**Hume, Contrary Miracles, and Religion as We Find It**

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# The Empirical Character of the Argument

Hume’s fourth argument for the special unreliability of religious testimony for miracles is usually called the Contrary Miracles Argument in the secondary literature.[[1]](#endnote-1) It runs as follows:

in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and . . . it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other (*EHU* 10.24).

He assumes that more than one religion can’t be true and that, since the purpose (“scope” in a now obsolete sense) of a miracle story is to establish the truth of a religion, if the religion isn’t true, then neither is the miracle story. If there’s no religion that produces an absolute majority of testimonies of miracles, then most testimony for miracles intended to establish the truth of a religion is wrong. If most religiously motivated testimony for miracles is wrong, then religious testimony for miracles is untrustworthy. Thus, testimony of the occurrence of a miracle that seems to support a religious system not only undermines other religions, but it should also reduce our general confidence religiously motivated testimony for miracles. Because advocates of a sectarian religious world view are implicitly calling rival miracle stories false, the unreliability of testimony for rival miracles boomerangs back on the foundations of initial religious system.

In summing up part 2, Hume concludes, “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). By ‘proof’ Hume means “such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition,” at least when considered on their own (*EHU* 6n10; Flew 74, Buckle 243). He 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. By his lights, the division of miracle stories among religions shows that most of them are false. If most Fs aren’t G, then an arbitrary F probably isn’t G.

Richard 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 pulls off a miracle that would make testimony reporting miraculous activity from Apollo more reliable, not less. Hume’s argument only works in situations where there are rival religious traditions who reject miracle stories from other religions. Insofar as the Contrary Miracles 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 inquiry into matters of fact. By Hume’s lights, of course, it is a mere matter of fact that contemporary religions reject stories from other traditions and also a mere matter of fact that there are different miracle stories in different religious traditions. His argument can’t be expected to extend to situations where everyone agrees that all the miracle stories point in the same direction.

According to Hume, the contrariety between miracles in rival religious traditions is like a disagreement between political factions about who won an ancient battle:

Suppose that . . . the historians of each party had uniformly ascribed the advantage to their own side; how could mankind, at this distance, have been able to determine between them? The contrariety is equally strong between the miracles related by Herodotus or Plutarch, and those delivered by Mariana, Bede, or any monkish historian (*EHU* 10.28)

In this comparison, rival religions correspond to rival political parties, and they not only assert the occurrence of their own miracles, but they reject the occurrence of rival miracles. This is what Hume means when he says that, with respect to religion, what is different is contrary.

In the world as we find it, there are a number of religious traditions with variations and denominations. Each of these denominations is partly constituted by its doctrines, and among these doctrines are that certain miracle stories are true, certain miracles stories are false, and certain miracle stories are adiaphora, that is, left to the individual judgments of the congregants. The more credulous adherents will believe in more of these optional miracles and the more skeptical will believe fewer. Thus, denominations implicitly attribute a certain range of reliability to religious miracle stories. For the skeptical adherents to a faith, the imputed reliability of miracle stories in general will be the number of miracle stories that one must believe divided by all the miracle stories that there are. For the credulous, you add the number of required miracle stories to the number of optional miracle stories and divide by all the miracle stories that there are. These ratios implicitly provide reliability estimates for testimony for religious miracles, at least as a first approximation. If you believe in a religion that rests its authority on the truth of certain miracle stories, but which also rejects the truth of most miracle stories, then you have some explaining to do.

# The Theological Context of Hume’s Argument

The problem that Hume raises is especially pointed for British Protestants of his time and place. By the late 16th century, English Protestants “firmly and widely” (Walker 111, see also Dear 669-74, Shaw 26-9) asserted that miracles cease sometime between the events described in the Book of Acts and 600 AD. Miracles were necessary to give authority to scripture in ancient times, but we now have scripture, and so we no longer need miracles.

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

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.

Hume 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 thus places himself in the Anglican tradition of rational anti-Catholicism in order to undermine Christianity more generally (Stephen 1.77-9, Wootton 192, 206-07, Harrison 1999: 249, Buckle 249-50). My point is not that there’s no Protestant superstition in 18th century Britain or that Hume isn’t hostile to it where it arises. He makes fun of English preachers for attempting to exploit prophetically inspired fears of earthquakes (*Letters* 1.141; Force 534-4, Shaw 177-8). My point is rather that British intellectuals thought of themselves as less superstitious than their Catholic counterparts, and they never were more hostile to the supernatural than when thinking about purported Catholic miracles.

Gaskin (13) places the primary significance of the Contrary Miracles Argument on the debate between ancient pagans and the early Christian church. One example that Hume gives of contrariety is “between the miracles related by Herodotus or Plutarch, and those delivered by Mariana, Bede, or any monkish historian,” which we might think confirms Gaskin’s suggestion. In our non-sectarian age, we think of the Venerable Bede and Juan de Mariana as Christian historians, but it’s worth observing that Hume describes them as ‘monkish’ historians, by which he means to impugn them for their Catholicism. His intended readers would have considered their miracle stories to be as superstitious as those of Herodotus and Plutarch.

