

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Divine Proof or Tenacious Embarrassment? The Wonders of the Modern Miraculous

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There is nothing quite like a good miracle story. Miraculous accounts have the capacity to enrapture or repulse; they can be sought after or disdained with seemingly equal passion. Depending on the type of miracle and mode of belief, they can be monotonously plentiful, enticingly elusive, or utterly preposterous. Throughout history and across cultures, purported miracle events and narratives have been foundational to faith conviction as well as to skepticism, making and breaking religious careers and movements in their wake. Although scholars of modern religion in South Asia are not known to shy away from sticky subjects, it appears that many have managed to keep these pervasively complex phenomena at arm's length, often leaving them unnoticed if not unscrutinized. Indeed, as Mark Corner observes, the concept of the miraculous often remains—among scholars and nonscholars alike—“cordoned off like a terminally ill patient in the corner of the hospital ward,” beyond repair or understanding in the modern secular world (Corner 2005, vii).¹

This volume is an attempt to bring South Asian narratives and conceptions of the miraculous into the light, to give them some of the attention we feel they deserve. We acknowledge that, in spite of the prevailing prognosis, the condition of the modern miraculous is far from dire, and thus this collection reads nothing like a diagnosis of a disease or discovery of a cure; it neither seeks to explain away nor rescue miracles from their demise. Instead, volume contributors uncover the range and variation of colliding forces that have forged the miraculous into what it is today: a healthy conundrum.

Well-known challenges to miraculous worldviews, generally represented by modern, rationalistic, scientific sensibilities—also alive and well in different ways across the globe—take a certain shape in South Asian cultural and religious contexts. Several chapters in this volume discuss conundrums created when miracle events and expectations are encountered by members of an educated Indian or Sri Lankan elite, living in South Asia or abroad, who typically have little time for or interest in miracles. In other chapters we find that, somewhat ironically, the strongest critiques of the miraculous emerge from religious leaders within Hindu traditions as well as within institutional Islam and Christianity. Some religious authorities indeed work tirelessly to promote miraculous events and worldviews, while others appear strongly disdainful of the same. Still others promote miracle events selectively, depending on their religious resonance and the context in which they occurred. Adding a final layer of conundrum to the mix, several volume contributors have woven into their writing their own—somewhat fraught—reflections on ethnographic encounters with the miraculous.

By investigating miracle as conundrum, it is our hope that, rather than simply reinforcing the usual distinctions between science/religion, West/the rest, modern/traditional, establishment/popular religion, and ethnographer/native, we instead illustrate how narratives and conceptions of the miraculous more often than not confound these traditional divides. This collection furthermore describes encounters with the miraculous that produce unanticipated conundrums and new perspectives—often by default—demonstrating how miracles are, by nature, unwieldy. While some understandably want to sequester the whole matter by consigning it to dark, hushed corners for the terminally ill, experience suggests that there is not always a choice.

Situating the Modern Miraculous

For our purposes, “miracle” has been defined broadly in this volume to involve an array of phenomena and contexts. Some events such as healings, punishments, mystical experiences, and visions emerge within officially designated sacred spaces such as churches, temples, or shrines. Other events such as the discovery of an impressive Shiva lingam, animal rescues from natural disaster, and healings (actual or promised) occur in locations not—or not yet—sanctified, such as a vacant suburban lot, a raging ocean, a hospital, or a television advertisement. Most miracle accounts are assigned specific dates within the past decades, while others exist as past events frozen in narrative time yet no less alive to their modern audiences.

Tying all these instances together are, to some degree, a sense of awe or surprise evoked in listeners or experiencers. In both European Christian and

Indic traditions, the words most closely associated with miraculous events are also associated with human surprise or wonder. The Latin *miraculum* emphasizes the wonder-causing aspect of an event and the Greek root word for miracle is *meidian*, “to smile.” Likewise, the Sanskrit root *smi*, “to smile,” is the derivative for the most common dictionary term for an astonishing, wondrous event: *vismaya*. Although no Indic words neatly translate as “miracle,” the Hindi term *alaukika* describes phenomena that depart from the normal course of events, and *ashcharya* is the human condition of wonder and astonishment. The Tamil word most typically used for a miraculous event is *putumai* and literally translates as “novelty” or “newness,” yet when used in a religious context *putumai* translates better as “wonderment” evoked by sacred powers. *Ath-putham*, the most commonly used term for “miracle” in Malayalam, has a literal translation similar to that of *putumai*.²

