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# *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*

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## New Humanity, New World

### I. Problems of Approach

In theology, as in the other sciences, questions of approach often play a determining role. The approach chosen may lead to impassable or irrepressible resistances, or on the contrary it may render the listener well disposed and promote understanding of the arguments offered. In recent decades theology has seen two changes of approach important enough to justify speaking of them as revolutionary: I am referring to the anthropological approach and the Christological approach. If I emphasize them as much as I do, it is because the change in perspective which they embody affects the theology of signs and especially the theology of miracle.

The anthropological outlook is everywhere evident.<sup>1</sup> Theology today is interested in the mysteries, not only in themselves but also, and even more, in what they mean for human beings and their salvation. This trend is a reflection of contemporary thought for which the human person is the center of everything, a point of universal reference. Henceforth all knowledge of God, even knowledge of the God of revelation, must come via the human person.

Scholastic theology was an effort to understand the mystery of God as God. Contemporary theology, for its part, is concerned primarily with bringing out the meaning of the Christian mystery for human beings. Even when it is confronted with Christ, the first thing it asks is what meaning Christ represents for human beings and the problems inherent in their condition. Is or is not Christ the one who deciphers the mystery of the human person, the sole exegete of the human enigma? Men and women today have little interest in a religion that has nothing decisive to say about their condition.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, contemporary theology is asking about human beings as located in the world and in time, about men and women as believers or non-believers. It desires to confront all the human problems: solitude, otherness, love, friendship, suffering, illness, death, family, profession, work, research, technology, progress, freedom, liberation, culture, politics, economics, and so on. It speaks of mysteries, but in such a way as "to unite a profound perception of what they are in themselves with a vital explanation of what they are for us."<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible, however, to speak of the human person without speaking also of Christ, for otherwise the human person remains a riddle. It can even be said that the Christological approach is the one that has most radically altered all the theological treatises, to the point of forcing a total revision of them. It must also be said that in giving this approach a privileged place theology is simply being faithful once more to the very movement of revelation itself and to the spirit of the liturgy, which is entirely centered on Christ and the paschal mystery.

Official acceptance of this approach finds expression in the major constitutions of Vatican II. For *Dei verbum* Christ is at once mediator, fulfillment, and sign of revelation (DV 4). For *Lumen gentium* he is the "light of the nations," while the Church is, "in Christ," the primordial sacrament (LG 1). *Sacrosanctum concilium* sees the liturgy, and especially the Eucharist, as the place where the faithful express by their lives and manifest to others "the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (SC 2). *Gaudium et spes* states that "only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person merge into true clarity" (GS 22). Under the influence of the council the encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, which is a charter for the human being made new in Christ, speaks of Christ as "the center of the universe and of history" (RH 1) and as the Redeemer of the human race and of the world (RH 7).

The impact of this Christological approach is so profound that some more important examples of it ought to be given:

1. For a long time theology presented original sin in a chronological perspective and within a static vision of the universe. In this view, after a period of original justice the first human couple committed the sin that opened the floodgate to all the misfortunes from which humanity suffers. With this prior knowledge assured, theological reflection then turned to Christ, the new Adam who redeems the human race by his death.

In the Christian message, however, the perspective changes. The fundamental datum now is Christ, revealed as the one whom all need. They are to be saved and who effectively saves all who believe in him.

The teaching on sin and death appears only secondarily, in explanation of the message concerning Christ as universal Savior. Finally, against this background the question is raised of the origin of evil, which does not come from God but from the misuse of human freedom. Faith in a universal redemption is not based on historical information about incidents that took place at the beginning of the world but on the revelation of the role of Christ as Savior of all human beings without exception. Here, Christ is known first and subsequently beams his light into the historical darkness that shrouds our beginnings.<sup>4</sup>

2. At the beginning of the twentieth century, revelation was most often presented as the communication, through instruction, of a set of religious truths that are proposed to human beings for their assent in view of faith and salvation; a certain number of these truths are called "mysteries" because they baffle the mind.<sup>5</sup>

More than a half-century of complaints and disagreements, and a simultaneous return to the biblical and patristic sources, were required in order to bring out and present in a balanced way the many facets of the first and greatest of the Christian mysteries. For, depending on the viewpoint adopted, revelation is at once a divine action, an historical event and a history, an economy and a pedagogy, an experience and a message, word, witness, and encounter, promise and fulfillment, culmination and eschatological expectation, audible discourse and interior word.<sup>6</sup> Since revelation and faith are correlative, renewal in the one area has brought renewal in the other. Faith is as much a gift of the entire person to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ, as it is an assent of the mind to the message of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, after long emphasis on revealed truths, the emphasis now is on the person who does the revealing and on the reality revealed. Above all, Christ is given his due place as revealer and revealed, and as mediator, fulfillment, and sign of revelation. Readers must have been familiar with the starting point of this change in perspective if they are to realize what a vast change it is; it is like passing from a dead star to the blazing sun. One thing is certain: it has meant for the theology of revelation a release and a renewal that are far from having exhausted their potentialities.<sup>8</sup>

3. In the theology of an earlier day the Church was looked upon primarily as an historical fact and as an institution. There was a tendency to identify the Church with the hierarchy as locus of power and rights. The Church was depicted as divided into two classes with quite different functions: on the one side, the magisterium, religious, and clerics, who possessed authority, guarded the word, and were alone qualified to present it and delve into it deeply; on the other, the laity,

on their knees before the altar, seated in front of the pulpit, sometimes called upon to teach but only at a lower level. Everyone is familiar with the crises of aggressiveness that this vision provoked. It is true that for a long time, ever since Vatican I, which was forced by circumstances to leave its work unfinished, the need was felt of a more complete approach that would go more deeply into the mystery of the Church on the basis of revelation and of the Church's own life in the Spirit. In fact, Vatican II was the place where the Church came face to face with the world, with Christ, and with itself. This threefold encounter has caused it to shift its center of interest away from itself to some extent and to have a better understanding of its own identity.

A council always belongs to a particular time and place. If the Church lives at the heart of the world, then it must feel the beating of that heart and breathe in its currents of thought. Vatican II had for its setting a society that is becoming aware of its planetary dimension, the interdependence of all of its members, its many and complex relations with cultures, churches, and religions. It is understandable that in this setting the emphasis on the Church as a visible society that is complete, hierarchical, and Western, and is conceived more on juridical than on theological lines, should have yielded its place to the vision of a Church that is a mystery of communion and of salvation in Jesus Christ and this is embodied in the people of the new covenant. The Church is a sacrament of salvation; that is, it symbolizes and communicates the invisible grace of salvation. It is the very salvation of Christ in the visible form of a social, structured body that is endowed with a variety of functions.

