

## MAN OF MIRACLES

The "miracles" done by Jesus have for many years perplexed Christians by a scale of degrees that appears to correlate positively with a person's level of formal education. The more formal education one has, the more is one likely to be perplexed by these miracles. It would seem that education and belief in the miracles done by Jesus are incompatible. Perhaps this is some of what St. Francis had in mind to support his disfavor of formal education. Well, this has not always been the case and is not always the case even today. But it has, from time to time, been very much the case for many educated people, including and especially clergymen and scholars.

Some years back I served as Organist to a small parish of the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego. One day the Rector of that parish asked me to accompany on the organ a special service in plainsong and chant which would be sung by a small group of his fellow clergymen. These men, including himself, were devotees of a cult of the Holy Virgin which was open to clergymen only. Periodically they met to sing the Mass and reaffirm their devotion to the Holy Mother with a special Service of Worship that made up in rich vestments, chants, censers and other supporting paraphernalia of Pusey's Anglo-Catholicism (which is just Cluny's Franco-Romanism, which is just Aaron's auro-bovinism) what it lacked in number of participants. I agreed to accompany the service.

When it was over, the clerics, some 5 or 6 of them, retired to the lounge

chairs of the parish garden, there to imbibe some hard liquor as fortification against a huge steak feast they had reserved for themselves at a local restaurant. While they were engaged in this social repast, I was engaged in building a dog house inside a garage-cum-wood-and-tool-shop next the garden where the clergymen reclined, chatting. I was able to hear every word spoken, and especially so after some minutes when their volubility had been raised by the nature of their refreshment. It was not my plan to listen. I was engaged in a building project. But, after the usual banter on the trials and titillations of the parish ministry had passed their lips, they launched upon a topic that caught my ear by its very unbelievability.

It was two of their number who had got hold of an old book relating miracles done by various Christian Saints of England through the years. From this book, which was the older-style epitome of pious reverence for the deeds of great men and women, the two clergymen commenced to read as if it were a burlesque after the manner of Mad Magazine. Evidentially, they had brought the book to this gathering with this purpose in mind. They guffawed at every line, they begged their bretheran to listen to each next hilarious whopper, they slapped their thighs in high glee, one of their number apparently almost falling from his lounge chair in double hysterics, and they spilled their cups in the excitement of ribalding the tales related in the old book. In a word, there was for them so much of entertaining buffoonery in these pious stories of saintly miracles that the clergymen -- who did not know I overheard their partying -- quite came apart in the delicious ridicule that was their vicious merriment.

Standing in the garage, listening to their fusillade, I was speechless. I had a burning sensation all over. My eyes burst into a flood of tears that I could not stanch for some minutes. Anger, white hot and raging, seethed inside me with cyclonic fury. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to tear through the walls of the garage and liquidate these clergymen on the spot. I had a thousand things to say to them, each fried to a cinder in the wrath that was inside me. I could not understand how they could descend from their High-Church cult of the Holy Virgin to this depth of satanic enormity. I wondered how they could read the Gospels from their pulpits. I was aghast and infuriated, both.

I waited to see if the Priest I worked for would curb the insolence of the two leaders, for I knew him as an older man of at least outward piety and sense. But no, his voice went jingling along with the rest in loud, rolling peals of uproarious laughter.

Finally, overcome with grief and remorse and wanting desperately to defend the sanctity of the Saints, I decided that I was an eavesdropper anyhow and that I should continue building the dog house. This I did, after regaining my composure. I do not remember later remarking this incident to the Priest I worked for. And, if I had, I am sure he would have responded with something like: "Don't be so sensitive." I was not Organist to that parish a month longer. Never again, I resolved, would I accompany those clergymen in the Worship of Almighty God. St. Teresa of Avila, I remembered, had had to observe vile devils <sup>seated</sup> triumphantly (on the shoulders of) a regular priest as he intoned the Words of Institution. It is not a pleasant experience.

The stories of miracles done by Jesus and Saints have not always been believed, especially by educated men and women of modern times. Not many will subject these stories to the sort of perfidious sarcasm given them by these Episcopalian clergymen. But many there are who will dismiss the stories as pious fables containing some germ of truth encased in human foibles. In other words, there is a marked tendency to regard such stories as not, in fact, factual in the sense of observable in the regular course of daily affairs. This tendency becomes the more pronounced and the more clearly remarked as one gets more academic degrees behind one's name.

Nor, I think, can one entirely blame the people who regard the stories of miracles so. The very system of education in which they have, perforce, to earn their degrees is positively prejudiced against any such stories. The educational system is based on the manipulation of tangibles and operates, deliberately, to exclude intangibles from the curriculum. Whether or not this approach is realistic -- a subject I shall not explore further here except to say that it is not -- it is a fact that this approach is almost universally adhered to by educated Western peoples today and so it should come as no surprise that the stories of miracles are often regarded as tales, pious or not.

For me, the whole issue of the believability of miracles turns on one's own spiritual maturity. Of course, people of low maturity will regard the stories as unbelievable. People of some maturity may regard them as factual or quasi-factual, perhaps embellished in the telling, but of positive worth in pointing to spiritual truth. People of such maturity will probably feel more at home with the stories of miracles than with the theories of

science and will look about them and wonder what all the fuss is all about, anyhow.