But not all miracle narratives incite wonder. In some instances they are meant not so much to evoke awe in the listener but to convey lessons about the awesome power of a saint or divinity. In some cases, efforts to assign significance to purported miraculous events can strip them of their wonder. As suggested by Carolyn Walker Bynum, medieval theologians described and analyzed designated miracle events so persistently and thoroughly that the freshness of the event and thus the amazement originally provoked by it dimmed (Bynum 1997, 3, 24). As some volume chapters demonstrate, contemporary narrators and producers of miracles can likewise emphasize the lessons to be learned by them to such an extent that their wondrous qualities fade into the background. Indeed, wonder is not the only—or even the most important—ingredient for the miraculous. A talking cow, for instance, does not necessarily constitute a miracle. Miracles can only be labeled as such if they are understood as the direct or indirect result of divine or saintly power and therefore as containing a particular purpose or meaning for humanity (Corner 2005, 5; see also Basinger 1986, 3).³ A miracle event must be, for those who identify it as such, a sign that is, in many cases, also a wonder.

Although religious authorities can offer a significant, seemingly ironic, force for deflating the wonders of miracles—sometimes debunking the category of the miraculous itself—the strongest antimiracle strain emerges from a post-Enlightenment scientific, empirical worldview. This perspective on miracles gained particular influence during and after the eighteenth century and is best articulated by the Scottish philosopher David Hume’s proposal that miracles violate the laws of nature. This is not to say, however, that pre-Enlightenment cultures did or do not understand nature to have laws and properties that can be verified through empirical study. For instance, Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* describes how Amazonian empirical rigor and rationality forged an understanding of the natural world that is in some ways more complex and comprehensive than the current store of information held

in botany, zoology, and pharmaceutical science.⁴ The difference between Amazonian and modern nonmiraculous worldviews thus has less to do with conflicting beliefs about the laws of nature than with a disagreement over the existence of a supernatural realm that can involve itself in the natural world. The post-Enlightenment shift is thus one in which worldviews that conceive of nature as an open system with which spirits can wondrously interact are challenged—and in some cases replaced—by a perception of the natural world as a closed and complete system that overrules not only the intervention but the existence of supernatural forces.⁵

In Hume's famous essay "Of Miracles" he identifies "irrational" miraculous worldviews not only with the premodern but also with the primitive Other. He proposes that miracles "are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors." Hume optimistically concludes this thought with his forecast that miracles will wane "in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages" (Hume [1748] 1989, 31). Hume's associations are clearly a product of their time, riddled with holes; his prediction for the future seems to have also fallen quite flat. Just as skeptical and miraculous worldviews do not strictly correlate with premodern and modern societies, respectively, so they do not—as is too often assumed—reflect fundamental differences between Hume's no doubt colonialist distinction between "us" and "them."⁶

Although Hume's associations may be largely anachronistic, they nonetheless are difficult to shake. In the midst of his excellent work on modern Indian religious traditions, for instance, Lawrence Babb seems to promote the view that Indian and North American worldviews are fundamentally different. He expresses this view through his reticence to apply the term "miracle" across cultural boundaries. As he describes it, "miracle" typically refers, in the West, to the "disreputable opposite of scientific rationality." This association, as he sees it, potentially distorts significant realities in the "Hindu world" that allow for deities or unseen beings to affect the realm of normal experience (Babb 1986, 176).⁷ Although this assessment may in some cases be true, we find that, based on evidence reflected in this volume and beyond, it is too broad to be helpful.

In her attempt to remedy such assumptions, Susan Sered proposes that in order for the category "supernatural" to be useful for ethnographers, the assumed natural/supernatural opposition must be dismantled, not only because it is often misleading but also because the opposition assumes a contentious hierarchy. This hierarchy, she argues, supports embedded hierarchies found in related dualisms such as West/the rest, Christian/pagan, true/false, and superior/inferior. Sered proposes that if the category of the supernatural were instead "part of a shifting lexicon that helps us make sense out of the

experiences and stories that comprise our work, we can begin to think in terms of a series of continuums” (Sered 2003, 217). If viewed as differently situated in a variety of contexts, the category of the supernatural—and, we submit, the miraculous—would be far more useful to our understanding.