This theme of the Church as mystery of communion and sacrament of salvation has radically renewed the whole of ecclesiology. It is not possible to separate the visible and invisible churches, the institution and grace. Moreover, the spiritual reality of which the Church sign and sacrament is our communion with the very life of the Trinity. For in this mystery of communion the bond uniting Christians among themselves and with God is a bond of love; it is the Holy Spirit. The Church is a gift of the Spirit. The Church has consequently been led to awareness of its radical universality that is based on the communion of all the baptized in all the Churches, and of its relationship with the Spirit. This vision marks the beginning of a new age for the Church.<sup>9</sup>

4. Sacramental theology has likewise been renewed due to a better approach to the mystery of Christ and the Church. Contemporary thought indissolubly connects Christ as the sign of God, the Church as

the sign of Christ, and the sacraments as actions of Christ done in and through the Church. The encounter of human beings with God takes place under the appearances of the primordial sacrament, that is, Christ,<sup>10</sup> who is the saving presence of God in humanity, and through the mediation of the sacraments, which are earthly prolongations of the glorified Christ. The Eucharist is the high point in this encounter with Christ; it is "the source and summit of Christian life," the sacrament that signifies and effects the unity of God's people in love (LG 11). The Eucharist is therefore the ecclesial sacrament par excellence and the one which is being given an increasingly privileged place in instruction. For in fact the Eucharist gathers up all the phases of the life of Christ and the life of the Church. While being a memorial of the passion and death of Christ that gave birth to the Church, it is at the same time a communion of all the faithful with Christ and of all the faithful among themselves in charity. It prefigures and anticipates the eschatological banquet at which all of the elect will be gathered around the table of the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

5. Moral theology has also seen a spectacular rectification. Before it ever speaks of precepts and sanctions; of what is permitted and forbidden, moral theology must first plumb the good news of our calling in Jesus Christ. The theme of vocation comes first and is more basic than the theme of law; if this order is not respected, the end result is a morality of the Pharisaic kind. The Christian is essentially someone "called" by God in Christ. A necessary corollary of this calling in Christ is a holy life that shows itself in everyday conduct (1 Thes 4:7). Just as in the past the ten commandments were to be seen as an inherent demand of the covenant with a holy God, so the Christian's calling in Christ must be accompanied by fidelity to the precepts that specify God's will for the life of the individual. But the vocation takes precedence over the precepts. Moreover, according to the New Testament, even when confronted with precepts, Christians first find themselves in the presence of a living person. For the law is Christ himself, the living love of the Father for us. The love of Christ is the source of all inspirations, the source of all life; it causes Christians to act in accordance with the precepts, not for the sake of observance but out of love. Violations then become failures in love. We are no longer in a world of moralism but in a world of reciprocal love. To live as Christians is to adopt the life-style of Christ, the Son who came in person to teach us to live as God's sons and daughters. No longer does the letter of the law fill the horizon of human activity; rather, love fills the heart.<sup>12</sup>



on the human person and its problems is so penetrating that it inescapably raises the question of the speaker's own identity. So much light shed on so great a mystery shows that Christ's word is a word that does not pass away, because it is the word of the Son who knows the Father just as the Father knows him. Christ reveals the Father's love, but at the same time his gestures of mercy and forgiveness, his attitude toward sinners, and the gift of himself in even the supreme sacrifice are themselves the expressions of a love that is wholly other and divine.

It is through his humanity that Christ reveals the Father; it is also by means of the incarnation that other human beings identify Christ as the Son of the Father: Christ is in himself the sign that authenticates the revelation which he likewise is in his own person. Jesus, the historical human being, gradually brings others to identify him as Messiah and Lord, as Emmanuel, "God among us." In the whole of his being, he is an enigmatic sign that calls for decipherment.

The process of personalization that has led to linking all the signs of historical revelation with the personal center that is Christ has also positively affected the sign that is the Church. It is individual Christians by their holy lives, and Christian communities by their lives of unity and charity, that posit the sign which is the Church. By living fully their condition as children of the Father who have been redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Spirit, Christians make it known to their fellow human beings that the salvation proclaimed and won by Christ is truly in our midst, because the rebellious and recalcitrant human heart has been changed into a docile and filial heart. The Spirit has been given, because the renewed human being lives and acts under the control of the Spirit. The concentration and personalization effected by Vatican II has found expression in a new word: witness. What Vatican I understood by the sign of the Church is henceforth translated into the category of witness or testimony. Once this transition has been made, it becomes obvious that the sign of the Church, far from being the poor cousin, is more important than ever.<sup>16</sup> But what a difference in approach between the two councils! The sign of the Church has become in practice the sign of unity in love. The unity and love are indeed fragile because they are the unity and love of a Church that has been forgiven, cleansed, and sanctified, and must acknowledge the need of constant *metanoia*. There is always a considerable gap between the holiness bestowed by a call, a vocation, and the holiness bestowed by response to the call.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of this return to a personalist and Christocentric approach it seems clear that an authentic theology of the signs of revelation must center on the fundamental signs that contain all the oth-

ers, namely, Christ and the Church. A presentation of the signs that would disconnect them from their source, from the center, which is Christ, or would reduce their value to that of a juridical argument, would be alien to the perspectives of the council and still more to those of the Scriptures.

A theology of miracles that follows a sound method cannot begin by studying isolated miracles or miracles that are recent or ambiguous. It must rather be based on the "foundational" miracles of Christianity, namely, those of Jesus. It must begin with the "explainer," not with that which is to be "explained."

Recent documents of the magisterium highlight three important points in a theology of miracles, which is the immediate object of my study:

1. Miracles are closely connected with the person of Christ. According to *Dei verbum* (no. 4), the very realities of the life of Jesus function as revelation and testimony.

2. The miracles are connected with the coming of the reign of God and with the person of Jesus in whom this reign manifests itself. According to *Lumen gentium* 5:

The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the good news, that is, the coming of the kingdom of God, promised over the ages in the Scriptures. . . . The miracles of Jesus also demonstrate that the kingdom has already come on earth: "If I cast out devils by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk 11:20; cf. Mt 12:28). But principally the kingdom is revealed in the person of Christ himself, Son of God and Son of Man, who came "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

The decree *Ad gentes* (12) develops the same theme: "Christ went about all the towns and villages healing every sickness and infirmity, as a sign that the kingdom of God had come."

3. Finally, the texts emphasize the point that while God has multiplied the evidences of his intervention in his history, he has nonetheless left human beings free to respond meritoriously to both the message and the signs of salvation. The signs are intended not as trammels upon freedom but as gifts and helps from God: they draw human beings and support them in the steps they freely take and in their free decision to believe. The Declaration on Religious Freedom says: "Christ . . . acted patiently in attracting and inviting his disciples. He supported and confirmed his teaching by miracles to arouse the faith

of his hearers and give them assurance, but not to coerce them" (DH 11). The declaration here refers the reader to the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* of Paul VI (August 6, 1964).

