**Hume and Catholic Miracles**

# British Anti-Catholicism

At the beginning of Part 2 of his essay on miracles, Hume gives four arguments for the unreliability of testimony for specifically religious miracles.[[1]](#footnote-1) Understanding two of these arguments requires looking at them in the context of 18th century sectarianism. In effect, Hume argues that if you believe in the miracles of the Bible, then you ought to be a Catholic. But Catholicism is absurd, so you ought not believe in the miracles of the Bible.

Soon after the town council of Edinburgh decides not to offer Hume a position as Professor of Moral Philosophy, the city is occupied for a month by an insurrectionist army supported by a Catholic foreign power (Mossner 161-2, 177, Harris 206-7, 232-3). Under the command of Charles Edward Stuart, theseJacobites attempt to restore a Catholic monarchy to Great Britain. The reaction against the rebellion of 1745 is the peak of anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain in the 18th century (Haydon 1993: 118). Sermons are preached against popery, priests are imprisoned, and there are anti-Catholic riots across the island (Haydon 1993: 131-63). Three years later, when Hume publishes the first *Enquiry* containing his essay on miracles*,* his readers aren’t tempted to believe in the genuineness of Catholic miracles.

This is a point about the reception of Hume’s work, not about what’s in his heart or about conditions of composition. He moves to France to compose the Treatise in 1734 (Mossner 92, Harris 78), when England and France are at peace, and that’s where he first has the relevant ideas. He likes France well enough to contemplate moving there permanently on at least two later occasions (“Life” ¶¶12, 18). He’s first introduced to Paris by the Chevalier Ramsay, a Scottish convert to Catholicism, and then he moves to La Flèche and befriends the local Jesuits (Mossner 93-6, 99-104, Harris 78-80). In 1747, he writes a defense of Archibald Stewart’s decision to hand over Edinburgh to the Jacobites, and in a postscript he blames Stewart’s unjust prosecution on “religious Whigs” whose zeal against bishops and the Book of Common Prayer leads them to “Dissimulation, Hypocrisy Violence, Calumny, Selfishness” (“True” Postscript ¶6; Mossner 182-6, Harris 235-36). A year later, Hume decides that the moderate and philosophical defense of the Protestant Succession that he gives in an essay on that subject is too mild for the confrontational spirit of the moment and delays publication for calmer times (Harris 240-1).

Notwithstanding his thoughts of retiring to France and his hatred of Protestant zealotry, in the *Treatise,* the first *Enquiry,* the *Natural History of Religion,* and “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” Hume treats Catholicism as a paradigm of superstition (*T* 1.3.8.4, 3.2.4.2, 3.2.5.14, *EHU* 5.16, *NHR* 12.2-7, “Superstition” ¶9; Shaw 11). In the part of his history of England describing the dissolution of the monasteries, he merrily recounts stories of how monks deceived a credulous laity through sleight of hand and mechanical tricks (*H* 3.253).

Britain in the eighteenth century is less fanatical in its anti-Catholicism than it had been in the previous two hundred years. In that century no one in Britain is executed for being a Catholic priest, as they had been before (Nuttall 192). In those earlier, less tolerant times, James VI/I argues that the Pope is the antichrist. Hume defends him from the charge of folly on the grounds that it’s a common belief of the age (*H* App 4.71). Even in the 1740s, inheritors of the Scottish Covenanter tradition treat both Jacobite rebels and England’s Catholic ally Maria Teresa as the antichrist’s servants (Kidd 1166-67), and the Church of Scotland is still governed by Chapter 25, Section 6 of the Westminster Confession, which holds that the Pope is the antichrist (Raffe 586-88).

In the 18th century, “Roman worship was illegal, and the penalty for a priest saying mass was perpetual imprisonment” (Haydon 1993: 47). Thus, according to Colin Haydon, had the “massive array of anti-papist laws . . . been rigorously enforced, catholicism could scarcely have survived in England” (2000: 49). These statutes are not strictly enforced in Hume’s day, but Catholics in the 1740s are genuinely excluded from military and civil offices and from practicing law. They can’t enter Oxford or graduate from Cambridge, and they are subject to a double land tax (Haydon 1993: 14, 47, 2000: 51).

In their battles against Catholicism, Protestants have to say something about Catholic miracles. In *The Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,* Martin Luther argues that even if “a miraculous sign were to happen for the pope against secular power . . . it should be considered as nothing besides the work of the devil, by means of the weakness of our faith in God” (1888: 414=1961: 417; Soerger 39-40) Luther also recommends closing pilgrimage sites where miracles are purported to be performed. According to him, “It really doesn’t help that miraculous signs happened there, since the evil one can of course work miracles, as Christ has taught us (Matt. 24.24) (1888: 447=1961: 457; Soerger 39, see also Shaw 22-24)

To the demand from Catholics that Protestants should produce miracles in defense of their reforms, Jean Calvin argues that reformers appeal to the miracles of the gospels, that Catholic miracles are so frivolous that they undermine faith, that Satan has his miracles, that defenders of the Donatist heresy used miracles to fool the common folk, and that Augustine warned us against trusting in wonder workers (Calvin 1846 8-10=Calvin 1960:16-18). Calvin concludes, “We thus don’t lack miracles in the least, and these are certainly not vulnerable to criticism; but those which they [our adversaries] allege are sheer delusions of Satan, since they lead people from the true worship of their God towards futility” (Calvin 1846: 10=Calvin 1960: 17-18; Walker 112, Harrison 2006: 500-1, Shaw 22-5). That is to say, the miracles in the Bible are indisputable and sufficient, and other miracles that Catholics might appeal to that go beyond the Bible only lead people away from true religion.

Hume recounts part of this history in a reply to a contemporary critic. Against Hume’s claim that “men, in all ages, have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories” of miracles ascribed to new systems of religion “that this very circumstance would be a full proof of a cheat” (*EHU* 10.38), George Campbell argues that Protestant reformers, with minor exceptions among the Quakers and French prophets, didn’t appeal to miracles in defense of Reformation (174-81=Fieser 6.69-72). Hume replies,

I wonder if the author does not perceive the reason why Mr John Knox and Mr Alexander Henderson did not work as many miracles as their brethren in other churches. Miracle-working was a Popish trick, and discarded with the other parts of that religion. Men must have new and opposite ways of establishing new and opposite follies (*Letters* 1.350).

Miracle working is a popish trick because Catholics have built up a reservoir of medieval miracle stories and institutional procedures for producing more miracles with pilgrimage sites and relics. The Scottish Reformers recognize that it’s more effective to dismiss and downplay recent Catholic miracles rather than to try to play catch up.

