**Demythologisation and Miracle**

In the UK recently, there was a well publicised case of a young boy, Archie Battersbee, who had sustained severe brain damage in Aprill 2022 as a result of a play activity that had gone terribly wrong. The case was notable for the long dispute that took place between the boy’s family and the hospital trust responsible for his care. Very soon after he was admitted to hospital, the trust had tried to end life-support on the grounds that Archie had suffered irrecoverable brain death. The family, however, campaigned to prevent this, until August 2022 when every legal recourse was exhausted; Archie’s life ended on August 6th 2022. The family acquired Christian beliefs in the turmoil of their tragedy and they, and Archie, were Christened during his illness. They established a Facebook page that invited communal prayer for Archie’s recovery. One of the reasons that the family wished to delay the ending of life support was that, as Christians, they continued to hope for a miraculous recovery on Archie’s part.

What form, for a Christian, might such a hope take? The view of Christianity from outside is probably that such a hope is for a supernatural intervention, one that seems to turn over the laws of nature. For instance, while scans revealed that Archie had sustained considerable brain damage, it might involve the hope that a subsequent scan would show the brain damage healed, despite all science saying that no such recovery is possible. After all, events of this order are recorded throughout the Gospels. The blind are made to see, the lame to walk; even the dead might be raised.

There are those, of course, who carry such a faith into the 21st century. For a healer like Jordan Seng, anything is possible. In his own ‘supernatural ministry’, ‘A tribal woman is healed of tumours in the mountains of Thailand. A crippled three-year-old walks in Sri Lanka. An African villager is healed of lung disease’[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless, there are many sincere Christians who are wary here. One development in 20th century Christian theology, issuing out of the work of ‘demythologising’ theologians like Rudolph Bultmann and Don Cupitt, discourages us from seeing the Christian message in overtly supernatural terms. For them, the Christian life is primarily one of inner transformation. It does not depend on believing the literal truth of Biblical history. The truth of Christianity does not depend on whether Jesus literally raised Lazarus from the dead. Jeffrey John, in a recent account of miracles, has recognised that for many Christians, these two views of miracle in Christian faith may equally call for loyalty. He recalls how at school he was taught RE by two teachers. First, there was Mr Davies, who believed what the Bible said, ‘had they only appeared in its pages, he would have believed in leprechauns’. Then there was Miss Tomkins, who had ‘reductionist’ ‘Modern Views’. She had read the demythologising John Robinson’s *Honest to God* and ‘Her great speciality was demolishing miracles’[[2]](#footnote-2)

John himself tries to weave a path through these poles by encouraging us to focus less on ‘what happened’ when a story of a miracle is told in the New Testament. He is clearly suspicious of the literal approach, ‘We are not required to believe in the existence of fork-tailed demons’, he says, when we read of Christ casting out demons. But he says he does not support the demythologising account either, in which miraculous events are to be grasped in ‘this-worldly’ terms. Still, in his own account, in which the casting out of demons is primarily intended to make us grasp ‘that the healing Jesus brings is as necessary for systems and societies as it is to individuals’, he shows how hard it is, in the 21st century, not to inherit the bones of the demythologising tradition. For otherwise, if for one moment we concede that something supernatural might be possible, we feel ourselves at risk of incurring Miss Tomkins’ wrath about ‘primitive’ Christianity.

John may also be unfair to the more eloquent forms of demythologisation with his charge of reductionism. In Bultmann, for example, there is a clear sense that the Christian message cannot be ‘reduced’ to this-wordly terms, that there are elements of Christian faith that involve transcendence. There is also a scepticism about the adequacy of the scientific world-view to a full understanding of human life.

Bultmann sees, or we might say, *almost* sees, that the ancient mythology which permeates the New Testament contains a fundamental element that remains for the Christian when the detail of that mythology is stripped away: ‘It believes that the world and human life have their ground and their limits in a power which is beyond all that we can calculate or control’[[3]](#footnote-3) It is out of this sense of such a ‘power’ that the idea of God grows. But in the fullest idea of God, even the notion of ‘power’ requires some demythologising. In ancient mythology, the mistake is that the gods are portrayed ‘as if they were men and … their actions … human actions’. Socrates had long ago warned us against seeing gods in such a way, and this warning would have applied also to the Jewish conception of God, Yahweh, in the Old Testament. What even Socrates proposed, and what emerged in due course at the heart of monotheistic faith, out of neo-Platonism and the work of the early Christian philosophers, is this sense of a power beyond all that we can calculate or control, what Socrates called The Form of the Good, the neo-Platonists called The One, what St Anselm called ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, even what the Hindu calls Brahman.

Those, like the Battersbees, who hoped for miracle are essentially hoping for what they know in a sense to be impossible. The English philosopher, David Hume, famously argued that it is entirely irrational to believe in miracles. Miracles, he said, are breaches of natural law, and therefore they are events with a probability of 0. Consequently, one can never rationally believe that a miracle has occurred for it is always more probable that reports of such a thing are false than that such an event has occurred. But the Christian believes that his life and the world have their ground and their limits in what is beyond anything that can be calculated or controlled. In terms of what can be calculated and controlled, miracles are impossible. But to believe that the impossible remains possible is to believe that the world is beyond calculation and control. One has, of course, no conception of what a particular miracle might involve. To even begin to describe how such a thing might occur would be to slip into the kind of mythology that Bultmann wants to avoid. But to believe that a miracle, an impossible event, might occur is nothing more than to believe in God transcending the world. This particular belief is not one that can be rendered by any particular mythical form. The ancient myths aim to grasp some part of this idea. Demythologising our faith requires us not to be too closely tied to any particular mythical form in its articulation.

Bultmann himself possibly finishes on a confused note. He thinks that ‘modern man’ cannot admit the idea of a miracle into his world-view, because the scientific world-view requires every event to have a causal explanation in naturalistic terms. But Bultmann accepts that there are elements of our world-view that are beyond science. He believes that features of the conscious life of free agents do not fit into a scientific picture. This may be true. But it can be argued that it is not possible to imagine a scientific account of the whole of creation, of the whole of being. For this would require, among other things, an account of why anything exists at all, and there clearly can be no *scientific* account of such a thing. It is actually hard to imagine any kind of *account* of such a thing. Being stands over against us, its existence a profound mystery, made more mysterious indeed by the fact that we participate in it. The religious person believes that at the heart of being, or perhaps even *beyond* the distinction between being and non-being (as is so beautifully expressed in the Rig Veda), there is a ‘power’ beyond anything we can calculate or control. It is against such a background that the thought of, and occasionally the hope for, miracle makes sense. When the Battersbees prayed for a miracle for Archie, they prayed for the impossible, but for the impossible that may still happen.

1. Jordan Seng, *Miracle Work,* IVP Press (2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracles,* Canterbury Press, Norwich (2001), p.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* SCM (1960), p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)