In this document the Pope offers the dialogue of revelation as the model for the Church's dialogue with the world: "No physical pressure was brought upon anyone to accept the dialogue of salvation; far from it, it was a dialogue of love. True, it imposed a serious obligation on those toward whom it was directed, but it left them free to respond to it or to reject it."<sup>18</sup> In the same perspective, the encyclical goes on to say that in his dialogue of salvation Christ "adapted the number of his miracles (cf. Mt 12:38ff) and their demonstrative force to the dispositions and good will of his hearers (cf. Mt 13:13ff), so as to help them to consent freely to the revelation they were given and not to forfeit the reward for their consent."<sup>19</sup> This is the first time that the authoritative teaching of the Church has emphasized to this extent its respect for freedom in response to the economy of signs and has paid so much attention to the conditions required in human beings if they are to accept revelation and its signs. This attention is henceforth one of the factors that must be taken into account in a theology of miracles.

### III. The Miracles of Jesus as Signs of the Kingdom

The miracles of Jesus are the privileged source for any theology of miracles, because they are the archetypes of all miracles: those of the Old Testament as well as those in the lives of the saints and in the universal Church. They are miracles seen at their source, in the setting that gives them life. It is therefore to the miracles of Jesus that we must constantly return if we are to grasp all the important values in Christian miracles and if we are to define a miracle correctly. If we adopt any other approach, we open ourselves to one-sided views and the risk of impoverishment and distortion. In the end, we find ourselves in possession of a caricature of the miraculous that makes it indefensible in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. The history of theology is filled with examples of such caricatures.

Even a rudimentary phenomenology of the miracles of Jesus as found in the Gospel tradition brings to light a number of structural elements: (1) Jesus himself, who compels recognition by the authority of his person and his works and provides grounds for the confidence of those who approach him; (2) witnesses: the disciples and the crowds; (3) a sick person, whose plea is sometimes clearly expressed, sometimes unspoken but present in a gesture, a look, a step taken; (4) a

dialogue of prayer and trust, followed by a cure that is effected in an authoritative way and without fanfare; (5) on the part of Jesus, a call to conversion and to faith in him who heals and proclaims the kingdom; (6) the establishment of a personal and often transforming relationship between Jesus and the recipient of the miracle; (7) the healing of the whole person, body and soul; (8) at times the miracle turns its beneficiary into a disciple and preacher of the kingdom.

In time, these elements, which are relatively numerous and so rich when seen in the context of the preaching of Jesus, quickly tend to become fewer. The pattern is already simpler soon after the resurrection of Jesus. Thus on Pentecost Peter speaks of "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested . . . by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him" (Acts 2:22). In his address in the house of Cornelius Peter also speaks of Jesus as "anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and with power . . . he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). The miracles are clearly linked to the person of Jesus, whom they accredit as God's messenger. The dominant function of the miracles is to bear witness to Jesus.

As we have seen, in the official teaching of the magisterium (a teaching that reflects the theology of the age), there is a tendency to connect message and miracle. Miracles are the juridical argument that guarantees the divine origin of the message or of faith in the objective sense of the word. The connection with the person of Jesus becomes secondary, while all the other structural elements are passed over. In the manuals used until 1950 a miracle was defined as "an event in the world, produced by God and falling outside the ordinary course of created nature in its entirety."<sup>20</sup> The only factors retained here are the miracle's physical transcendence as a cosmic phenomenon, and its juridical role.

I am not saying that the elements retained are false. They are, however, so reduced in number and intrinsic value that a miracle ultimately becomes something colorless, insipid, and almost *in-significant*. How could one make bold to speak of it as an important element of revelation and of the Gospel message?

And yet, if we stop and look closely, a miracle proves to be one of the richest of all Christian realities, and inexhaustible in its intelligible content, somewhat like the sacraments, whose polyvalent meaning points in all directions. Without anticipating what will be said in later chapters, let me emphasize here at the beginning certain aspects that make the miracles of Jesus something very specific which must be interpreted in the context of the kingdom, the person of Jesus who

comes to establish the kingdom, and the birth of a new human being and a new world, and as a hint of the eschatological transformation of the universe and humankind.

1. In and through Jesus the reign of God is "at hand." It is proclaimed as good news for the poor, the despised, sinners, those who suffer. Its coming obliges human beings to conversion and faith. Jesus sees the "already" dawning in the midst of the "not yet." In and through him God comes to take up the work of salvation. He signals, through the healings and exorcisms of Jesus and the evangelization of the poor, that this work is a serious one. Material realities undergo change to make it clear that human beings too must change. Miracles and conversion are inseparable in the proclamation of the good news. Jesus comes to make possible what is impossible for human beings on their own. And to bring home the fact that a new humanity is about to be born of water and the Spirit, Christ introduces into the cosmos signs of this deliverance and rectification that embrace the whole person, body and soul. *A new humanity, a new world.* In order that men and women may realize that the race is entering into a new age and a new condition and that this new world is already present at the heart of the old, Christ gives visible form to the salvation he proclaims.

2. This transformation of the entire human being and of the universe itself is connected with the person of Jesus. The eschatological salvation which he announces and preaches has in fact entered the world in his person. Satan is expelled by one stronger than he, and this stronger one is Jesus in whom the power that destroys Satan's kingdom is present and operative as a power belonging to Jesus himself: "I . . ." The miracles of Jesus are seen as a manifestation of his being; they raise the question of his identity.

3. The reign of God that Jesus inaugurates is in an initial stage; it is present in the form of salvation offered. The time of the promises is past, but the final fulfillment has not yet come. Human beings are nonetheless called upon to choose this man who comes to change the status of all human beings and of history. The human heart, transformed into a filial heart but always in danger of betraying its calling; the sicknesses overcome but always ready to return; the universe momentarily mastered but always threatening: these are the announcement and foreshadowing of the final renewal that is being prepared before our eyes.

By his miracles Jesus begins a new phase in the history of the world's definitive deliverance. The transformation of the universe by miracles and the transformation of human beings by holiness are signs of the eschatological order of things. This complete and definitive

transformation to come implies at its source the person of Christ, from whom comes all the light that falls upon our world.<sup>21</sup> The transformation of humanity and the universe is closely bound up with the glory of the risen Christ, whose glorified body is a permanent miracle. The work of salvation is complete in the risen Christ; the renewal of humanity has been effected in him, and the universe itself feels the beneficial effects of the renewal. In the risen Christ invisible salvation and visible effects of the renewal. In the risen Christ invisible salvation and visible transformation of the world are brought into unity. In the context of salvation thus understood, miracles can be seen to be the visible traces of the radical change that in Jesus Christ affects human beings and the universe in which they dwell. Henceforth, all miracles have their origin in the risen Christ.