An easy entrée into dismantling such assumed associations is to consider the increasing North American belief in a divinity or spiritual force who actively engages with our natural world. Since World War II the United States has experienced a surge of Neo-Pentacostalism that revels in charismatic gifts of the spirit, divine signs, and healings. The long lines of books on spirituality at any given mainstream bookstore today might, as neatly described by Mark Corner, “make the mystery religions of Rome look tame by comparison” (Corner 2005, 179). In a *Newsweek* poll released May 1, 2000, nearly half of the respondents claim to have personally experienced or seen a miracle. Eighty-four percent professed a belief that God performed miracles.⁸ It is also important to note that in India both belief in and skepticism of the supernatural are alive and well and have been for centuries. The most notable ancient skeptics were adherents of the Charvaka and Lokayata traditions, who denied all nonempirical events and provided an important foil against which religiously oriented philosophical texts argued.

A stellar incident of misapprehension and collision between Indian skepticism and American and European credulity occurred through the meeting of the Indian Arya Samaj and the American and European Theosophists in the late 1800s. The two groups were briefly under the impression that they would, as proponents of Eastern spirituality, join forces. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, leader of the Arya Samaj and champion of Hinduism as a rationalistic and scientifically verifiable religion, abruptly broke with the Theosophist delegates Henry Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, from the United States and Russia, respectively, once he discovered their propensity, as Spiritualists, to communicate with spirits of the dead. This breakup was marked by Dayananda’s publication of a pamphlet, *Humbuggery of the Theosophists*, in which he denounced the trickery and irrationality of Olcott and Blavatsky’s practices (Van der Veer 2001, 55–57).

Efforts to relinquish assumed oppositions and hierarchies when discussing miraculous worldviews is not the same as obliterating distinctions completely, particularly in reference to premodern and modern beliefs in the miraculous. The most significant difference between premodern Amazonian and contemporary middle-class South Asian or North American miraculous worldviews is not an indebtedness—or lack thereof—to empiricism but the extent to which modern miracle advocates must defend their position. Although modern proponents of the miraculous likely do not agree with prevailing post-Enlightenment assumptions that render their worldview primitive or suspect, it is nearly impossible not to, on some level, engage with or

respond to such assumptions. As noted by Ursula Rao in her discussion of the miraculous in contemporary urban north India, modernity is not, as is often presumed, an opposition to or replacement of tradition but rather “the struggle over traditions.” The question of “whether to keep, abolish, rework or reinvent them [i.e., miraculous worldviews]—is considered to be part of the modern condition” (Rao 2002, 8). Miracles in the modern context thus rarely cease to be a conundrum for their supporters, who, more elaborately than their predecessors, must work to give validity and respectability to their beliefs.

Much ink has been spilt on the part of theologians, philosophers, scientists, and folklorists in their efforts to maintain a level of respectability for the miraculous in today’s world. Among European and North American Christian theologians who argue in their defense, a sturdy bone of contention worthy of centuries of rebuttal is, as mentioned, the writings of David Hume. Prophesying the importance of his argument, Hume declared, “I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and the learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusions, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures” ([1748] 1989, 24). Although perhaps overly optimistic about the final impact his argument would have on what he considered to be the terminally ill modern miracle, Hume could not have overstated his lasting influence on the miracle debate. In an effort to understand the range of religious responses to Hume’s assessment that miracles violate the laws of nature and are therefore irrational and that witnesses claiming to vouch for them must be untrustworthy or deluded, I have arranged miracle advocates into two camps: classical theists and nondualists. Although these camps are not necessarily mutually exclusive and miraculous worldviews are often too unwieldy to be perfectly accommodated by such categories, I find this schema helpful for sorting out not only how religious traditions (and traditions within traditions) defend the miraculous but also how they make room for miracles in the modern context.

Briefly put, modern miracle advocates in the classical theist camp acknowledge the laws and properties of an empirical, scientifically validated reality yet counter Hume’s argument against Christian theism by contending that this reality is not the only one in existence. Divinity and divine powers are realities that reside in a separate realm that, under extraordinary conditions and largely in response to prayer or ritual activity, make their presence known—through blessings, healings, and occasional punishments—to the empirical world. Nondualists, in contrast, include adherents who are largely nontheistic in their religious orientation. Proponents tend to agree, for the most part, with Hume’s view of nature as a complete system closed to outside forces. Yet they do not conclude that divine or “supernatural” power must therefore be nonexistent. Rather, seemingly extraordinary forces work through specially tuned humanity and within the laws of nature. “Miraculous” events thus often appear

as such to the uninitiated who have yet to comprehend or discover aspects of the natural world that allow for these events. In spite of the fact that many nondualists understand the acquisition of extraordinary abilities such as foreknowledge, spontaneous healing, and bilocation to be available through the natural processes of human proclivity and discipline, I nonetheless label their view miraculous, because the end product has religious significance that transcends the mundane.⁹ Also, for those who stand outside his or her conceptual box, a nondualist's science will likely be viewed as pseudoscience.