Luther and Calvin aren’t trying to disenchant the world or and they aren’t denying that faith can work wonders. Their point is that the Bible suffices for doctrine and that we shouldn’t appeal to purported new miracles to settle questions of doctrine. If we call miracles that are needed to settle matters of doctrine ‘revelatory miracles,’ their point is that revelatory miracles have ceased. And once theology rules this out, there’s less theological motivation to see contemporary events as miraculous.

By the late 16th century, English Protestants “firmly and widely” (Walker 111) assert that miracles cease sometime between the events described in the Book of Acts and 600 AD. Miracles are necessary to give authority to scripture in ancient times, but we now have scripture, and so we no longer need miracles. The first article of the Westminster Confession declares,

it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and . . . to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased (Ch. 1, Art. 1).

“The evident purpose of the doctrine,” D.P. Walker explains, “was to prove that all medieval and especially all contemporary Catholic miracles were either fakes or diabolic wonders, and to account for the lack of Protestant miracles” (111, see also Dear 669-74, Shaw 26-9).

During the interregnum there’s a hiccup in this story of Protestant hostility to miracles when dissenters start appealing to prophecies and miracles to establish religious and political authority (Thomas 148-78, Shaw 33-8, 52-64). With the restoration of the monarchy and the reestablishment of the church, respectable British theologians become smug in their confidence that miracles have ceased (Thomas 172-3, Duffy 254-7, Heyd 434, Dear 1990: 669). Eighteenth-century British

Protestants scoffed at the false miracles supposedly worked in Popish churches. The magical power claimed by the Roman clergy seemed to be part of a medieval world picture: they were out of place in an enlightened age. To hostile commentators, it was obvious why such superstition was not eliminated. Pilgrimages to shrines, payments to witness ‘miracles’ or to handle relics, all brought fat revenues for the church . . . . The laity were duped so that their priests—and especially idle monks—might live well (Haydon 1993: 5-6).

The British come to see themselves as an island of rationality facing off against a continent mostly inhabited by superstitious papists. Campbell calls Great Britain, “this island, this asylum of liberty, where the spirit of Christianity is better understood . . . than in any other part of the Christian world” (G. Campbell 301=Fieser 6.113).

The resulting position is unstable. As Eamon Duffy writes,

zealous anti-catholic controversialists poured scorn on papist writers for their irrational or dishonest claims to monkish miracles and wonders, totally at odds with any rational account of the creation: yet these same divine diligently defended the biblical miracles as the chief, even the only, bulwark of protestant christianity against the deism and sceptical impiety of the age (252).

Anglican theologians are fighting a two-front battle, against Catholics on the one side and against skeptics and deists on the other. Too much vigor against one opponent can undermine the battle against the other.

Hume attempts to exploit this tension. So, for example, he begins his argument against believing any religiously motivated account of a miracle by citing John Tillotson’s argument against transubstantiation, which he says has a “like nature” to the one that he is about to offer (*EHU* 10.2). Hume places himself in the Anglican tradition of rational anti-Catholicism in order to undermine Christianity more generally (Stephen 1.77-9, Harrison 1999: 249, Buckle 249-50).

# The Acme Argument

With this background in hand, let us turn to Part 2 of Hume’s essay on miracles. The first argument for thinking that religious testimony of a miracle is especially unreliable runs as follows:

there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time attesting facts performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: all which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men (*EHU* 10.15).

Call this the Acme Argument: there has never been a sufficiently well-attested religious miracle in history. On its own, this paragraph won’t persuade anyone. Anyone who believes in testimony of some religious miracle believes its testimony is attested by sufficient numbers of good witnesses who aren’t trying to deceive anyone.

Not only does the Acme Argument seem unpersuasive on a first reading, but it seems as if Hume contradicts himself a little later on. In the initial statement of the argument, Hume denies that witnesses of a purported miracle has ever had all of the following desiderata: 1) “a sufficient number 2) “undoubted integrity” 3) “credit and reputation” 4) “good sense, education, and learning” and 5) living “in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable.” A little later, Hume claims that “a cloud of witnesses”[[2]](#footnote-2) testify to the healings around the tomb of the Jansenist François de Pâris, and “what is more extraordinary, many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world” (*EHU* 10.27). Hume goes out of his way to say that these attestations meet the five desiderata that he earlier says are never met. After quoting these texts, the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace exclaims, “It seems almost incredible that this can have been written by the great sceptic David Hume, and written in the same work in which he has already affirmed that in all history no such evidence is to be found” (11).

If I hadn’t primed you with tales of anti-Catholic prejudice, you might follow Wallace in wondering what’s going on here. In his final analysis, Hume assumes that there aren’t any miracles around Paris’s tomb, and he assumes his readers will agree with him (Noxon 76, Burns 174).

Let me stipulate that an argument begs the question if no one in its intended audience is likely to accept its premises unless they already believe the conclusion. In that stipulated sense, Hume isn’t begging that question at issue by presupposing the falsehood of testimony of Jansenists. He isn’t writing for Jansenists. He’s writing for British Protestants in the middle of the 18th century. Given the anti-Catholicism at the time, Hume’s readers will reject Catholic miracle stories with at least as much confidence as Hume himself shows.

According to Richard Swinburne, in Hume’s discussion of the miracles around Paris’s tomb, “the credibility of the witnesses in terms of their number, integrity and education is dismissed, not as inadequate, but as irrelevant” (16). This misunderstands the form of Hume’s argument. Hume emphasizes as far as he can the number, integrity, and education of the witnesses because he takes it for granted that his readers will deny that anything miraculous happened at the tomb. In this way, the tension that Wallace points to dissolves. This is the best there is, and it still isn’t good enough.

“What Hume does in his analysis of the Jansenist miracles,” according to Francis Beckwith, “is simply to beg the question in favor of naturalism” (51). This is also a misunderstanding. Hume takes a premise that almost all of his readers believe, that the Jansenist miracles aren’t genuine, praises the quality of the witnesses of those miracles to the skies, and infers that there’s never been sufficiently good testimony for a miracle. He isn’t begging the question by assuming the falsity of the Jansenist miracles. He just knows his audience.

How does the Acme Argument relate to Part 1 of Hume’s essay on miracles? The conclusion of the Acme Argument is “there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle” attested by witnesses whose backgrounds “secure us against all delusion” and “of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others” (*EHU* 10.15). That’s higher than the ordinary standard for accepting testimony. Hume is assuming the argument of Part 1 raises the standard that we should require from testimony in order to show a violation of the laws of nature, and the Acme Argument attempts to show that the standard isn’t met in the best attested cases.

