dead and bring the promise of eternal life. Resurrection is not a possibility within the set order of things, of course, but stories of miraculous victory over death are expressions of a nearly universal hope that the order of things is not as set as it seems.

As the greatest unknown in human experience—what we cannot know, confined as we are to our narrow lanes in the linear dash through time and space—the future also requires supernatural light for its illumination. Here the miraculous figures in two ways: divine revelation of future events and divine intervention to bring about those events. Thus, both prophecy and apocalypse are miraculous events. Insofar as stories of miracles are told in relation to human hopes about illness, death, birth, food, and the future, they represent nearly universal responses to common human anxieties. But does that observation enforce the impression that belief in miracles is a naïve wish to have our basic needs met by power more reliable than our own, an escapist delusion that relieves us of the responsibility to care for ourselves?

Miracles and Reflective Faith

Objections to belief in miracles often echo the hope of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), on the concluding page of *Future of an Illusion*, that once humanity receives a proper “education to reality” religion will be understood as the nursery rhyme it is and we will leave heaven to angels and sparrows. But the charge that believers expect divine intervention to release them from their duty to work for the improvement of the world is exaggerated. For most religious people, belief in miracles is not so much a deterrent to responsible action as it is the necessary, if not sufficient, condition of acting in the first place. After all, why should I be motivated to

sacrifice self-interest in pursuit of ideals if the course of events, natural and historical, is immutably bound by principles in place since the birth of the universe? If genuine novelty is impossible, if there is no other order of reality capable of impinging upon this world, if in fact there is “nothing new under the sun” and all return to the dust together, then I may perceive all labor to realize new value as futile. Believers in miracles believe, on the contrary, that certain events in our common world signify human possibilities and divine powers that lie beyond the limits of ordinary reality. That belief need not be confirmed under ordinary conditions (indeed, how could it be?), yet it is central to their religious faith.

The American Presbyterian theologian William Adams Brown (1865–1943) once characterized a miracle as “a strange fact with a divine meaning—a luminous surprise.”⁴³ The surprise of a novel event becomes luminous through interpretation. These two responses are dialectically related: wonder responds to absolute difference, while understanding requires comparative similarities.⁴⁴ Moving from one to the other is not a linear process, but both point to distinctively human characteristics. We are capable of surprise, but we remain unfulfilled by sheer novelty. For Brown it was a mark of progress when humans moved from receiving unusual events as wonders to understanding them as signs. At that point miracles become revelatory, not only of divine reality but also of human capacity. “In miracle man is conscious of some new accession of vitality and power. It is not simply that his questions have been answered, but that his resources have been enlarged.” That is, to designate an event a miracle is not merely to engage in a naming exercise, it is to participate in the creative power that produced the event and to find one’s own life enriched as a result. This is another way of expressing what we earlier called the performative effect of a miracle story, evoking in readers or listeners a lived response that draws them into the narrative world of the story.

We pause at this point to note important differences between telling/hearing a miracle story and performing/observing an act of magic. There is the usual self-serving distinction drawn within religious traditions: magic is the result of human deception or demonic influence, while miracles are caused by divine agency. For example, the magicians in Pharaoh’s court who duplicated Moses’ miracle of turning a staff into a serpent are denounced in Jewish tradition as opponents of divine purpose. In a reversal of judgment, the New Testament account of the Acts of the Apostles records that “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul,” including the defeat of seven Jewish exorcists by a demon who acknowledged only Paul’s authority. As a result, “a number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them pub-

lily” (Acts 19:19). From a less apologetic perspective, we may say that miracles and acts of magic both evoke wonder; but entering the narrative world of a miracle carries the potential of permanently transforming the hearer’s life. While an act of magic is puzzling, it is not necessarily life-transforming. The difference is that those who witness or read about a miraculous event attribute a meaning to it that they are willing to enact in their subsequent lives.

Further, there are techniques by which magicians create their illusions: incantations, potions, gestures, and objects endowed with wondrous power. Miracles, by contrast, often occur without ritual means by a spontaneity that signals to believers their impetus from transcendent, not mundane, intention. Finally, if magicians are accomplished at their craft, they produce the same results from the same techniques. If not, they are judged to have failed at some point in their performance. Consistent efficacy is the test of a magician. Miracle workers, on the other hand, typically do not presume to control the manifestation of transcendent power.

Reflecting strong Jewish condemnation of sorcery and divination, early Christian thinkers drew what the historian Michael Bailey calls “the essential and stark Christian distinction between divine and demonic power” that shaped subsequent negative European perceptions of magic. Eventually, even those techniques designed to draw from the influence of astral bodies on earthly events—so-called natural magic—fell into disrepute under the double rejection of scientific investigation and theological judgment.⁴⁵ In the Islamic world as well, magicians were associated with spirits (*jiin*) who could lead humans astray.⁴⁶ In all three traditions, the term *magic* serves the polemical purpose of designating powers and rituals that are foreign to one’s own deity and religious ceremonies.