#### IV. From Sign of Power to Sign of Love

In dealing with questions of the approach to miracles I must explain, finally, the predominant place of miracles among the signs of the foundational revelation, and the shift from miracles as signs of power to miracles as signs of love.

The God of the Old Testament is an omnipotent God who creates, controls the universe and its peoples, chooses, saves, and enters into covenants. In this setting, how could Jesus have identified himself as God-among-us, that is, among the Jews of his time, except by signs of power? And, in fact, the signs of the kingdom as listed in the answer Jesus gave to the delegates of the Baptist are reducible to miracles and the evangelization of the poor. We too often forget that the signs which the encyclical *Qui pluribus* of 1846 cites as rendering credible the divine origin of Christianity did not exist in the time of Jesus: the life and resurrection of Jesus, the fulfillment of the Scriptures, the witness of the saints and martyrs, and the multi-secular activity of the Church!

If we are to appraise correctly the importance of the miracles of Jesus, we must "situate" them in the *kairos* of Jesus and "situate ourselves" in the Jewish mentality of the time. As far as a Jew in the time of Jesus was concerned, the expected Messiah had to identify himself, like Moses, as messenger of the Almighty, whose power fills the Old Testament, from creation to the exodus, from the establishment of the monarchy to the restoration. Otherwise, the God proclaimed would not be the true God. The Almighty is indeed also a God of mercy and tender pity. But it is only by a gradual conversion that Jesus brings the Jews to understand that God is love. His miracles are therefore works of power, but in the service of love; they are always works of the



Almighty who exorcises, heals, and raises to life, but out of love. They are omnipotence in the service of love, omnipotence exercising love; they are manifestations of omnipotent love. But to win recognition for himself Jesus has to give signs of this *dynamis* in the service of *agape*. That is why his miracles play such an important part in this first phase of revelation. Unless Jesus had used miracles to force the question of his identity and authority, he would have remained simply anonymous and unidentifiable for his fellow Jews. Thus every attempt to reduce the place of miracles or to eliminate them is, if not the expression of an innate prejudice, at least evidence of a profound failure to understand the economy of revelation.

### Problems of Pre-Understanding

Anyone studying the miracles of Jesus immediately runs into two difficulties. The first is caused by the redactional activity of the evangelists. This activity, as we know, is exercised on both the *logia* and the *gesta* of Jesus. It can be said that in a sense everything in the Gospels is redactional. The miracles, however, are in a class by themselves, since what the Gospels give us is an *account* of the miracles of Jesus. It is, of course, the early Church and the evangelists who transmit to us the message of Jesus, his teaching as actualized and commented on, especially in St. John; what reaches us, nonetheless, is the tradition concerning the sayings of Jesus: the *vox Jesu*. In the case of the miracles, the action was that of Jesus, but it was the early preaching, apostolic and ecclesial, that put these events into words. Miracles and teaching (the parables and beatitudes, for example) are therefore not in the same situation. Consequently, the question arises more urgently for the miracles than for the parables: Do the miracle stories have a factual basis? Are they *ipsissima facta Jesu*? Or, on the contrary, are they the product of a more explicit Christology in which, under the influence of faith and in order to compete with the religions of the contemporary world, Christ is presented as a divine wonder-worker? Once the question is asked, the historians of religion open their storehouse and produce the many hypotheses aimed at showing that the miracle stories are the fruit of a propagandistic desire to bring Christ into line with the Greek divinities.

The second difficulty has to do with the very idea of miracle, which is rejected before any examination of the facts offered for study. In the area of miracles more than anywhere else, "the die is cast" from the outset. Miracle stories belong to another age, another mentality. To accept them as historical would be to display a naiveté as dismaying as it is anachronistic. We no longer believe in miracles, any more than

we believe in fairies or ghosts. "Our ancestors . . . believed because of miracles; we believe in spite of miracles."<sup>1</sup> What is at issue, then, is the very possibility of a miracle, the credibility of such an intervention of God into a self-sufficient universe. Once the occurrence of miracles has been eliminated, all that is left is to eliminate the stories of miracles or, if we keep them, to give them an acceptable meaning, which is the business of interpretation.

Readers, believing or unbelieving, of the Gospel stories cannot, of course, abstract from their experience and from the understanding they already have of God, humanity, and the universe. They always read the accounts with a certain pre-understanding or prior knowledge of the world and things; that is, they read with pre-suppositions. This pre-understanding can be enriched and even altered; it can be changed through contact with the facts. It can also harden and close in on itself, thus becoming a pre-judgment, a blunt refusal.<sup>2</sup> One thing is certain: all must challenge themselves regarding the principles that guide them, and must make these explicit. This is a minimum requirement if misunderstandings are to be avoided.

Most of the difficulties alleged by rationalists against miracles ever since the eighteenth century are based on the findings of science. On this basis rationalism asserts miracles to be either impossible or out of place. Any phenomenon claimed as "miraculous" has a natural explanation that only needs to be discovered: drugs, credulity, suggestion, hypnosis, illusion, unknown forces. The history of religions is then brought to bear to confirm these hypotheses.

## I. In the Name of Science as Interpreted by Philosophical Reason

1. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the previously scattered attacks on miracles became a united offensive against their probative value. In his *The European Mind*,<sup>3</sup> Paul Hazard has expertly described the historical and cultural context of this denial of miracles. In the struggle "against traditional beliefs," he says, miracles, which so brutally violated the laws of nature and enjoyed such blatant prestige, were the first enemy that had to be conquered, but it had to be done skillfully, because miracles were still in favor with honest folk and believers, and these were many. Pierre Bayle devoted himself to showing the ridiculousness of belief in comets as omens of great disasters, as well as the mass of wild stories, eccentricities, nonsense, and superstitions that disfigure religion.<sup>4</sup> Miracles, he said, are contrary to rea-

son. Nothing is worthier of God's own greatness than for him to enforce the laws which he himself has established; nothing is less worthy of him than the belief that he intervenes to violate the action of these laws.<sup>5</sup>

Spinoza, Voltaire, and Hume repeat the same argument in their attacks on miracles: a miracle is impossible, because it would mean a rent in the immutable web of the laws of nature. In face of the determinism that rules the world, human interests are petty and negligible; the claim, therefore, that God interrupts the order of things for the sake of human beings is really sacrilegious.

2. Baruch Spinoza, in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*,<sup>6</sup> resolutely took his stand on the ground of philosophical reason and so became the first theoretician of this position, which was to be repeated over and over after him. In the Preface of his work he says that human beings are so inclined to superstition that "signs and wonders of this sort they conjure up perpetually, till one might think Nature as mad as themselves, they interpret it so fantastically."<sup>7</sup> Spinoza is determined to liberate the mind from enslavement to such superstitions.