Having evoked that reaction, he asks his readers to diagnose their judgments: “And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation” (*EHU* 10.27).

Given what Hume says about the eight-day-eclipse at the end of the essay, and given his views on possibility, I take his expression “absolute impossibility” with a grain of salt.[[3]](#footnote-3) I think he thinks there’s merely a ‘proof’ against miracles, “meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition” (*EHU* 6n10; see Flew 74, Buckle 243, Johnson 11-16, Millican 153-4, 167-9, 178-9). In reply to Campbell’s request for an applicable general principle for weighing evidence, Hume writes,

The proof against a miracle, as it is founded on invariable experience, is of that *species* or *kind* of proof, which is full and certain when taken alone, because it implies no doubt, as is the case with all probabilities, but there are degrees of this species, and when a weaker proof is opposed to the stronger, it overcome (*Letters* 1.350).

A proof is a degree of evidence that, when considered on its own, doesn’t allow for doubt. The laws of nature are so well confirmed that the evidence for them amounts to a proof. In order to overcome a proof in this sense, testimony for a miracle has to rise to the level of a proof. That is to say, when taken on its own, there has to be no room for doubt that the testimony is false. Hume thinks that the miracles around Pâris’s tomb are well attested, but not that well attested. According to him, no actual testimony for a miracle is that well attested. Hume believes that his readers reject Catholic miracle stories for the right reason, namely, that it contradicts the strong inductive evidence we have that laws of nature work without exceptions.

This is a recurring motif in Hume’s essay. In 1731, Jean-Baptiste Silva, an eminent doctor, investigates the case of Marguerite Thibault, a woman who claims to have been healed at the Abbé’s tomb of edema and paralysis (Montgeron 14-22). Silva argues that if she had been paralyzed, we would expect to see more atrophy in her leg (Montgeron 199). Louis-Basile Carré de Montgeron (200) replies that the only explanation of Thibault’s medical history is supernatural. According to Hume,

The physician declares, that it was impossible she could have been so ill as was proved by witnesses; because it was impossible she could, in so short a time, have recovered so perfectly as he found her. He reasoned, like a man of sense, from natural causes; but the opposite party told him that the whole was a miracle, and that his evidence was the very best proof of it (*EHU* 10.27n24.7).

Silva is the hero of the story, the person Hume’s readers would have identified with. According to him, Thibault can’t have been as sick as recently as witnesses say, since it would break the laws of physiology for her to recover so quickly.

Along the same lines, Cardinal de Retz is assured by all the priests associated with the Saragossa Cathedral that the doorkeeper of the cathedral had recovered a lost limb by rubbing holy water on it and they tell him that 20,000 residents of the neighborhood would be willing to confirm the miracle (de Retz 4.550). De Retz doesn’t say that he’s convinced.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to Hume,

He considered justly, that it was not requisite, in order to reject of fact of this nature, to be able accurately to disprove the testimony, and to trace its falsehood, through all the circumstances of knavery and credulity which produced it. He knew that, as this was commonly altogether impossible at any small distance of time and place; so was it extremely difficult, even where one was immediately present, by reason of the bigotry, ignorance, cunning, and roguery of a great part of mankind. He therefore concluded, like a just reasoner, that such evidence carried falsehood upon the very face of it, and that a miracle, supported by any human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument (*EHU* 10.26)

It isn’t worth investigating such stories, since the relevant witnesses to such things assert them zealously, uncritically, and without scruples. Hume knows that his readers will assume such miracles stories are false, and he feeds them lines of reasoning that will justify them in this assumption. The next step, he believes, is to get them to generalize that attitude to the miracles of the Old and New Testaments.

# Hume’s Elaborations of the Acme Argument

I’ve been describing the nucleus of the Acme Argument as it stands in the first edition of the *Enquiry.* In 1750 he adds a footnote that makes explicit an argumentative principle that he’s been assuming, and he mentions another, earlier, Jansenist miracle. In 1756, he adds more material that expands on the merits of the testimony offered for the earlier miracle. Let me explain these additions and the argument as it stands in its full glory in 1756.

Hume begins the footnote by citing two sources of accounts of the miracles around the tomb of the Abbé de Pâris. The first, mentioned in the first edition text to which the footnote is applied, is written by Montgeron, who “is now said to be somewhere in a dungeon on account of his book” (*EHU* 10.27n25). The second comprises three volumes titled ‘*Recueil des Miracles de l’Abbe* Paris’ by an anonymous author. Hume first criticizes a comparison the anonymous author draws,

There runs . . . through the whole of these a ridiculous comparison between the miracles of our Saviour and those of the Abbé; wherein it is asserted, that the evidence for the latter is equal to that for the former: As if the testimony of men could ever be put in the balance with that of God himself, who conducted the pen of the inspired writers. (*EHU* 10.27n25)[[5]](#footnote-5)

If you assume that the works of the Old and New Testaments are written by authors infallibly inspired by God, then it’s ridiculous to suppose that merely human reports of miracles in Paris could be of equal quality to that testimony.

Hume then turns around and praises the comparison from another perspective: “If these writers, indeed, were to be considered merely as human testimony, the French author is very moderate in his comparison, since he might, with some appearance of reason, pretend, that the Jansenist miracles much surpass the other in evidence and authority” (*EHU* 10.27n25). That is to say, if you don’t assume that the authors of the Bible are divinely inspired, and you consider those works as human productions, then the comparison is understated. Our evidence for the Jansenist miracles is much stronger than our evidence for the miracles in the Bible (Kreiser 399).

We can present the argument systematically as follows

1. Belief should be proportioned to evidence (Proportionality Principle, *EHU* 10.4)

2. The evidence for the Jansenist miracles is stronger than the evidence for the Biblical miracles (Hume’s evaluation of the evidence)

So, 3. If you ought not believe in the Jansenist miracles, you ought not believe in Biblical miracles (1, 2)

4. You ought not believe in Jansenist miracles (British Protestant premise)

So, 5. You ought not believe in Biblical miracles (3, 4)

It’s not bad as this sort of argument goes. Notice that to avoid the conclusion while granting premises one and four that it’s not enough to criticize the epistemic value of accounts of the Jansenist miracles. You also need to show that the evidence for Biblical miracles is stronger than that.