Hume hopes to exploit the tension between his compatriots’ rejection of Catholic miracles and their acceptance of the miracles of the Bible. Besides the monkish miracle stories in Bede and Mariana, he cites Jansenist miracle of the holy thorn and the healings around the Abbe de Pâris’s tomb (*EHU* 10.27), He also describes a purported miraculous healing in the Zaragoza Cathedral that, in his telling, Cardinal de Retz dismisses without investigation (*EHU* 10.26). William Adams, a contemporary critic of Hume’s, 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). To the extent that testimony for Catholic miracles is a large portion of testimony for miracles, someone who rejects such stories should infer that testimony for religious miracles is generally unreliable, and some special story will need to be told to vindicate testimony within that category.

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 extra work to persuade them that miracle stories are mostly unreliable. As Peter Millican puts the point, “rather than attempting to *argue* for such rejection, he may be simply reporting a view that he expects others to share, and tacitly inviting his discerning reader to notice the difficulties this implies” (178).

Hume assumes his readers will grant that the miracles of Vespasian, in the Zaragoza Cathedral, and by the Jansenists didn’t happen. Partly, this is for the reason on the surface of the argument: the putative unreliability of rival miracle stories undermines the reliability of all miracle stories. 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 his intentions, it’s worth knowing that his readers would have rejected the reality of such miracles out of hand

One way to avoid Hume’s skeptical conclusion is to draw distinctions between Biblical miracle stories and other miracle stories so that the unreliability of the second doesn’t cast aspersions on the reliability of the first. 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.

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.

Thomas Rutherforth, another contemporary critic of Hume’s, sees the challenge raised by Humean arguments clearly. In *The Credibility of Miracles Defended,* Rutherforth 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 an argument from George Lyttelton about how the miracles stopped when Pâris’s tomb is walled off (Rutherforth 19=Fieser 5.34, see Lyttelton 63).

One obvious approach for dismissing miracle stories from rival religions is to independently assess the likelihood of the attested doctrine. Someone might say that if a doctrine is wicked or implausible enough, then we may deny the veracity of the miracle story that is offered to support it. As Pascal pointed 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 recommended was 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 the error is in dispute, a miracle decides the issue (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, at least not in the same way.[[2]](#endnote-2) 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.

If Hume had written the Contrary Miracles Argument with a Catholic audience in mind, he would have written it differently. For one thing, he might have tried to put more effort into justifying his claims that Catholic miracle stories are false rather than just treating them as obvious evidence of human credulity.

There’s an asymmetry between the miracle stories that 18th century philosophical Anglicans and Moderate Presbyterians believe and those that an 18th century Jesuit believes. The respectable British theologian believes in the miracles of the Bible and perhaps in some miracles associated with the early Church fathers. The Jesuit believes in all of those and more. There aren’t Presbyterian miracle stories that Hume could point to in order to undermine a Jesuit’s faith in miracle stories more generally. Hume’s explanation for the asymmetry is that “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 Reformers recognized that it was more effective to dismiss and downplay contemporary Catholic miracles rather than to try to play catch up.

Still, if we take a longer and broader view of the Protestantism, we can find grist for Hume’s mill that he could use in transforming his argument so that it might better persuade Catholics.

Various dissenting groups during the interregnum believed that they could perform miracles: Both sides in the English Civil War appealed to prophecy to shore up their position (Rusche, K. Thomas 164-6, 354-5, Shaw 99-100) and George Fox wrote a book of purported Quaker miracles. (K. Thomas 149-51, Shaw 52-64). Baptists claimed that they could work healing miracles, and they continue to believe that after the Restoration (Shaw 32-49). Hume’s contemporary John Wesley thinks that miracles ceased during the middle ages because of the depravity of the Catholic Church, but the Reformation opened the door for a new era of miracles (Wesley 10.1-2; T. A. Campbell 47, Shaw 178-9). The Methodists follow John Wesley in rejecting the cessation of miracles, and other new Protestant denominations follow their lead. Today, it’s no longer a distinctive feature of Protestantism to believe in the cessation of miracles. A modern Catholic might doubt stories of faith healing, immunity to snake poison, and speaking in tongues, not to mention Joseph Smith’s prophecies, healings, and the stories surrounding the discovery and translation of the Book of Mormon.

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. Doubts were often raised about miracle stories even during the Middle Ages (Goodich 1988). Not all good Catholics believe that Saint Denis walked for miles holding his head after being decapitated. 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?

In his statement of the Contrary Miracles Argument,Hume writes “the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China . . . abound in miracles” (*EHU* 10.24). To begin with the religion of ancient Rome, Hume could have given examples of polytheistic miracles stories beyond those of Vespasian and Alexander of Abonoteichus. For the common people in ancient Greece and Rome, Robert Knapp observes, “super-human powers existed; they were many; they lived in, entered and left the natural world at will; they could intervene in people’s lives for good or ill; their favour could and should be won over through approved action, prayer, offerings, and rituals” (61).