In his chapter on miracles Spinoza observes that in the view of the masses God's power is never more admirably displayed than when it defeats the powers of nature. Nothing could be more absurd, he says: "Any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, *ipso facto*, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature—an evident absurdity."<sup>8</sup> Nothing in nature contravenes the universal laws that govern it. "Nature . . . always observes laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth, although they may not all be known to us, and therefore she keeps a fixed and immutable order."<sup>9</sup>

From this "it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural causes cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or, at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle."<sup>10</sup> To say that something is contrary to nature is to deny the existence of an immutable God. Nature itself cannot have no part in such folly. A "miracle" is therefore only something which our present state of knowledge cannot explain, or which we think it cannot explain.<sup>11</sup> "Thus it is plain that all the events narrated in Scripture came to pass naturally,"<sup>12</sup> "like everything else, according to natural laws."<sup>13</sup> "Miracles appear as something new only because of man's

ignorance"; they must therefore be shown to be "in complete agreement with ordinary events."<sup>14</sup>

3. In Great Britain David Hume (1711-76) represented the position earlier taken by Spinoza on the Continent. We find in him the same approach to the religion-science-philosophy triangle. He speaks of miracles in the tenth essay of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which was published in 1748.<sup>15</sup>

The *Essay on Miracles* has two parts. The first, which is quite short, says that the authority of Christianity rests on weak external proofs, namely the testimony of the apostles, since in the final analysis the only foundation of our certainties can be the experience of our senses.<sup>16</sup> This experience, however, shows that the laws of nature operate in a constant manner. Consequently, if someone claims that a miracle has occurred, we must reject his testimony, since "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."<sup>17</sup> It hardly needs saying that Hume is at fault for not attending at all to the unique character of the apostolic testimony or to the unique person of Jesus and for caricaturing miracles by defining them as violations of the laws of nature.

The second part of the essay, which is more fully developed, gives four arguments against miracles: 1. Nowhere in the entire course of history do we find a single miracle attested by a sufficient number of witnesses who possessed "unquestioned good sense . . . undoubted integrity . . . credit and reputation."<sup>18</sup> 2. Miracles originate in the popular tendency to dwell upon the extraordinary, even if it has no solid basis in fact. How credulously, for example, people accept as beyond question the stories told by travelers from distant lands.<sup>19</sup> 3. While miracles multiply among ignorant and barbarous peoples, they tend to disappear among civilized peoples.<sup>20</sup> 4. All religions (Greece and Rome, Islam, China, Siam) abound in alleged miracles.<sup>21</sup>

Hume carefully avoids citing even a single New Testament miracle. He refers, and this in a general way, only to the miracles of the exodus and Moses, which he attributes to "a barbarous and ignorant people."<sup>22</sup> He does not deny, however, that in its beginnings Christianity was accompanied by miracles.<sup>23</sup> It is nonsense, however, to speak of miracles occurring in our times. According to Hume, "bigotry, ignorance, cunning, and roguery" are the marks of "a great part of mankind."<sup>24</sup>

To conclude: I share C. Brown's judgment on Hume: he shows no originality.<sup>25</sup> He also shows himself incapable of grasping the specific

character of Christian miracles and their profound intelligibility. He gives evidence of an ironical and prejudiced outlook that is distressing in a professional thinker.

4. In his *Philosophical Dictionary*<sup>26</sup> Voltaire carries Spinoza a step further. "A miracle," he says, "is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws. By this very statement a miracle is a contradiction in terms." God (people say) "might unsettle his machine, but only to make it go better; however, it is clear that, being God, he made this immense machine as best he could: if he had seen some imperfections resulting from the nature of the material, he would have attended to that in the beginning; so he will never change anything in it."<sup>27</sup> It is unworthy of God to imagine that he performs miracles for the sake of human beings, who are but an "anthill," a "little mud pile." "To dare palm off miracles on God is really to insult him (if men can insult God); it's to tell him: 'You are a weak and inconsistent being.' It is therefore absurd to believe in miracles—in one way or another it dishonors Divinity."<sup>28</sup>

Most of the time, however, Voltaire follows his natural bent and waxes ironic, ridiculing the miracles both of Scripture and of Church history. To tell stories of miracles is, he says, to "pass on follies that insult the divinity"; to believe in them is to prove one's own stupidity.<sup>29</sup> Using a method dear to the history of religions school, Voltaire likes to show parallels between the marvels of pagan antiquity, especially at Epidaurus, and those of Christianity; the parallels exist because they all derive from the same error.<sup>30</sup>

5. I. Kant (1724-1804) speaks, but quite briefly, of miracles in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). In his view, the human mind operates within pre-existing mental categories. Our knowledge of the physical world is therefore limited solely to appearances. This being so, what importance can the historical miracles of Jesus have for a religion that is based on morality? In fact, Kant devotes only five pages to miracles. He does not deny their theoretical possibility, but he considers it useless and absurd to try to establish the historical authenticity of the miracles of Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

6. R. Bultmann, who was heir to the tradition of Heideggerian existentialism, gives a philosophical rationalism, gives a philosophical mentality of our age and asserts that the world controlled by science.

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event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. And if we suppose that we can do so ourselves, we must be clear that we can represent this as the attitude of Christian faith only by making the Christian proclamation unintelligible and impossible for our contemporaries.<sup>32</sup>

Bultmann judges that a distinction must be made between *Mirakel* and *Wunder*.<sup>33</sup> A *Mirakel* is a miracle as understood by the man in the street, that is, an event that is an exception to the laws of nature. "The idea of wonder as miracle [*Mirakel*] has become almost impossible for us today, because we understand the processes of nature as governed by law."<sup>34</sup> For us nature's "conformity to law" is a pre-supposition which we cannot set aside at will; it is the implicit or explicit basis of all of our activity in the world. It is not "an understanding of the world" or "a judgment about the world" or a "a world-view," that is, a decision to regard the order of the world as determined rather than not determined; rather it is a necessity "given in our existence in the world."<sup>35</sup> The idea of determinism is not an acquisition of modern science, for it is as ancient as the human race itself; science, however, has applied it in so radical a manner that an exception to the universal network of laws is simply unthinkable.<sup>36</sup>