There’s a second, more oblique comparison to Jesus’ miracles in the footnote. Hume writes, “the Molinists were in a sad dilemma. They durst not assert the absolute insufficiency of human evidence, to prove a miracle. They were obliged to say, that these miracles were wrought by witchcraft and the devil. But they were told, that this was the resource of the Jews of old” (*EHU* 10.27n25). The Molinists are the foes of the Jansenist. They dare not assert the absolute insufficiency of human evidence for miracles because that would undermine the testimony of the Bible. The Jews of old are the Pharisees who accuse Jesus of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebub. In reply to the possibility that the miracles carried out around the tomb of the Abbé are actually performed by demons, the anonymous author cites Luke 11:16-19, where Jesus replies to the Pharisees. The author attributes to Jesus the principle that for exorcisms and healings, “it’s enough that you don’t see anything unworthy of God for you to not attribute it to the devil” (182). Thus, according to the author, the burden of proof is on the foes of the Abbe Paris “to prove that these [healings] are the work of Satan” (182-3).

Hume isn’t interested in the relative burden of proof between demonic and divine explanations of supernatural phenomena. He is interested in the comparing the evidence for the miracles of Jesus with the evidence for the miracles around the tomb of Pâris and in what would happen if we applied the same standards and principles in both cases.

The year before the first publication of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the poet and politician George Lyttelton defends the reality of St. Paul’s miracles and attacks the reality of the miracles reportedly performed around the tomb of the Abbé Pâris. He observes that the later miracles stop after the tomb is walled off from the rest of the church. After quoting a mordant sign posted on the wall (“By Command of the king, God is forbidden to work any more Miracles here”), Lyttelton asks some pointed questions:

But if God had really worked any Miracles there, could this absurd Prohibition have taken Effect? Would He have suffered his Purpose to be defeated by building a Wall? When all the Apostles were shut up in Prison to hinder their working of Miracles, the Angel of the Lord opened the Prison Doors, and let them out. But the Power of Abbé Paris could neither throw down the Wall that excluded his Votaries, nor operate through that Impediment (63)

Hume replies to this objection as follows:

No Jansenist was ever embarrassed to account for the cessation of the miracles, when the church-yard was shut up by the king’s edict. It was the touch of the tomb, which produced these extraordinary effects; and when no one could approach the tomb, no effects could be expected. God, indeed, could have thrown down the walls in a moment; but he is master of his own graces and works, and it belongs not to us to account for them. He did not throw down the walls of every city like those of Jericho, on the sounding of the rams horns, nor break up the prison of every apostle, like that of St. Paul (*EHU* 10.27n25.9).

Hume himself, of course, doesn’t believe that the miracles in the tomb worked through touch. His point is that if we make it a precondition on trusting miracle stories that they conform to rational general principles, then we will also have to exclude the miracle stories in the Bible.

Recall the five desiderata of the Acme argument. The witnesses are supposed to be 1) numerous 2) have integrity 3) reputation 4) having good sense and learning and 5) and observing publicly performed events in a city where fraud would be detected. Hume follows up on the number of witnesses willing to attest to the recovery of Anne Lefranc (*EHU* 10.27.25.5; Kreiser 136, Stayer 242) and the reputation of one witness, the Duc de Chatillon, who reports that the brother of one of his servants recovers from partial paralysis after visiting the tomb on two occasions in 1731 (*EHU* 10.27.25.7; Anon 1734a 152-9). Hume cites the integrity of archbishop Noailles, who is sympathetic to the Jansenists and who assembles a dossier supporting the miracle stories (*EHU* 10.27n25.3; Kreiser 94-6, Strayer 238-9); and he observes that two hostile investigators, the Archbishop Vintimille and René Herault aren’t able to refute the stories (*EHU* 10.27n25.4, 6; Kreiser 393-4). Hume gives a bit of international reporting: “all those who have been in France about that time have heard of the reputation of Mons. Herault, the *Lieutenant de Police,* whose vigilance, penetration, activity, and extensive intelligence have been much talked of” (*EHU* 10.27n25.6). Hume himself is among those in France at about that time, arriving in Paris in 1734 and leaving La Fleche in 1737. During his time in France, Herault’s police arrest numerous people inspired by Pâris including Montgeron, who attempts to present a copy of his book to the king (Kreiser 318, 380-2, Strayer 262-5).

Beside the Duc de Chatillon, Hume doesn’t cite examples of the integrity, reputation, or learning of any of the *witnesses* of this miracles. This is partly because Jansenism is a socially and religiously marginal movement in the middle of the 18th century. After Pope Clement XI’s condemnation of 101 Jansenist propositions in 1713, Jansenism becomes a locus of political and religious disgruntlement (Strayer 156-91, Van Kley 75-81). The purported miracles around Paris’s tomb after his death in 1727 give rise to a movement of worshippers beset by convulsions, and the suppression of that movement gives rise to a splinter group of self-torturers in the 1740s (Strayer 245-70). Some of Hume’s early critics picked up on the disreputable aspects of the convulsions of the worshippers around the tomb. In 1752 William Adams remarks, “the most usual effects of this sepulchre were not the cures, but distempers—a sort of convulsions, which seized alike the sound and the sick, and were attended with such strange appearances as brought great contempt and ridicule upon the other miracles of the saint” (Adams 88=Fieser 5.72, see also Leland 2.123-4=Fieser 5.220-1, G. Campbell 241-3=Fieser 6.92-3). Adams’s explicit concern is with the disreputability of the acts, but this suggests the disreputability of the witnesses.

In 1756 concerns about the reputation of the witnesses make Hume add to the footnote a more detailed account of another Jansenist miracle, this one from the 17th century and having famous witnesses. Pascal’s niece, Marguerite Périer, suffers from a lachrymal fistula, that is, a superfluous connection between the tear sac and the skin. This became infected, which causes a bad smell and a tumor the size of a hazelnut (Shiokawa 79-83). She presses a purported remnant of Jesus’ crown of thorns against the wound and fully recovers (Racine 80-1, Shiokawa 83-89). What raises this example over others is the reputation of the witnesses: “the famous Pascal, whose sanctity of life, as well as extraordinary capacity, is well known” and “the famous Racine” who “gives an account of this miracle in his famous history of Port-Royal, and fortifies it with all the proofs, which a multitude of nuns, priests, physicians, and men of the world, all of them of undoubted credit, could bestow on it” (*EHU* 10n25.12). Besides these, defenders of the miracle can also appeal to the “great names” of Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, who take up the defense of Port Royal in the wake of the miracle (Racine 88).