Theologians and philosophers from the classical theist position tend to stave off Hume's accusation that miracles violate nature's laws by rendering this statement either irrelevant or erroneous. Cardinal Newman, for example, argued for the existence of a divine reality separate from the natural realm, a reality that can only be accessed by faith, not science. In Newman's mid-nineteenth-century sermon "Faith and Reason Contrasted as Habits of the Mind" (in which he refers to Hume not by name but as "a well known infidel of the last century") he does not attempt to defend two spheres of reality but, rather, two mutually exclusive types of minds. Newman agrees with Hume that no amount of empirical evidence can compel a person to have faith in miracles; rather belief in miracles has to do with "a 'habit of the mind' prior to and independent of examination of the material world" (quoted in Mullin 1996, 127). C. S. Lewis attempts to undermine Hume by describing divine and empirical realities as "naturally" interconnected. Using the analogy of the collaborative process of human conception, he reasons, "If Nature brings forth miracles then doubtlessly it is as 'natural' for her to do so when impregnated by the masculine force beyond her as it is for a woman to bear children to a man. In calling them miracles we do not mean that they are contradictions or outrages; we mean that, left to her own resources, she could never produce them" (Lewis 1947, 61–62). The analytic philosophers David and Randal Basinger argue that miracles, understood by classical theists to be fueled by divine forces, do not, as Hume contends, violate natural law. Responding to Hume's critique that miracles have no plausible proof, the Basingers note that since the cause of miracles is nonempirical, their proof can only be nonempirical: "Since natural laws can only tell us what will or will not happen under natural conditions, they cannot be used to predict or explain what will happen when non-natural forces are present" (Basinger and Basinger 1986, 13).

Nondualist miracle supporters tend to challenge Hume by embracing the scientific approach, arguing for the natural occurrence of "miracles" or seemingly supernatural events. Alfred Russel Wallace, a nineteenth-century British biologist known for formulating the theory of evolution by natural selection,¹⁰ levels his critique of Hume by making a case for Spiritualism and for supernatural forces that can be empirically measured and therefore proven. These supernatural "facts," rather than violating nature's laws, demonstrate that our

current understanding of the laws of nature is incomplete. Wallace writes in his *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* that “many phenomena of the simplest kind would appear supernatural to men having limited knowledge. Ice and snow might easily be made to appear so to inhabitants of the tropics. . . . A century ago, a telegram from three thousand miles’ distance, or a photograph taken in a fraction of a second, would not have been believed possible, and would not have been credited on any testimony, except by the ignorant and superstitious who believed in miracles” (Wallace [1896] 1975, 39).¹¹ The Christian process theologian David Griffin echoes this view by arguing for the repeatability and therefore scientific validity of phenomena that suggest life after death, apparitions, extrasensory perception, and “apparent” precognition.¹² Griffin’s view is based philosophically on a nondualistic association between mind and body, an association, he contends, that is supported by Hume’s writings (Griffin 1997, 108–10).

Since nondualists tend to downplay the existence of a divinity who exists separately from yet is involved in the course of human history¹³—a foundational belief for mainstream Christians—most of its adherents in contemporary Europe and the United States include New Age practitioners, nontraditional Christians, and members of nontheistic religious traditions. In India, the modern nondualist approach that applies scientific terminology and methods to seemingly supernatural phenomena has emerged most significantly within Hindu nontheistic traditions, particularly in association with Neo-Vedantic philosophies and practices. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Hindu Renaissance leaders such as Vivekananda and Yogananda de-emphasized ritual practices and theism and promoted instead an ethical spirituality and experientially based meditational practices that showcased Hinduism as a scientifically verifiable religion. Mystical capabilities known as *siddhis*, understood as by-products of yogic discipline, have for over a century been examined and explained through scientific means. H. C. Mathur, a former U.N. telecommunications expert, describes the capacity for reading minds, seeing hidden objects, healing the sick, and levitation as arising from a subconscious faculty of the brain that has been developed through discipline and practice. While *siddhis* may seem miraculous (or faked) to the ordinary person, Mathur notes that “they are no more miracles than the scientific gadgets like radios, TVs or telephones which produce intelligent speech, music, or pictures out of nothing” (Mathur 1998, 3; see also Davis 1998, 10–11).