With respect to the religion of Turkey, Adams (77=Fieser 5.68), John Leland (2.103=Fieser 5.210-1), and George Campbell (150-63=Fieser 6.61-2, 64) all observe that in the Koran Muhammad doesn’t claim to perform miracles. Hume concedes the point and explains it away in the same way with the a similar explanation as the one that he used for the absence of miracles among the Reformers. In comments on a manuscript version of Campbell’s *Dissertation on Miracles*:

The Greek priests, who were in the neighbourhood of Arabia, and many of them in it, were as great miracle-workers as the Romish; and Mahomet would have been laughed at for so stale and simple a device. To cast out devils, and cure the blind, where every one almost can do as much, is not the way to get any extraordinary ascendant over men” (*Letters* 1.350).

The relevant Greeks priests are those of early Byzantine Empire.According to Hume, because they had established an institutionalized system of miracles, Mohammed knew that he couldn’t acquire influence by playing the same game.

Whatever the merits of this as an explanation of the paucity of miracle stories attributed to Muhammad in the Koran, Hume needn’t have backed away from the existence of Muslim miracle stories*.* Miracle stories grow up around Muhammad anyway, and, by the 9th century, ’Ali al-Tabari, a Christian convert to Islam, could list a catalogue of them (D. Thomas 208). The traditional Muslim doctrine (as expressed, e.g., by Mustafa Sabri) is that the stories describing miracles surrounding Muhammad are reliable and that nothing in the Koran is inconsistent with them (Terzić 25-9).

With respect to the Buddhism of Siam and China, there are wondrous powers attributed to bodhisattvas (Gethin 217-19). Some of these stories are presented as descriptions of past lives of the Buddha, some of his compatriots, some are presented in connection with the lives of holy monks and nuns, and some are presented as works of the bodhisattva Guanyin (Verellen 229-31). Taoists replied with their own stories of evidential miracles at the turn of the tenth century (Verellan 224-5. In these stories, miracles are worked by deities of temples and monasteries, deities embodied in statues and icons, the deified Laozi, the deified Zhang Daoling, and other sources (Verellen 225-6)

# Miracles without Doctrine

According to Hume, miracles haven’t historically been separated from doctrine: “I never read of a miracle in my life, that was not meant to establish some new point of religion (*Letters* 1.350). It’s not obvious this is true, even by Hume’s own lights. As Hume presents him, Tacitus might reasonably be charged with atheism, and he wasn’t trying to persuade anyone of the divinity of Vespasian (*EHU* 10.25). To be sure, Tacitus himself presents the examples as evidence of “the favor of heaven and a certain partiality of the gods toward Vespasian,” which we might count as a new point of religion (*Histories* 4.81). The clergy of the Zaragoza cathedral weren’t trying to persuade Cardinal de Retz of a new point of religion in telling the story of the miraculous healing of the doorkeeper (*EHU* 10.26), though it is true that they were trying to vindicate Catholic institutions and the efficacy of holy oil. Hume’s argument only works against miracles that are presented as evidence for a religion that rejects a large number of other miracle stories. But these cases are very important!

A. E. Taylor argues 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, and the Contrary Miracles Argument won’t work. Of course, once they are stripped of attendant 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. Taylor’s argument seems to defang the Argument from Contrary Miracles, but it really makes miracles irrelevant to settling religious questions.

Sometimes people stand up for their preferred religious doctrines by granting the occurrence of seemingly rival miracles, but interpreting them in a way consistent with their preconceptions. The Jesuit François Annat, a foe of the Jansenists and the target of Pascal’s last three *Lettres Provinciales*, argued 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 the miracle of the holy thorn occurred to show the Jansenists the error of their ways, “as a last effort to touch their hearts more forcefully” (9).

Notwithstanding Annet’s arguments, 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 next century, the French public takes the miracles around Paris’s tomb as evidence that God opposes the condemnation of the Jansenists (Van Kley 97-98).

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. A version of Hume’s argument could apply here as well: if miracles aren’t a reliable guide to doctrine for rival religions, why should they be for your own? Here again, the difficulties lie in drawing a distinction that avoids arbitrary stipulations, appeals to ignorance, and double standards.

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?

Alfred Russel Wallace is an interesting figure in this regard. 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 (11). 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 Pâris’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. Wallace is a naturalist in one sense 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. Once you separate miracles from the usual doctrines that people assume that they support, there’s no telling where you might end up.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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2. In 18th century Britain, dissenters don’t hold schism to be a sign of error at all, and members of the Churches of Scotland and England don’t think of schism in the same way. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. More recently, Larry Shapiro (Ch. 3) has also argued against reflexively assuming that God is the cause of miracles [↑](#endnote-ref-3)