According to Hume, “our divines” ought to treat this miracle story “as being worth more, a thousand times, than all the rest of their collection” (*EHU* 10.27n25.12). This collection includes the miracles of the Old and New Testaments, of course. If Hume can persuade his Protestant readers of this premise, it will taken them from where they are (a miracle didn’t occur in the Port Royal abbey) to where he wants to take them (we’ve no good reason to believe in any miracles.) The puffing up of great names is meant to establish the premise that if this testimony doesn’t suffice to establish a miracle, then no testimony does. Since hardly any of Hume’s readers would be tempted to believe in the authenticity of Catholic miracles, they face a forceful argument. As Brandon Watson writes, “the Miracle of the Holy Thorn, precisely because of the quality of its attestation, becomes part of Hume's argument that we can never believe a religious miracle on testimony.” Only in light of the purported Jansenist miracles is the Acme Argument anything more than an undeveloped assertion. As Hume presents the case, the Jansenist miracles are the best attested miracles in history.

The last sentence of the footnote on the Jansenist miracles contains an elliptical dig that shows the extent to which Hume is attributing a concrete theological system to his reader. The miracle of the holy thorn “may serve very much to their purpose. For that miracle was really performed by the touch of an authentic holy prickle of the holy thorn, which composed the holy crown, which, &c.” (*EHU* 10.27n25.12). The surface meaning is that theologians can still appeal to the miracle to prop up Christianity, since the alleged miracle depends on the association of the thorn with Jesus. This is still part of a reductio ad Catholicism against the Bible, however, since Hume knows that “our divines” won’t adopt the offered argument. He knows that they hate Catholicism and its relics more than they fear deism or atheism.

We might worry that the Acme Argument depends essentially on anti-Catholic bigotry. Not believing in miracles of other religious traditions isn’t bigotry, thought; it’s just ordinary human religion. In any case, even if the argument as I’ve interpreted it were an expression of prejudice, that wouldn’t be evidence that it isn’t Hume’s argument.

Indeed, Hume’s presentation would have been quite different if he had a different audience in mind. Even so, his argument still should have some force among Catholics since their religious authorities reject Jansenism, especially after the pope condemns the group in 1713. In Hume’s role as acting ambassador to France in 1765, he reports to the British Secretary of State that the assembled clergy in France are very unhappy that the state prohibits them from attacking Jansenism with full force (*NL* 97, 114). *Convulsionnaires* are generally despised or pitied by Hume’s philosophically minded French audience (Strayer 279-80, Van Kley 98-99).

Some of the *philosophes* hostility to Jansenism rubs off on Hume. As with Adams before him, Leland at the same time, and Campbell afterwards, Jean d’Alembert (4.171) argues that since the tomb of the Abbé Pâris is the common source of convulsions and miracle stories, we should doubt the stories: “Where convulsions were born, miracles were born. They therefore come from the same source; now, the wiser [Jansenists] confess that the work of convulsions is an imposture, or the work of the devil: therefore, etc.” Before meeting the *philosophes,* Hume praises the Jansenists, saying that they “preserve alive the small sparks of the love of liberty, which are to be found in the French nation” (“Superstition” 79). After his time in Parisin the 1760s, he emends the 1773 edition of his *History of England* to call the Jansenists “a fanatical sect in France” (*H* 5.131=*H73* 6.166), a description that echoes d’Alembert description of the *convulsionnaires* as a “*secte de fanatiques*” (4.171; Wilkins 1762, Strayer 280). In both passages Hume draws attention to the similarities between Jansenism and Protestant enthusiasm.

The central maxim of Hume’s essay on miracles is that testimony should be evaluated not just on the circumstances of the production of the testimony, but also on the content of what is testified to (*EHU* 10.13). The case of the Jansenist miracles is a nice illustration of that maxim. Our attitude towards the testimony depends not just on our beliefs about the character, number, and reputations of the witnesses, but also on our attitude toward Jansenism. Hume knows what his readers’ attitudes would be, and he relies on those attitudes for argumentative and rhetorical purposes.

# Contrary Religions

Hume’s fourth argument for the unreliability of religious testimony for miracles is usually called the Contrary Religions Argument in the secondary literature. He assumes that more than one religion can’t be true: “in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary” (*EHU* 10.24). If there’s no religion that produces an absolute majority of testimonies of miracles, then most religious testimony is wrong. If most religious testimony is wrong, then religious testimony is untrustworthy. Thus, miraculous testimony that seems to support a religious system undermines not only tends “to overthrow every other system” (*EHU* 10.24), but it also should reduce our confidence in the reliability of any testimony for miracles that are supposed to support a religion. In this way, the unreliability of testimony for rival miracles boomerangs back on the initial religious system, thus destroying “the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established” (*EHU* 10.24). For example, the miracles in Herodotus and Plutarch, two pagan ancient Greek authors, undermine the reliability of the miracles in the Venerable Bede and Juan Mariana, two “monkish” historians (*EHU* 10.28), and undermines the reliability of testimony for religious miracles in general

Swinburne (59-60), J.C.A. Gaskin (1985: 6-9), and Bruce Langtry (1975) all make the point that not every worship of a god is contrary to the worship of every other god, especially within a polytheistic pantheon. If a priest of Athena manages to pull off a miracle that makes testimony reporting miraculous activity from Apollo more likely, not less. Insofar as the contrary religion argument is abstracted away from its theological context, it’s not any good.

The *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* ends with a recommendation to burn any book that is neither an abstract discussion of quantity nor an empirical investigation of matters of fact. An implication of this dichotomy is that philosophy, including the contents of the first *Enquiry,* ought to be an empirical endeavor. Campbell charges Hume with giving up “his favorite argument” by allowing the possibility that testimony for an eight-day eclipse to be persuasive (G. Campbell 89-92=Fieser 6.40-1). In reply, Hume writes,

There is no contradiction in saying, that all the testimony which ever was really given for any miracle, or ever will be given, is a subject of derision; and yet forming a fiction or supposition of a testimony for a particular miracle, which might not only merit attention, but amount to a full proof of it (*Letters* 1.349-50)

That is to say, given the actual evidence and how well confirmed the laws of nature are, we should ridicule all the miracle stories that we have or are ever likely to get, but there are fictitious situations in which it would be reasonable to believe such a story. By Hume’s lights, of course, it is a mere matter of fact that polytheism is false, and also a mere matter of fact that testimony about religious miracles is unreliable. His argument can’t be expected to extend to situations where polytheism is true or where religious testimony is perfectly reliable. His claim is that, given that the facts of testimony about religion are as they are, religiously motivated testimony that a miracle has occurred is unreliable.