But while faith has no interest in *Mirakel*, which is a break in the determinism of natural law, it has a lively interest in *Wunder*, that is, a natural event that is confessed to be a work of God. I recognize a *Wunder* when in an event (*Weltgeschehen*) that obeys universal laws I see an action of God (*Gottes Tat*). There is, in fact, "only one wonder [*Wunder*]: the wonder of the *revelation*, the revelation of the grace of God for the godless."<sup>37</sup> A *Wunder* proves nothing; it is simply an event in which faith, and faith alone, recognizes God revealing himself. It is faith alone that sees in a healing a revelation of merciful love, a sign addressed to a human being who acknowledges himself or herself to be sinful and forgiven. Nothing has changed, however, in the phenomenal world or in the web of laws. A *Wunder* takes the form of forgiveness because it delivers human beings from their sins and gives them a new understanding of their existence.<sup>38</sup>

What, then, is to be thought of the miracles of Jesus? "Most of the wonder tales contained in the Gospels are legendary; at least they have legendary embellishments."<sup>39</sup> Jesus undoubtedly did perform certain actions which in his mind and the minds of his contemporaries were really miracles (*Mirakel*), but we are by no means obliged to believe

that as visible, objective phenomena, these actions escaped the determinism of nature. Bultmann's thought is clear: We men and women of today think of the world as nature, and we know that there are no miracles (*Mirakel*). God gives life and death, health and sickness, but in doing so he acts *in* events and not *in the cracks between* events.

It is impossible not to see in the attitude of Spinoza, Hume, Voltaire, and Bultmann a totalitarian outlook that makes human beings the judges of everything, including God's action. They set themselves up as the measure and criterion of God's initiatives; it is they who decide what can or must be allowed. Bultmann ultimately empties everything of meaning: miracles, incarnation, redemption, resurrection. In the rationalist perspective all these become impossible.

In the face of rationalism the apologetics of the time found itself in a bad position, especially since it tried to meet the enemy on the enemy's ground. By defining a miracle as a "breach of the laws of nature" and stripping it of its essential function as sign of salvation, the apologists got themselves into an impasse. Not without reason were they accused of turning the provisional inexplicability of a scientific fact into something metaphysically inexplicable. They involved themselves in secular discussions of natural law and thereby imprisoned themselves in the very universe from which they were claiming to escape.

One fact remains. The opinions and positions that were spread and popularized by a science-inspired rationalism ended up giving substance to the idea, even in the minds of sincere Christians, that the miracle stories recorded in the Gospel have had their day. It cannot be denied that twentieth century men and women are allergic to miracles, those of Christ as well as those of Lourdes. That Jesus continues to be for our world the embodiment of a love never surpassed—that is acceptable. But that with a gesture or a word he rehabilitated and restored life to paralyzed limbs or healed suffering bodies or multiplied food or brought the dead back to life—that is too hard a saying! Miracles no longer have a place in a world in which everything can now or will eventually be explained.

Many Christians do not go that far, but they do regard miracles as "unseemly." To talk to them is to lack decorum; it is to make God "show off" in an unbecoming way. Once creation has been set in motion it is illogical to think of the journey as strewn with accidents such as miracles. In short, if you talk of miracles nowadays, you risk being regarded as "backward." It is useless to cling to what is meaningless. To allow miracles into a universe that has its own intrinsic intelli-

bility is, it seems, to allow the intelligible and the unintelligible to co-exist.

It is certainly hopeless to try to modify the rationalist position, especially if it claims to be exclusive and incapable of revision. But Catholic theologians can set forth their own pre-understanding of the world. For they too make critical demands which they can and must define, without trying to force them on others who reject them. It is possible, I think, to line up the elements of this Catholic vision as follows.

1. It is true that the material universe becomes intelligible through its *habitual obedience* to the laws of the universe, although a good number of these laws are as yet simply statistical. On the other hand, reality in its entirety is not one-dimensional; by this I mean that it is not co-extensive with the material world and its network of laws. Reality as a whole is comparable rather to a pyramidal order in which no part is completely autonomous but all the parts together form an organic whole that is ordered toward a summit or apex that transcends the activity connaturally possible for each part. There is a hierarchy of intersubordinated orders: the order of the inorganic in which determinism reigns; the order of the organic with its finalities; the order of thought and art with its creativity; the order of religious and moral life with its freedom. In this hierarchy each lower order is "ordered" to the next higher order and thus integrated into the total order. The subhuman universe is ordered to human beings, and these in turn are open to the transcendent action of God. Miracles liberate the physical universe from its "limitations," elevate it, and enable it to play a part in the higher order of salvation. On the one hand, therefore, it is completely legitimate for the physical universe to derive its habitual meaning from the determinism of its laws; on the other, it is no less intelligible that God should intervene in a wholly unmerited way in history and the universe, in order to manifest his still more unmerited intervention in giving salvation through Jesus Christ. Miracles thus become *rites and signs, in the visible universe, of the gift of salvation.* They have their place in the order of the religious dialogue in which God calls human beings to share his life.<sup>40</sup>

2. Furthermore, if it be true that Christ, the incarnate Word, is the summit and goal of salvation, then miracles are to be seen as interventions of God in the time between the first creation and the final transformation of everything and everyone in Jesus Christ. Miracles are herefore an anticipation of the eschatological order with its new heaven and new earth: they are the future invading the present and giving it its meaning, for the present now already manifests the trans-

forming *dynamis* of God that is at work in our world. The glorified body of the risen Christ is a permanent miracle. In him the human race is re-created, and the cosmos itself experiences the beneficent effects of this re-creation: nature becomes flexible and obedient, for it too is caught up in the movement of the glorification of the children of God. In this perspective, which is that of St. Paul (Rom 8:19-21), miracles are not a problem; rather they force human beings to ask themselves what the ultimate meaning of history and the cosmos is. Paradoxically, it is miracles that become intelligible and explanatory.

3. Miracles can be perceived only by those who see the world as controlled and directed by a free and transcendent Being who acts at his own level as a creative and re-creative power and can establish interpersonal relations with human beings. A miracle, like revelation, is a call addressed to men and women in the depth of their being, at that level of interiority at which, as spiritual persons, they are open to God and to his possible self-manifestation in history and in the world. A miracle supposes that human beings honestly acknowledge the finiteness of their existence and of the universe around them, as well as God's freedom to act in history and initiate an unparalleled dialogue with them. God's freedom is not exhausted by his creative act, as if it were a spring that dries up after its first outstreaming. God is infinite freedom, and his gratuitous initiatives are unpredictable and inexhaustible.