The nondualist’s scientific approach to extraordinary events and capabilities has recently made inroads into classical theistic traditions in India, as well. As such, scientific language has become, for some, a means to legitimize an array of religious phenomena including communication with and actions of deities. Ursula Rao describes how terminology such as “proven fact” ascertained through “sensory experience” and “physical examination” has in north

India begun to replace traditional means of validation such as “belief” when referring to such events. As Rao puts it, scientific rhetoric has allowed traditional religious adherents to enter “the discourse of the elite and [has] deprived the elite of its claim to a language of superiority” (Rao 2002, 10). As she describes it, rationality can no longer be the domain of one privileged group, but of several groups in competition with and in seeming opposition to one another.

The miracle debate does not therefore simply rage between adherents of secular scientific and religious worldviews but can also be a fiercely contested intrareligious affair. As suggested above, those who hold the nondualist position within Hindu traditions can be disdainful of theistic Hindus who adhere to more conventional devotional practices. Neo-Vedantic gurus at the turn of the nineteenth century most starkly articulated this tension by deriding ritually based Hinduism and passionately arguing that science, not the miraculous, was the root of their tradition. This assertion did not necessarily rule out, however, the possibility of supernatural powers ascertained through yogic practices. Urban elite Sai Baba devotees likewise commonly associate miracle-prone traditional Hindu practices and beliefs with superstition yet align themselves, somewhat ironically, with a wonder-worker godman (Babb 1986, 200). On the North American front, miracle-prone Pentacostal groups who tend to dismiss postbiblical medieval (i.e., Catholic) miracles as “pagan supernaturalism” believe that, more recently, as phrased by Mark Corner, “the miraculous taps were turned on again on behalf of the Protestants” (Corner, 2005, 185).

Demonstrating a Christian perspective that stands in strict opposition to miraculous worldviews are mainline Protestant and Catholic theologians who, since the mid-nineteenth century, have ultimately agreed with Hume’s assessment of miracles. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), one of the first Protestant theologians to assert this position, argued that since nature is God’s handiwork, any supposed violation would be a transgression of God’s own work. Humanity’s connection to and reliance upon God should not therefore be based upon miraculous events but upon a sense of awe and wonder invoked by nature taking its course (Corner 2005, 3). As stated by the Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann, the miraculous worldview reflected in the Bible, traditionally accepted by Christians, must be rejected by all believers who wish to stake their claim as members of contemporary—that is, rational—society: “[I]t is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in The New Testament world of miracles” (Bultmann 1972, 5, quoted in Corner 2005, 80).¹⁴

Although the pressures of scientific empiricism and religious rationalism have not ultimately succeeded in squelching modern conceptions of the miraculous, this is not to say that today’s miraculous worldviews are not high

maintenance. One could even argue that, in some contexts, miraculous worldviews are held against great odds and with considerable tenacity. As described by Robert Mullin, this tenaciousness seems due in part to the complexity of miracles, to the web of “cherished beliefs” woven into a belief in miracles. Upon challenging the existence of miracles, one also challenges the existence of the spiritual realm, the efficacy of prayer, and the availability of a personal God who cares for humanity (Mullin 1996, 4–5). Weaving a slightly different cherished web, the nondualists’ miraculous view assumes a perception of a natural world that is imbued with spiritual energy and agency, one that lends deeper significance and contour to mundane understandings of the empirical world.

Skeptics’ arguments for the nonexistence of miracles are no less complicated and no less wed to an array of related concerns. An antimiracle skeptic does not simply take a stance against irrationality but also against a host of troubles understood to be associated with irrationality and credulity. The Indian Science and Rationalists’ Association, established in 1949 and known to many as “guru busters,” explicitly aims to expose fraud among wonder-working gurus, astrological societies, and miracle events such as the internationally renowned Ganesh milk-drinking miracle in 1995. The stated purpose of the association is not simply to promote rationalism as an end in itself, but also to combat what they consider to be spiritualism’s exploitation of the poor (Burns 1995). Joe Nickell, a former professional stage magician and private investigator who wrote *Looking for a Miracle: Weeping Icons, Relics, Stigmata, Visions and Healing Cures* likewise sets out, as he puts it, to expose “pious frauds.” Nickell describes the task of exposing miracles as gravely serious due to the magnitude of miracle claims themselves as well as to the impact these claims have on the credulous masses. In the book’s introduction, Nickell recounts the benefits that rational thought and enlightened endeavor have brought to our world, replacing “primitive authoritarianism” with “enlightened democracy.” He concludes his statement with a sober reminder that “there are those whose beliefs and actions run counter to a rationalist ideal. Often seemingly contemptuous of science or, at best willing only grudgingly to acknowledge its benefits, they view the world in terms that hark back to the ‘Dark Ages,’ holding beliefs in myriad phenomena—from apparitions to weeping statues—that might generally be described as miraculous” (Nickell 1993, 9).