Hume gestures around the world in giving examples of contrary religions: “of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China” and a little later to “any miracle of Mahomet or his successors” and to “Grecian, Chinese, and Roman Catholic” witnesses to purported miracles (*EHU* 10.24). Hume doesn’t seem to have put a lot of thought into some of these examples. The Confucianism of Qing Dynasty China, to take one example, isn’t a hotbed of miracle stories. (In “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” Hume says “the *literati*, or the disciples of Confucius in China” are “the only regular body of *deists* in the universe” (“Superstition” ¶8). The one non-Christian miracle that Hume describes in any detail, that of Vespasian curing two men in Alexandria (*EHU* 10.25), is underwhelming. The blind man cured by Vespasian’s spittle isn’t entirely blind to begin with and the description of the useless hand being fixed by the emperor’s stepping on it is compatible with its having been the natural restitution of a dislocated finger (Douglas 96-103=Fieser 5.151-4, Johnson 84-6).

The right way to think about Hume’s fourth argument is in its anti-Catholic context. The primary tension that he hopes to exploit is between his compatriots’ rejection of Catholic miracles and their acceptance of the miracles of the Bible. Besides the miracle of the holy thorn and the healings around Pâris’s tomb, Hume also describes a purported miraculous healing in the Saragossa Cathedral that, in his telling, Cardinal de Retz dismisses without investigation (*EHU* 10.26), and he lists the Bede and Mariana as “Monkish” historians whose miracle stories are incompatible with those of ancient pagan authors (*EHU* 10.28). The Catholic miracle stories that have accumulated over the years radically outnumber the miracles stories of the Bible. Since 18th century British Protestants don’t take the Catholic miracle tradition in the least bit seriously, they have to admit that most testimony that a religious miracle occurred is false and thus that testimony of that sort is unreliable. Adams concedes “that the credulity of mankind is very fully proved by” the stories surrounding the tomb of the Abbé Pâris “and the other legendary miracles of Popery” (Adams 100=Fieser 5.77). Hume attempts to show rejecting Catholic miracles could reasonably lead to rejecting all miracles.

The argument in “Of Miracles” is an inductive argument, and like all inductive arguments, it depends on the background knowledge of its readers. Whether or not we are entitled to infer that *all swans are white* from *all swans observed in Europe in the 18th century are* *white* depends on what else we know and believe. Someone who believes that Catholicism is superstition will believe that testimony for Catholic miracles is unreliable. On the assumption that testimony for Catholic miracles is a large portion of testimony for miracles, such a person will be entitled to infer, generally speaking, testimony for religious miracles is unreliable.

Gaskin (13) places the primary significance of the Contrary Miracles Argument on the debate between ancient pagans and the early Christian church and to the later echoes of that dispute. Hume’s example of Vespasian’s miracles show that he has the contrast between paganism and Christianity in mind to some extent. But the contrast between Protestants and Catholics is more salient to an 18th century Scot who likes spending time in France.

Hume assumes his readers will grant that the miracles of Vespasian, in the Saragossa Cathedral, and by the Jansenists didn’t happen. Partly, this is for the reason on the surface of the argument. The testimony of each undermines the testimony of the others. At least as important rhetorically, however, is that Hume knew that his readership would not have felt the tug of those stories. In understanding Hume’s intentions, it’s worth knowing that his readers would have rejected the reality of such miracles out of hand.

Thus, an argument like Hume’s still has force today. Even though most Protestants today don’t believe the Pope is the antichrist, they mostly believe that there are important differences between the branches of Christianity, and they would only reluctantly become Catholics. Generally speaking, members of Protestant denominations don’t believe in the miraculous powers of relics or pilgrimages, the intercession of saints, or in miracle stories surrounding medieval and modern saints. If you aren’t a Catholic, you probably don’t think Catholic miracle stories are true, and this ought to pull you away from believing in the reliability of testimony about religious miracles.

How does the Contrary Religions Argument relate to Part 1 of Hume’s essay on miracles? In summing up Part 2, Hume writes, “Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish” (EHU 10.35). Hume takes himself to have established in Part 1 that there is a proof in favor of the laws of nature and that testimonial evidence for a miracle would have to rise to a level of proof on the other side in order to possibly be accepted (*EHU* 10.11-12). His summary of Part 2 shows that he believes that not only does religiously motivated testimony for miracles not meet the standard of ‘proof’ it doesn’t meet the far lower standard of probability. I think it’s fair to attribute to Hume the principle that if most Fs aren’t G, then, probably, the next one won’t be either. If a Protestant is willing to grant that most miracle stories are in defense of Catholicism and insists that these stories are mostly false, then it takes some work to avoid the conclusion that an arbitrarily selected miracle is probably false.

Decisive evidence that this form of reasoning is at the core of Hume’s argument comes in the story he tells Campbell of how he came up with the argument:

It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits’ College of La Flèche … and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, … this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;— which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer (*Letters* 1.361).

This letter suggests two arguments. First, a ground level argument, that events that are unprecedented or break the laws of nature are very unlikely, and less likely than the invention of a story. This is the argument that Hume first offers to the Jesuit and the argument of Part 1 of Section 10. The letter also suggests a second argument against miracles, suitable for Protestants such as Campbell: if the constancy of nature gives us good reason to doubt Catholic miracles, then it gives us good reason to doubt the miracles of the Gospels (Gopnik 8-9). The thought that the falsity of Catholicism may be used against miracles more generally is thus present at the inception of Hume’s thinking on the subject.[[6]](#footnote-6)

John Earman complains, “Hume’s review of miracle stories in Part 2 can be seen as an attempt to gather” data about the proportion of miracle stories that turn out to be true, “but if so, the attempt is crude since not enough information is given to determine whether or not the witnesses were in fact deceived” (48). If, however, Protestants are willing to stipulate that Catholic miracle stories (after, say, 600 AD) are all false and that they outnumber the miracles of the Bible, then Hume doesn’t need to do any work to persuade them of the desired conclusion.

One way to avoid this conclusion is to draw distinctions between Catholic miracle stories and Biblical miracle stories so that the unreliability of the first doesn’t cast aspersions on the reliability of the second. In this connection, Earman writes, “as with all frequency data, the reference class is crucial” (48). For Hume’s argument to work, *testimony for a miracle that supports a religion* needs to be an epistemic natural kind. We want to avoid gerrymandered epistemic kinds such as <evidence for the existence of the Loch Ness monster *or* evidence that Columbus is the capital of Ohio> where the unreliability of one disjunct doesn’t impugn the reliability of the other.