It is due to God's unpredictable love and infinite freedom that he decided to reveal himself to the human race and to save it through the incarnation and the cross, that is, through what is most unlike himself who is pure Spirit, namely, through the flesh, and that he also decided to continue this incarnational economy in an economy of signs that bear witness to the efficacious presence of salvation in our midst. Far from talking nonsense, those who locate miracles within this economy of salvation and infinite freedom see in the divine action a *constellation of harmonies*: harmony of the signs with the intervention of God made flesh; harmony of the signs themselves with one another; harmony of the signs with the human person who is made up of flesh and spirit. The miracles of Jesus have their place in the higher logic of love and salvation. One who wishes to be consistent in rejecting this higher intelligibility must reject all the elements in the economy of salvation: incarnation, redemption, resurrection, miracles. Bultmann takes this step, but in doing so he automatically renders himself incapable of grasping the intelligibility proper to Christianity, for he has sacrificed the essential factors of this intelligibility. In his case, an obsession with anthropology eliminates Christology, both that of the Gospels and that

of the apostolic letters and the councils. He returns to gnosticism, to a message without a messenger, a figure without face.

## II. In the Name of the History of Religions

The historian of religions takes over from the philosopher in explaining the presence of miracle stories in the Gospel. These stories come from Hellenism and are to be connected with the equally Hellenistic idea of a *theios anēr*.

If miracle stories are almost entirely absent from Q we must not explain this by saying that Q contains no narrative of events. . . . The deeper reason for their absence is the different light in which Jesus appears. In Q he is above everything else the eschatological preacher of repentance and salvation, the teacher of wisdom and the law. In Mark he is a *theios anthropos* [divine man], indeed more: he is the very Son of God walking the earth. . . . This distinction between Mark and Q means that in Q the picture of Jesus is made essentially from the material of the Palestinian tradition, while in Mark and most of all in his miracle stories Hellenism has made a vital contribution.<sup>41</sup>

In Bultmann's mind there is no doubt that preaching in a Hellenistic environment was responsible for clothing Jesus the prophet in the attributes of a Greek god, so that he came to be called Son of God, *Sotēr* (savior) and *Kyrios* (Lord).<sup>42</sup> "The most important development . . . as the interpretation of the person of Jesus in terms of the Gnostic redemptive myth. He is a divine figure sent down from the celestial world of light, the Son of the Most High coming forth from the Father, veiled in earthly form and inaugurating the redemption through his work."<sup>43</sup>

In the Greek cultural environment thaumaturgic powers reserved to the divinity were attributed to the *theios anēr* or *theios anthropos* or divine man. The Christology of the miracles, says Bultmann, was formed and controlled by this figure of the *theios anēr*: the Jesus of the miracles was portrayed as the divine man of Hellenistic circles for propaganda purposes (or, as we would say, in order to market him).

I might have illustrated this theory from the works of its principal proponents: R. Reitzenstein, H. Windisch, L. Bieler, D. Georgi. If I have chosen Bultmann, it is because in him the theory is already in

unchallenged possession; it is an unquestionable, acquired fact and ends by deceiving the unwary reader.

The truth is that this theory is by now a heap of ruins. The recent books of D. L. Tiede<sup>44</sup> and C. H. Holladay<sup>45</sup> leave no doubt about this. Tiede notes that in Greek philosophical literature (especially that which focuses on the figures of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Apollonius of Tyana) there are two pictures of the "divine man": he is either a wise man or a miracle worker. Now in the first century A.D. Plutarch and Seneca depict Socrates as a wise man and describe his moral courage in facing death, precisely in order to avoid exalting him as a miracle worker. In the second century Lucian of Samosata takes the same view, but must defend himself against the popular craving for the extraordinary. In the third century, Philostratus and Porphyry, who depict Apollonius of Tyana and Pythagoras as "divine," present them as *both* wise men and miracle workers, in order to adapt themselves to the opinion of the masses. In Hellenistic Jewish circles Philo and Flavius Josephus depict Moses as the ideal sage. If they also recount his miracles, they never do so in order to accredit him as divine. It is therefore incorrect simply to identify divine man and miracle worker. On the contrary, for in the first century the figure of the "divine man" is not yet associated with wonder-working.

Holladay's study is even more convincing. He first reminds us of the thesis of the adherents of the history of religions: namely, that primitive Christology depicted Jesus as a divine man with the aid of miracle stories. This Christology, which (they say) was the origin of the title "Son of God" (in the metaphysical sense), supposedly arose in Hellenism, as did the figure of the divine man. There would then have been a transition from the Hellenistic divine man to the divine man of Hellenistic Judaism (Moses and the prophets), and finally to the divine man Jesus. Hellenistic Jewish culture would thus have been the medium for introducing the category of divine man into the Jewish world and subsequently into the Christian world as well. By their depiction of Moses and the prophets as *theioi andres*, Philo in particular, along with Flavius Josephus, would have been the link between Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity, the catalyst for the passage from Jesus the prophet to Christ the Son of God and miracle worker.

In regard to this entire thesis Holladay notes, first of all, that *theios anēr* is semantically a fluid term that can have at least four different meanings: (a) a divine man; (b) an inspired man; (c) a man having some relation to God; (d) an exceptional man.<sup>46</sup> *Theios anēr* may therefore not be taken automatically to mean a miracle worker: it is too general and lacks precise definition. It is applied to seers, priests,

heroes, healers, wise men, kings, and exceptional individuals. Furthermore, an analysis of the Jewish Hellenistic sources (Flavius Josephus, Philo, Artapanus) shows that the category "divine man," in the sense of "deified man," never took successful root in Jewish soil, Hellenized or not. The sense of God's absolute transcendence was too highly developed there to allow for the attribution of divinity to human beings. The heroes of the Old Testament are glorified, but they remain men.

More specifically, the category "divine man" appears in only four passages: three in Philo and one in Flavius Josephus. The latter uses the term once of Moses, in order to describe him as a great sage after the model of the Stoic sage.<sup>47</sup> In Philo, too, *theios anēr* is the equivalent of "sage." But never do Philo or Flavius Josephus dream of deifying Moses or the prophets: there is something divine in them, but these men are not gods.<sup>48</sup> Nor in the four passages is the "divine man" ever linked to the theme of miracles and the miracle worker; it is always connected rather with the theme of wisdom.

It is therefore a complete fantasy to claim that the "divine man" was a figure widely known in the Hellenistic world and possessed a set of well-defined traits, thaumaturgy among them; that in order to facilitate their proselytizing activity the Jews depicted the prophets and heroes of the Old Testament as "divine men" in the Greek sense, and this a century before Christ appeared; and, finally, that primitive Christianity applied the category of "divine man," in the sense of Son of God and miracle worker, to Jesus.<sup>49</sup> It is inaccurate to claim that this Hellenistic Christology of the "divine man" is the source of the miracle stories. The category "divine man" is absent from the Old Testament and the New alike; it is useless to try to bring it in on non-existent historical grounds. The technical sense given to "divine man" appears late in Hellenism, well after the time of Jesus. It is one thing to say that the miracles of Jesus awakened a favorable echo in a Greek environment; it is another to claim that this environment gave rise to the Christology of Jesus as miracle worker and divine human being.