Based on the preceding accounts of classical theist and nondualist worldviews, it appears that modern supporters of the miraculous understand or contextualize science differently than Nickell but can hardly be considered “contemptuous” of it. The opposition Nickell sets up between secular scientific and miraculous views thus seems rather forced, and yet, as argued by the folklorist Gillian Bennett, who studies popular accounts of the supernatural in England, believers and skeptics often face one another in mutual incomprehension

(Bennett 1987, 15–16). In H. C. Mathur's introduction to his book exploring the *siddhi* powers of yogic adepts, he glumly notes this mutual incomprehension by describing how his work—mixing scientific theory with religion—has difficulty finding an audience: “The readers who are interested in Indian mythology with a religious bent of mind do not have enough knowledge of science to understand the theory of wave mechanics involved. On the other hand, readers with sufficient knowledge of science are just not interested in theological literature. So nobody found [my] first two books interesting” (Mathur 1998, vii).

Not only are staunch believers and skeptics typically indisposed to the perspectives of one another, but also these indispositions can be equally resolute. From today's mainstream rationalistic vantage point, it is easy to see a belief in miracles as tenacious. Yet when viewed from the opposing angle, from a context that allows for miracles, skeptics can seem just as loyal to culturally predetermined perceptions. Nickell, for instance, insists that he is objective in his investigation of miracles and does not decide ahead of time—based on wishful thinking—about their truth or falsity (1993, 9). Yet this assurance rings hollow when it directly follows the passage, partially quoted above, describing the perils of the “primitive authoritarian” miraculous worldview. In order to not be swayed by preconceived notions, Nickell suggests that miracle investigators make use of the principle of Occam's razor, which proposes that the simplest tenable explanation—the one laden with the fewest assumptions—is most likely the correct one (1993, 13). Based on Nickell's predisposition, it is clear from the outset that the most reasonable (i.e., simplest) explanation will be one that does not involve the supernatural. Yet, as argued by Bennett, an application of “common sense” in investigations of the supernatural can produce rationales far more elaborate than “simple” supernatural explanations themselves. Bennett offers a number of examples, including the rather extreme case of a man whose house was plagued by mysterious noises. His daughter, refusing to give in to the supernatural rationale of a haunting and apparently lacking any better reasoning, suggested that the sounds were “made by a fox which was trying to attract the hunt, so it would have an excuse to run about and get warm” (Bennett 1987, 14).¹⁵

My own experiences of similar—albeit less outlandish—“commonsense” explanations emerge from academic settings where I presented abbreviated versions of the chapter included in this volume. Briefly put, my presentations explored the subjective nature of the miraculous as experienced at a Hindu goddess temple in upstate New York. I argued that one person's routine experience is another's miracle and told the story of a friend of mine who, due to the touch of a guru, experienced an intense burning of the six chakra centers located up her spine—something she related to me later in textbook detail. My friend's religious training had been entirely in Christian and Jewish traditions,

and thus she was not predisposed to the possibility of a guru's charged touch (known as *shaktipat*) or of the existence of chakra points in the body. As such, this experience, which may have been commonplace for others, seemed like a miracle to my friend. In the discussion following my presentation I was hoping to explore further how individual frameworks shape the meaning—not the actuality—of such events. Yet I was surprised at how, in both settings in which I told this story, some of the skeptics in the audience were eager to figure out the “real” cause of my friend's sensations. In one setting, a retired scholar deduced that since my friend was training to be a nun, she must have, at some point in her past, had access to a chart with the chakras on it. Although she may have forgotten, her subconscious mind fed her the pertinent information that led to her experience. In the other setting, a baffled participant suggested, half-humorously and after relinquishing his earlier hypothesis that her experience was imagined, that my friend was in fact experiencing menopausal hot flashes. Not everyone in the two settings seemed equally baffled by the event; my guess is that participants ran the gamut from true believers to true skeptics, with many in between. The vocal skeptics in the room seemed to take for granted that the yogic explanation was untenable and thus searched for another. If we applied Occam's razor to their “commonsense” explanations I'm not sure they would be the best choice. In the end, it was interesting for me to note how one person's routine experience is another's miracle is another's impossibility.