And, indeed, Hume’s early critics attempt to draw lines between the testimony for religion miracles that they accept and testimony for religious miracles that they reject. They draw distinctions with respect to whether the testimony is used to establish a religion (G. Campbell 142-82=Fieser 6.58-72), whether it is self-interested (Adams 104-07=Fieser 5.78-9, Leland 2.86-90=Fieser 5.202-04), and whether it is the product of irrational religious fervor (Adams 67-9=Fieser 5.64-5). In principle, such a strategy could take the air out of Hume’s argument. The difficult-to-avoid dangers in such replies include drawing ad hoc distinctions, appealing to double standards, and assuming things that are unknowable

An obvious criterion for assessing the likelihood that a miracle is genuine is to independently consider the likelihood of the attested doctrine. As Pascal points out, however, there is a risk of running in a circle here: “if doctrine governs miracles, then miracles are useless for doctrine” (Pascal 1963: 607=Pascal 1966: 284 #832; Dear 1990: 672). One policy that Pascal recommends is to check to see whether the doctrine is schismatic, and if it isn’t obviously so, let yourself be guided by the apparent miracle, “A miracle among schismatics is not so much to be feared, since the schism which is more obvious than the miracle, visibly marks their error. But when there is no schism, and what the error is in dispute, a miracle distinguishes (Pascal 1963: 616=Pascal 1966: 303-4 #903; Shiokawa 164-5). Protestants can’t accept that criterion, since they don’t hold schism to be a sign of error. In any case, if you test miracles by doctrine, it isn’t obvious ahead of time how such an inquiry is going to turn out. If natural reason tells you that the doctrine of Hell is wicked, you might end up rejecting the veracity of all of Jesus’ miracles for that reason.

Thomas Rutherforth, one of the earliest critics of Hume’s essay on miracles, sees the form of Hume’s arguments clearly. In *The Credibility of Miracles Defended,* he warns,

if we study to avoid, as much as may be, the trouble of examining the several popish miracles distinctly, and indolently please ourselves with any thing, which promises to confute them all at once; we shall be easily led to take part with those, who under the specious pretence of defending the protestant religion, would unsettle the foundations of christianity itself (Rutherforth 20=Fieser 5.34).

Instead, Rutherforth recommends that his coreligionists rebut each Catholic miracle one by one:

If we would contend, as with reason we may, that the popish miracles, which are best attested, are each of them connected with some such circumstances, as render it either directly, or by necessary consequence, inconsistent with our knowledge of God’s power; we should then be able both to defend ourselves as protestants, and to give an answer to every one, who shall ask us a reason of our faith in the miracles of Christ and his apostles” (Rutherforth 20-1=Fieser 5.34).

The task that Rutherforth sets for his coreligionists is a heavy one: to show that each miracle outside of the Gospels is less probable than the miracles within. As a model for this approach, Rutherforth cites the argument from Lyttelton about how the miracles stopped when Paris’s tomb is walled off (Rutherforth 19=Fieser 5.34).

The Contrary Religions Argument won’t convince any Catholics in the form that Hume presents it, but it might work if reconstructed. Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim traditions have their miracle stories,[[7]](#footnote-7) and there are stories of pagans with supernatural powers in the ancient world (Knapp 182-99). Some Protestant denominations, including Quakers during the interregnum (Thomas 149-51, Shaw 52-64) and Methodists in Hume’s day (Shaw 178-9),[[8]](#footnote-8) believe that miracles continue to be performed in the modern era, and Catholics will probably be inclined to reject their reality. Moreover, not every Catholic believes every story of every saint’s miracle. A sophisticated French Catholic such as de Retz may look down on benighted Spanish Catholics. Moreover, doubts are often raised about miracle stories even during the middle ages (Goodich 1988). A Catholic may deny the veracity of a good number of miracle stories, do the math, and conclude that relatively large percentage of miracle stories are false. The question then arises, if testimony about religious miracles is unreliable, why should I believe in the miracles that I do?

# Miracles without Doctrine

In reply to Campbell, Hume writes, “I never read of a miracle in my life, that was not meant to establish some new point of religion (*Letters* 1.350). For the sake of making the Contrary Religions argument work, what matters is whether the miracle, if genuine, would establish a controversial doctrine. So, for example, the doctrine that the relics of saints ought to be venerated is a controversial doctrine. Those who reject the doctrine won’t believe in miracles that would establish the doctrine. They’ll end up rejecting many miracle reports and thus end up saying that miracle reports are frequently unreliable.

A.E. Taylor observes against Hume that a miracle, considered as “the actual occurrence of an unusual fact” can’t be incompatible with another unusual event at a different time and place (14, see also Flew 180-1). If you strip miracles from the doctrines that they are supposed to justify, then they won’t be incompatible with one another. Of course, once they are stripped of associated doctrines, miracles can no longer be used to justify those doctrines as a kind of revelation. In order for revelation to be justified by miracles, we can’t treat them as entirely loose and independent events.

There’s a great deal of flexibility in interpreting what a miracle story signifies. In theory, we could take miracles to prove nothing or anything. According to Swinburne, “most alleged miracles, if they occurred as reported, would show at most the power of a god or gods and their concern for the needs of men, and little more specific in the way of doctrine” (61). As we’ve seen, Luther and Calvin argue that Catholic miracles aren’t to be trusted, since they may have been produced by the devil.According to the Book of Acts, after Paul heals a man disabled from birth, the natives of Lystra conclude that he and Barnabas are incarnations of Mercury and Zeus (Acts 14:8-13; Knapp 160). The Jesuit François Annat, a foe of the Jansenists and the target of Pascal’s last three *Lettres Provinciales*, argues that it’s “a blasphemy to say that God works miracles in order to authorize errors condemned by the church,” (6) and, since “signs and miracles are ordinarily used for the conversion of those who have not true faith” (9), we have good reason to suppose that little Marguerite has been healed to show the Jansenists the error of their ways, “as a last effort to touch their hearts more forcefully” (9). In criticizing Hume’s Contrary Miracles argument, Anthony Ellys argues that God “sometimes permits Miracles to be wrought in false Religions” in order “to try the good dispositions of Men in the true one” (Ellys 16=Fieser 5.102). It’s useful, or at least amusing, to consider the application of Ellys’s interpretive possibility to the miracles of the New Testament. It would be a funny joke on humanity if Yahweh only allowed Jesus, Peter, and Paul to perform miracles for the sake of tempting Jews from following the law of Moses.