In Hinduism and theistic forms of Buddhism, on the other hand, the semantic distinction between *miracle* and *magic* (both terms of Latin origin) is not linguistically available and the theological assumptions that support the distinction are not present. For example, Hindus affirm that everything appearing to us as real is the result of *māyā* (illusion) and, in that sense, our entire lives are lived under the spell of magic. According to the popular Hindu scripture called *Bhagavad-Gītā*, that condition can be good for those who take refuge in Krishna’s “divine magic,” but for those who fail to do so “their knowledge is ruined by magic, they fall prey to demonic power.”⁴⁷ Divine and demonic agents both exercise transcendent power in creating wondrous acts that are most often called *vismaya*, the sight of illusion. When performed by supernatural agency, such events may be termed miracles or magic acts; the critical question is whether they contribute to the spiritual liberation of those

who witness, hear, or read about them—or become further snares attaching one to this world.

Given the wide differences between the meaning and range of terms for wondrous events in religious traditions, let us be content at this point to observe that in the ordinary parlance of English speakers magic belongs to the powers of this world, while miracles are signs of transcendent reality. Yet the distinction becomes less bright in the modern turn of the miraculous from supernatural intervention in nature to transformation of human motivation.

William Adams Brown claimed that the form of creative energy that awakens wonder and calls for meaning shifts as human consciousness develops. “When life is simple and needs largely physical, miracle is sought and is found without—in the rain that saves the harvest, in the pestilence that destroys the enemy, in healing for the body, or water smitten from the rock; but where the conscience awakes and man . . . realizes that his worst foe and his most formidable dangers are within, the centre of interest shifts from the body to the soul.”⁴⁸ We find similar judgments in other religious traditions: that the shift from outer to inner concerns, from power over the material world to mastery of spiritual reality, is a sign of religious maturity.⁴⁹

Miracles of the sort that most attract popular attention—levitation, translocation, clairvoyance, and healing—are often proscribed by religious authorities and devalued by the very ascetics, mystics, and spiritual masters best qualified to perform them. Despite cautions from the highest authorities, however, ordinary believers flock to shrines, temples, mosques, and churches in search of wonders. For them the meaning of miracles consists primarily in their signifying possibilities of achievements of new value in a degenerate world, of freedom from the pitiless necessities of closed systems, natural or political or personal. Whether the breakthrough comes in immediate and unprecedented release from disease, imprisonment, addiction, or despair, it is a sign of ultimate freedom: a promise of access to divine power.

If there is a transcendent realm of being, a claim at the heart of most religious traditions, and if humans are able to know or participate in that realm, then miracles seem not only possible but also necessary as signs of that being. For Brown, the final psychological ground for belief in miracles was the desire for certainty about the reality of God, a confidence that requires for its greatest assurance confirmation in public form. “It is not only in the closet that man has met God face to face,” he wrote, “but on the wider stage of nature and of history.” Despite philosophical, scientific, and historical objections, religious belief in miracles remains strong both in the closet of inner transformation and on the stage of public display.

Inner and Outer Miracles

Miracles come in many forms: preternatural powers, such as levitation, control of weather, freedom from limits of time and space, transformations of nature, insight into the minds of others; healings of body and mind; visions of divine beings or of future events; and knowledge of reality beyond finite consciousness. As miracles occur in different ways, so believers testify to their presence in different domains of experience. Some may feel directly in their bodies a miraculous healing. Others may see with their own eyes a person rise from the dead or storms dissipate at the wave of a saint's hand. Still others may be filled with spontaneous joy or a sense of unconditional forgiveness or compassion embracing all creatures or inexplicable tranquility of soul in the midst of suffering or mourning. Believers interpret such states of enhanced awareness as gifts from beyond their own emotional and psychic resources. Whether experienced as deliverance from overpowering addiction when one has "hit bottom" or as release from paralyzing depression or as the centering of scattered thoughts and energies in a creative focus, these are some instances of what religious believers call miracles.

But there is another type of experience that we must also consider. Some believers claim to receive knowledge that surpasses the limits of human understanding through revelation. For Siddhartha Gautama, sitting in determined meditation, the clear realization of his true being transformed his consciousness. No longer deluded by ordinary human awareness, he became the "enlightened one," Buddha. The miracle in this case was not the result of supernatural agency, but of Siddhartha's discovery of reality beyond the world in which all suffer and die. On very different premises, St. Paul claimed to receive transcendent knowledge through revelation. He insisted that his gospel was "not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11b–12). That is, the insight he was given into the significance of Christ's death and resurrection did not come from other disciples, nor was the truth drawn from his own reason. The mystery he proclaimed had been "hidden for ages in God who created all things," and who now chose to reveal secrets kept since "the foundation of the world" to his chosen apostle (Ephesians 1:4). In both cases the miracle consisted of an event of disclosure, private apprehension of transcendent reality that inspired public teaching and proclamation.