Without doubt, credulity can and has led to massive exploitation; “pious frauds” are not in short order, and the principle of Occam's razor does often militate against supernatural explanations. From a classical theist's perspective, a miraculous worldview must also answer to the problem of theodicy—how an omnipotent, beneficent God can be active in a world containing so much evil.¹⁶ Defenders of miracles—often defenders of particular religious traditions, movements, and/or wonder workers—are often no less aware of the pitfalls of purported miracles than are their critics. Yet believers can speak eloquently, and to the right audience convincingly, on their behalf. As described by Cardinal Newman, the language often used to describe the realm of the miraculous is the language of faith, something that speaks from experience and often in defiance of an established logic. C. S. Lewis contends that miracles make sense in the same way that moments of inspired poetry can; in the most unexpected, jarring turns of phrase, poetry can illuminate if not create realities for those who understand: “[Miracles] will not be like unmetrical lumps of prose breaking the unity of a poem; they will be like that crowning metrical audacity which, though it may be paralleled nowhere else in the poem, yet, coming when it does, and effecting just what it effects, is (to those who understand) the supreme revelation of the unity in the poet's conception” (1947, 61).

Regardless of the credence one gives to modern miracle accounts, it is not hard to argue that they are—on a variety of levels—audacious, supremely revealing, and worthy of analysis. Because modern conceptions of the miraculous can never escape some measure of scrutiny, critique, and exaltation, they also cannot help but be a conundrum—especially if one stands far enough back to take in the full view. It is our hope that the chapters in this volume provide enough close scrutiny to illumine the critique and poetry embedded in South Asian conceptions of the miraculous; taken as a whole, we hope to paint a panorama that not only allows the reader to view the modern miraculous as a wondrous conundrum but to make some sense of it, as well.

Situating the Volume

Departing from generalizing theology, philosophy, and scripture—and thus from overt critique or support of miracles—the chapters that fill this volume offer, as a whole, a rather complicated view of the miraculous. Contributors' discussions and analyses of the modern miraculous tend to be anchored in particular narratives that invoke faces, names, and places that help to assuage abstraction. Whether viewed through the eyes of religious proponents or skeptics or conceived from the perspective of tentative born-again belief, savvy miracle marketing, or ethnographical consternation, the collection paints a richly variegated picture of a richly variegated subject matter. The organization of the volume into three parts, centered around contexts within which conceptions of South Asian modern miracles find their shape, is nevertheless an attempt to tease out important themes and trends that emerge when considering the modern miraculous in all its complexity.

Part 1, "Miracles and Modern Ambivalence," explores the complicated ways modern religious movements and sensibilities—both nondualist and classical theist—integrate and accommodate modern scientific worldviews. Here we find that in spite of the efforts of self-proclaimed modern rationalists to wrest the miraculous from their religious purview—and in so doing putting a safe distance between their religiosity and that of the credulous masses—miraculous experiences and interpretations find ways of creeping back in. Contributors to this section explore the dynamic and often unexpected ways that particular religious representatives of scientific rationalism—Neo-Vedantic swamis (in response to British colonial expectation), Christian medical missionaries, and mainstream urban sensibilities—selectively interact with, push against, and, in some instances, unwittingly (or covertly) give in to miraculous worldviews.

Part 2, "Making and Breaking Shrine Reputations," relates tales and experiences situated in particular localities associated with the miraculous—

shrine contexts and divinities known for (and, in various ways, dependent upon) miraculous events. In such instances, although miracle clientele can be indebted to mainstream modern sensibilities, purported miracles seem less challenged by institutional and modernist expectations. In comparison with part 1 and part 3, conundrums described in these chapters tend to be more nuanced, focusing on the often-confounding nature of divine activity in the world rather than skeptically confounded humanity. All three settings—rural Rajasthan, suburban middle-class Tamil Nadu, and upstate New York—involve Hindu traditions that differ significantly due to their location and clientele. As a result, each chapter describes varying conceptions of divine intervention that present a range of challenges for divinity as well as humanity.

The volume's final part, "Managing the Establishment: Miracles and Popular Expression," is similar to part 1 in its exploration of the fraught relationship between popular expectation and modernist/institutional reticence, but it views the interaction largely from the opposite perspective—from that of the miracle proponent. Here, miraculous worldviews are encased in and reliant upon modern institutions and media—constrained by post-Enlightenment rationalism, theological orthodoxy, or a combination thereof—that are, in turn, somewhat reliant upon miracles for their livelihood. We learn that popular support for miracles must often contend with the formalized contexts that help deliver them—and vice versa. This push-and-pull dynamic is viewed from the context of a Catholic pilgrimage site, of a Muslim healing center, and of advertisements for South Asian miracle workers aired on Zee TV. Those who experience, narrate, and promise miracles in these contexts uniquely respond to and in some ways defend against contrary expectations of the institutions and media to which they are, somewhat ironically, symbiotically tied.