It’s worth mentioning, however, that Jansenist miracles in the early modern period are normally interpreted in ways favorable to the Jansenist cause. Of the miracle of the holy thorn, Hume reports, “The queen-regent of France, who was extremely prejudiced against the Port-Royal, send her own physician to examine the miracle, who returned an absolute convert” and “saved, for a time, that famous monastery from the ruin with which it was threatened” (*EHU* 10.27n25). As Hume says, the purported miracle persuades Anne of Austria, the young Louis XIV’s mother, to stop harassing Port-Royal’s abbeys (Strayer 95). In the *Pensées,* Pascal argues that the most likely interpretation of the miracle is as evidence of the sanctity of Port Royal: “‘This is the house of God, for he works unusual miracles there.’ The others: ‘This is not the house of God, for they do not believe there that the Five Propositions are in Jansenius.’ Which is more understandable?” (Pascal 1963: 612=Pascal 1966: 294 #855) Similarly, the French public takes the miracles around Paris’s tomb as evidence that God opposes the condemnation of the Jansenists (Van Kley 97-98).

Suppose we disassociate miracles from the doctrines which they are supposed to vindicate. Suppose we separate the Miracle of the Holy Thorn from the question of whether the Port Royal abbeys should be closed, separate the cross of light that is supposed to have appeared over the Milvian Bridge from the question of whether the Roman Empire should be Christian, and separate Jesus’ miracles from the Golden Rule and the doctrine of Hell. What lessons might we draw from the phenomena once they are stripped down in this way?

Wallace is an interesting figure in this regard. As I said earlier, he sees a tension between Hume’s assertion that no example of testimony of a religious miracle has ever been good enough to merit belief in the attested miracle and his sympathetic description of the quality of the witnesses to the Jansenist miracles. Wallace resolves the tension by concluding that the Jansenist testimony is trustworthy, and he goes into some detail in recapitulating the case of Louise Coirin (11-12).

Wallace is not a Jansenist, so he needs an account of what the Jansenist testimony signifies. In 1865 he begins attending seances, and he soon becomes convinced in the existence of a realm of spirits (Raby 184-93). On this hypothesis,

Modern Roman Catholic miracles become intelligible facts. Spirits whose affections and passions are strongly excited in favour of Catholicism produce those appearances of the Virgin and of saints which they know will tend to increase religious fervor. The appearance itself may be an objective reality, while it is only an inference that it is the Virgin Mary—an inference which every intelligent spiritualist would repudiate as in the highest degree improbable (Wallace 215-6).

According to Wallace, the miracles around Paris’s tomb are produced by spirits who aren’t agents of the Catholic God, his mother, or his saints, but who want to inspire religious feeling. I earlier described Wallace as a naturalist because he spent years studying plants and animals in the Amazon basin and on the Malay Peninsula and because he is the co-discover of natural selection. He is not a naturalist in the sense that he denied the existence of intelligent ethereal spirits. If you’re not a Jansenist but you believe that some of them are witnesses to violations of the laws of nature, then you ought to say something about what those violations mean. Well, Wallace says something.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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2. An allusion to Hebrews 12:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Antony Flew (186-7) helpfully suggests that Hume means ‘physically impossible’ here [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. De Retz (4.550) doesn’t actually say that he doesn’t believe the story. Hume seems to have inferred de Retz’s disbelief from his supposed “incredulous and libertine character” (*EHU* 10.26). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hume actually foists this comparison onto the anonymous author, who explicitly rejects it (Anon 1736: 6-46,see G. Campbell 257-60n=Fieser 6.98n140) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Campbell criticizes both parts of Hume’s essay. The fact that Hume refers to “that argument which you have so strenuously attacked” suggests that he thinks of these parts as constituting a single argument, with Part 1 showing that a high standard needs to be met for testimony of miracles to believed and Part 2 showing that testimony for religious miracles is unusually unreliable. R.M. Burns says that the anecdote is only an account of the origin of Part 1 of the essay (133). In my opinion, this is because Burns doesn’t recognize the argumentative and rhetorical role that Protestant rejection of Catholic miracles plays in Part 2 of the essay, and thus doesn’t see how Hume and Campbell’s shared disbelief in the Jesuit’s story and similar ones constitutes a premise in some of the arguments in Part 2. In 1737, Hume writes to the eventual Lord Kames that he has written “some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*” and asks for his opinion, asking in particular, “is not the style too diffuse?” (*Letters* 1.24). According to Burns, this worry doesn’t refer to the essay as we have it, since its style is “pithy and direct” (135). I think that only Part 1 of the essay is pithy and direct. In Part 2, Hume first states four arguments, and then gives illustrations and elaborations, and leaves it as an exercise to the reader to figure out how the illustrations apply to the arguments. Elsewhere in his book calls these illustrations “rambling and repetitive” (174). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On Hindu miracle stories see Flood 2011 and on early Buddhist miracle stories see Gethin 2011. In the *Enquiry* Hume says “the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China . . . abound in miracles” (*EHU* 10.24). With respect to the religion of Turkey, Adams (77=Fieser 5.68), Leland (2.103=Fieser 5.210-1), and Campbell (150-63=Fieser 6.61-2, 64) all observe that in the Koran Muhammad doesn’t claim to perform miracles. Miracles traditions grow up around him anyway. The traditional Muslim doctrine (as expressed, e.g., by Mustafa Sabri) is that the miracle traditions surrounding Muhammad are reliable and that nothing in the Koran is inconsistent with them (Terzić 25-9) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Wesley doesn’t believe in medieval miracle stories (Wesley 10.1-2; T. A. Campbell 47), but he does believe in the genuineness of the miracles around Pâris’s tomb (Kreiser 398). In his journal entry for January 11, 1750, he writes, “I read, to my no small amazement, the account given by Monsieur Montegeron, both of his own conversion and of the other miracles wrought at the tomb of Abbé Paris. I had always looked upon the whole affair as a mere legend, as I suppose most Protestants do, but I see no possible way to deny these facts without invalidating all human testimony” (Wesley 2.171). To the objection, “will not the admitting of those miracle establish Popery?,” Wesley replies, “Just the reverse. Abbé Paris lived and died in open opposition to the grossest errors of popery, and in particular, to that diabolical bull *Unigenitus,* which destroys the very foundations of Christianity” (Wesley 2.171). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. More recently, Larry Shapiro (Ch. 3) has also argued against reflexively assuming that God is the cause of miracles [↑](#footnote-ref-9)