If we turn to the philosophers of the Greek world we find several of them being depicted in the tradition as miracle workers: for example, Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Apollonius of Tyana. We have detailed lives of these healers only for Pythagoras (written by Porphyry in the third century A.D.) and Apollonius of Tyana (written by Philostratus in about 217 A.D.). The biography of Apollonius reports about twenty marvelous incidents, seven of which are told in detail. The stories include one of a resurrection, five of cures, four of the deliverance of possessed persons, and six of actions involving inanimate nature. Yet Philostratus is less interested in the prodigies of Apollonius (which

occupy only 10 of 308 pages in the Pleiade edition) than in his reputation for wisdom. If Apollonius is depicted as a "divine man," this is because of his wisdom; in none of the stories about his wonderful deeds is he described as *theios anēr*. In the eyes of Philostratus, Apollonius is a sage, and his miracles are only a secondary illustration of his glamor as a sage; they are told in order to stir the interest of the readers and inspire them to heed the call to wisdom rather than to an encounter with the person of the sage himself. Moreover, the absence from Greek thought of any idea of a history of salvation prevents miracles from being the signs of a universal eschatological salvation.<sup>50</sup>

In summary: critics must stop resorting to the alchemical theory of the *theios anēr* in order to explain the attribution of the titles "Son of God" and "miracle worker" to Jesus. That theory is destined for oblivion.<sup>51</sup>

### III. In the Name of Literary Criticism and a Demythologizing Hermeneutic

The form critics, Bultmann chief among them, have not failed to point out the obvious literary similarities between the miracle stories of the Gospels and the wonders attributed to Asclepius or Apollonius of Tyana.<sup>52</sup> "The Hellenistic miracle stories offer such a wealth of parallels to the Synoptic, particularly in style, as to create a prejudice in favour of supposing that the Synoptic miracle stories grew up on Hellenistic ground."<sup>53</sup> In this view, identity of forms and structures gives us insight into the apologetic and polemical reasons for introducing the stories: these stories sprang from the conviction that Jesus was Messiah and Lord and from the desire to ground this conviction and so communicate it to others.

The argument is this: as soon as it is seen that the stories of wonders worked at Epidaurus or elsewhere really are about natural cures that have been turned into prodigies, the same has to be said of the Gospel stories. But the conclusion is invalid. After all, from the literary point of view nothing more closely resembles a true account of an exceptional healing than a fictitious account. "I challenge Bultmann himself," says Msgr. de Solages, "to give a factual account of an extraordinary healing without first telling us that the sick person was seriously ill, then that he or she was cured, and, finally, without showing that the cure really took place. This necessity arises not from the form of the story but from the nature of things."<sup>54</sup> The most important factor in the case of Jesus is that the *person* who is at the center of the

story is unprecedented in history and that the miracle itself has specific traits which are completely without parallel.<sup>55</sup> There is no justification for ignoring the religious dimension of Jesus, the nature of the religious context of the miracle, and the nature of the other signs which accompany it and are of the same order. The analysis of literary forms is not an infallible guide in making judgments about historicity.

But if the miracle stories of the Gospel are just stories, are they therefore to be eliminated? Bultmann, for his part, thinks that we must keep them but "demythologize" and "interpret" them. The important thing, in his view, is not the historical reality behind the story (this is often impossible to uncover or is even non-existent), but the *meaning* which it contains for the understanding of our condition as forgiven sinners. The tools of hermeneutic thus enable us to save the story while sacrificing the event. Furthermore, the problem of the historicity of the miracles of Jesus is unimportant and ought to be left completely to the critics. The miracle stories have a meaning for faith, independently of whatever really happened. This meaning does not reside in the event itself with which it is associated, but in the faith that finds expression in the story: faith purifies, saves, gives life, raises from the dead. The miracle stories make it clear that revelation is food, light, and life.<sup>56</sup>

This view of the matter has only one defect: it does not fit in with the biblical conception of revelation or with the concern of the evangelists to tell us "what happened."

In Bultmann's view of the Gospels, the miracle stories are simply a continuation of the discourse; that is, the literary form shifts from discourse to narrative but in fact the narrative is simply discourse in narrative form. The discourse in this case makes use of a real or fictitious event in order to convey meaning, but the meaning is not that of an event that must be real if the meaning is to be there. This reduction of the Gospel to a simple message of deliverance is anti-biblical.

Unlike the Eastern philosophies or Greek thought or the Hellenistic mysteries, which had no place for history, the Judaeo-Christian revelation is both event and word, God manifests himself in two ways: through events and through authoritative interpreters of these events. Revelation is inseparably event and commentary on event, action and language, efficacious word. As a result, we find two complementary lines running through the Old Testament: the line consisting of events and the line of the prophets who in God's name proclaim the events and their ultimate meaning. In the New Testament Jesus appears on the scene as the eschatological prophet, "mighty in deed and word": he is both the event and the exegete of the event. Revelation is never a mere gnosis. Jesus announces an event: the kingdom of God, but at the

same time he accomplishes the works of the kingdom: preaching, exorcisms, healings. He proclaims salvation by his words and by his deeds.<sup>57</sup> It is essential that we recognize this indissoluble union of word and event in the revelation of salvation, for only then can we situate the miracles and understand them. The actions and gestures of Jesus (meals taken with sinners; preference for the poor and the lowly; cures of the sick) are no less part of his sojourn on earth than are the parables, disputes, and beatitudes. The evangelists bear witness to this indissoluble union when they assign such massive importance to the miracle stories.

In such a setting it is completely arbitrary to acknowledge the historicity of the preaching of Jesus, while at the same time putting into the category of myth what belongs to the realm of the factual. The attachment and fidelity of the apostles and the Church to their one teacher, Jesus, extend not only to his words but also to his most characteristic actions, especially those that caused him to be acclaimed as the prophet of Israel.

"It would," therefore, "have been unnatural to preserve only the sayings of such a man."<sup>58</sup> The apostles bore witness to the *facere* as well as to the *docere* of Jesus (Acts 1:1). It is not possible to accept the historicity of the tradition about Jesus without including the historicity of his actions, his miracles among them. There are no grounds for saying that his *logia* can be regarded as having "really happened," but that his miracles are to be described as legendary and as having "not really happened." Moreover, Jesus was not satisfied to act and do "works of power"; he also announced *their reality and their meaning*. It is the very *logia* of Jesus that justify us in speaking of his miracles. In short, only a refusal to accept the very idea of miracles can explain the recourse to the history of religions and to literary analogies in order to dissociate works from words in the life of Jesus and to sacrifice events in the name of their meaning. The revival of gnosticism, due to the drive of the human spirit to control everything, is a periodic phenomenon, and our age has not escaped its influence.