Interestingly, Paul testified that his own prayer for a miracle of healing was denied, three times, until he finally gave up—content that the inner miracle

of enlightenment was of higher value than the outer miracle of physical healing. On that principle, religious leaders often seek to confine popular enthusiasm for miracles to higher spiritual aspirations. For example, one Sufi saint declared, “It is better to restore one dead heart to eternal life than to restore to life a thousand dead bodies.”⁵⁰ Perhaps, but the thousand mourners at the side of those dead bodies might well disagree. For them the miracle of receiving lost loved ones into their arms again in this world would be a far greater display of transcendent power and goodness, a more wondrous benefit, than the unseen transformation of an insensitive soul. Charles Dickens portrayed the melting of the miserly heart of Ebenezer Scrooge as a Christmas “miracle,” but any parent knows that the healing of Tiny Tim is the true wonder of the story. When a miracle transpires in the secrecy of private experience, it loses its power to bestow wider meaning. It is no longer a social act that carries religious significance beyond the individual. Thus, despite cautions by officials and skepticism by critics, people of faith continue to believe in miracles as public displays and not merely personal benefits—even if most believers never see a miracle themselves.

Belief without Expectation

There is no more persistent feature of religious life than unanswered prayers for miracles. Believers across traditions pray for healing of their bodies and cures of loved ones, for rain on their fields and food on their tables, for knowledge of future events and visions of enduring reality beyond this world. In short, they pray for freedom from the constraints of limited existence within a fated natural order. They pray, however, with a history of death, starvation, and unforeseen disaster behind them. They pray, furthermore, with the paradox of confidence that a miracle *could* occur and reluctance to affirm that a miracle *must* occur. They pray for the best, they say, and prepare for the worst. They do not pray out of desperation for to be desperate, as the Latin root of the word indicates, is to be without hope, and they offer their prayers with courageous hope. But that hope is held in spite of the background knowledge that almost all prayers for miracles go unanswered.⁵¹ In the nature of things, it could not be otherwise.

A miracle cannot be necessary because there is no system of causation, physical or moral, that could guarantee a miracle. Here is where religious traditions often draw another line between magic and miracle. A believer kneeling in prayer or bowing in worship is not performing a magic trick, but registering a need that cannot be met by any exercise of natural powers and

awaiting a deliverance that cannot be scheduled or demanded. An attitude common among devotees of Krishna, disciples of Jesus, and servants of Allah is to leave the outcome to divine will. Similarly, some Buddhists and Hindus, who seek no relation with personal deities, do not regard ascetic denial or prolonged meditation as leading *necessarily* to spiritual liberation. In fact, ascetics in all traditions are famously scornful of those who offer shortcuts, let alone guaranteed programs, to enlightenment or holiness.

In whatever form a miracle is sought, there cannot be a direct relation between the way of seeking and certainty of attaining the end. Believers in miracles seem clearly to understand this discontinuity and are not unduly discouraged by it. Most pilgrims to Lourdes, including popes, return home with their medical conditions none the better. Most daily bathers in the sacred Ganges proceed on their way with prayers for health or fortune unanswered. Yet the lack of supernatural response neither precipitates a crisis of faith nor prevents a return trip. It appears that only skeptics consider such experiences as disconfirming faith. For believers, the rarity of miracles is essential to their capacity to evoke gasps of wonder and prayers of thanks.

Still, one might persist, how is it possible to sustain belief without expectation? If not the anticipation of personal benefit, provided at the moment of acute need, what other values could miracles realize? Why do people rush to sites of apparitions of the Virgin Mary or to milk-drinking statues of the Hindu god Ganesha, to witness what they believe is a divine intervention that offers them no immediate personal reward? Conventional answers play on public gullibility, political and economic interests, official deceit and manipulation—and it cannot be denied that these factors play a role. In fact, the frequency with which ordinary believers are duped by religious charlatans, whether priests, rabbis, or gurus, is great enough that all traditions develop safeguards against them, from official control to cautionary tales in oral culture.

But most believers in miracles are not fools; they are simply playing the odds. By its nature as an event of transcendent power, a miracle cannot be predicted or compelled by anything in the world, including human agency or need. Thus, one could never count on a miracle occurring, just as one cannot count on drawing the winning numbers in a lottery. Yet uncertainty about actually pulling the winning combination does not cancel the possibility of winning, assuming the lottery is not rigged. Similarly, one can believe that miracles happen, without assuming that the specific miracle one desires will occur. For example, even if it is possible that your heart disease will be miraculously healed, it is improbable. Therefore, you would be wise to seek

the best medical treatment you can find. Praying for miracles does not guarantee their occurrence, and faith endures disappointment—still the believer hopes for that unexpected breakthrough that signals an event of transcendent power, wondrous in its startling newness and rich with meaning for the rest of one's life.

Talk about miracles across the five traditions we will consider in this book expresses a common desire for freedom from the merciless confines of time and space, from the inevitability of age and death, from the limits of body and mind. Perhaps at the most basic level, belief in miracles is the expression of our refusal to accept existence in a closed system of material forces and our hope that the future may be radically different from the past. Religious or not, I believe, we all desire the rare and striking wonder that will open our lives to new possibilities. Is that not, after all, a large part of what it means to be human?