There is a continuum of cognition here, running from immature people, who cognize through their senses, poor instruments at best, all the way up to mature people, who cognize with the inner eye of wisdom. Roughly inbetween on this continuum of cognitive accomplishment are those who rely on their intellect or reason to curb and canalize the fickleness of the mind, which is always going out through the senses to grasp what the senses have encountered. The highest cognition, however, is above even the intellect and consists in the inner eye of wisdom or yogic vision -- or, what the Christian mystics have usually termed "contemplation."

Those engaged in contemplation have no trouble believing the stories of miracles. In fact, to such people, miracles are rather mundane matters, of as little noteworthiness as any other phenomenon. Those who use their intellect, and use it well, will believe the stories of miracles but stand somewhat in awe of them, considering them very important "proofs" of the Presence of Divinity. Those who use their intellect sloppily will appreciate the stories of miracles and have some feeling that they are worthwhile, but, in general, they will regard them as pious fiction which, at the most, may contain some grain of facticity that has been heavily overlaid with embellishments, intensifying their "miraculousness," during long years of retelling. Those who cognize through their senses will regard stories of miracles as stupid fiction, unscientific mythologizing, contemptible poppycock, ridiculous ravings, not true.

So, it is a matter of the level and license of one's maturity. To get a man locked into his senses to believe the stories of miracles by adducing evidence for him will not work. To get a person of high intellectual accomplishment to treat the stories with indifference -- as the doers of miracles do -- by evincing a blasé attitude toward them will probably not work. In fact, it may suggest to him that you are an irreverant fellow. One has to wait, in each case, for the next step in maturity to mature, to be reached, inwardly, by the person himself or herself. This can take a little time or a lot. It depends on the inward prompting of Divinity Itself. Not all flowers bloom at the same time. But, all must bloom and fruit, sooner or later.

However, we can say most emphatically that the real goal is not to believe the stories of miracles at all but to be unbothered by them, unconcerned, in fact, disinterested altogether. The real "miracle" is not the deed but the Doer. He is Who the contemplator of these events is beholding. He cannot be beheld by the senses or even by the intellect but only through the inner contemplation. This is the truth of stories of miracles. Miracles are no more than the Divine Calling Card. Really speaking, they are tinsel and trash. The Caller -- He is the real miracle. The contemplator -- he is the miraculous event. Miracles help to convince the wavering and confuse the wandering. For the initiated, they are only what one would expect.

Still, we may observe that the miracles done by Jesus are not different or more extra-ordinary than those done by many, many other personages both before and after His Career. This is an important fact which is, perhaps,

better known to Catholics, who are familiar with the lives of Saints, than to Protestants, who have tended to excise the saintly record from their ruminations. Viewed just within the Hebrew and Christian traditions, the miracles done by Jesus are rather unremarkable in that they exist within a vast continuum of such events, extending from well before to well after His Career.

Even more so are they unremarkable when viewed within the whole flow of human history. Against this background, the miracles done by Jesus hardly stand out at all, not because they are made insignificant by comparison with others, but because they are such a few amidst such a countless congregation. One can hardly deny the reality of the miracles done by Jesus without taking on the reality of history itself -- such is the effrontery of the gesture. It is equivalent to denying the existence of a whole phylogenetic sheaf on the up-surgng Tree of Life. And while one can hardly expect a complete dearth of those with sufficient wildness of vaunt to take on the history of mankind with impunity, one cannot <sup>resist</sup> marveling at the raw glamour and gorgeous conceit of those who actually make the effort.

Those who would deny the miracles done by Jesus are taking on the likes of <sup>Saints</sup> Augustine, Jerome and Francis, Sages Wasishta, Vyasa and Valmiki and the Avatars Rama, Krishna and Sathya Sai Baba. In other words, one needs to be a degree on the far side of insane to do this.

Each of the miracles done by Jesus is well-attested from other sources and traditions. Many that are not attributed to Him are plentiful elsewhere. Even the Resurrection is hardly unique among miracles. Jesus Himself

tells His disciples that they will do more and greater than He does. So, one must conclude about these events that their only extraordinariness is our own extraordinarily tender blood for believing their existency.

#### ONE SALIENT CIRCUMSTANCE

Over only three things of the "miraculous" sort do we need to pause to reflect upon their significance for the problem at hand: namely, Christian and Islamic statements regarding the Nature of Jesus. These three things are omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, three attributes which, rightly, are regarded as belonging to the Godhead alone. About these attributes as they pertain to Jesus of Nazareth the Bible is of a double mind and tongue. In the Synoptic Gospels, none of these attributes is attributed to Jesus as from His Birth. He is presented as possessing decidedly divine powers, but not absolute omnipotence. He is shown knowing events and thoughts in advance but not having absolute omniscience.

Omnipresence is an attribute the Synoptics attribute to Him only after His Ascension. By contrast, the Pauline and Johannine literature -- followed in extenso by the Creedal Conventions -- portrays Him as having these attributes from before birth but, prior to birth, emptying Himself of the bulk or weight of them so as to enter this transitory life with a mere fraction of the Glory which He is and has by right as One Person of the Godhead.