Starting off the first part, "Miracles and Modern Ambivalence," Robin Rinehart discusses strategies employed by Swami Vivekananda and Swami Rama Tirtha—two late-nineteenth/early twentieth-century advocates of Neo-Vedanta—in making their case for Hinduism as a scientifically verifiable religion. Teaching at a time when Christian colonizers and missionaries accused popular Hindu practices of superstition, these men not only debunked purported miracles within the Hindu context but argued that such beliefs were not the "real" Hinduism. In spite of their efforts to keep the wondrous at bay, miracle accounts associated with these two men emerge when given the right conditions and distance from colonial suspicions. Set in the same time period are the interactions between Satnami-Christian and European and North American medical missionaries in Chhattisgarh, explored by Chad M. Bauman. Moving from Rinehart's view of an elite Indian response to colonial derision of Indian credulity, Bauman examines more closely colonial assumptions expressed and enacted by Western evangelicals. He finds that the mis-

sionary campaign to convince Satnami converts to forgo superstitious practices, particularly in the context of healing, was never complete and—more significantly—medical experts were not entirely devoid of their own reliance on supernatural forces in their healing practices. Bauman details how Western missionaries' assumed alliance with the purely modern was made possible through a heavily biased double standard. Sunil Goonasekera's chapter brings us to present-day Sri Lanka, to Hindu and Buddhist devotion to Kataragama Deiyō and to the immediate aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The miracle narratives highlighted in this chapter delve into the accounts of two Western educated gentlemen who experience deliverance from calamity by a mysterious stranger and an alligator, respectively. Through their tales, these men wrestle with rationalistic expectations that are difficult to square with events that seem nothing short of miraculous. Discursive strategies such as sly suggestion and implication help them in their efforts to seem not taken in by something that has clearly taken them in. They articulate a fine balancing act, deftly executed in the face of conflicting impulses.

In part 2, "Making and Breaking Shrine Reputations," we begin with Ann Grodzins Gold's discussion of miracle narratives associated with deities residing at rural Rajasthani pilgrimage shrines. She compares these "real-time" narratives with a miracle story embedded in a women's worship tale from the same community. While shrine narratives tend to expose divinity as somewhat of a show-off—at times quarrelsome and bent upon garnering respect—Gold notes that the women's worship tale reflects a more remote, eternal divinity whose miraculous actions are, seemingly, taken for granted. Human wonder at such miracles can be less a sign of devoted affiliation than of obtuseness; yet it is human obtuseness that requires shrine deities to unleash powers in ways that shake their worlds—hopefully for the better. William P. Harman relates a temple-origin story from a middle-class suburb in central Tamil Nadu that hinges on a series of miraculous events. At the root of these events, many having to do with dream appearances of Lord Shiva, is the discovery of a sizeable Shiva lingam in a vacant lot in the form of a granite outcropping. Harman describes not only how such temple miracle accounts give power and credibility to the shrine, but explores the mechanisms that give the narrative telling its force and, indeed, a sacred reality its own that is difficult to discount—even in its modern suburban setting and in the eyes of a non-native ethnographer. My chapter relates miracle stories emergent at a Hindu temple in the town of Rush in upstate New York. The temple, whose members hail from a variety of backgrounds, has built a reputation for miraculous events and experiences. Founded on the Srividya tantric tradition that works to tap divine energy through ritual, the Rush temple also employs Neo-Vedantic scientific terminology to explain ritual energy and mystical

experiences. I explore inherent tensions and resolutions in this setting where devotion is offered to a (partially) transcendent temple goddess and mystical and ritually powerful events are understood as scientifically verifiable.

Selva J. Raj begins the volume's final part, "Managing the Establishment: Miracles and Popular Expression," by guiding the reader through the miraculous as experienced at a Catholic healing shrine dedicated to St. Anthony and located in the rural village of Uvari in Tamil Nadu. The Uvari shrine, known for offering relief to victims of possession, attracts a significant number of Hindu as well as Catholic pilgrims. Raj relates two case studies of supernatural possession and healing and elaborates upon the ecumenical nature not only of the clientele but of the supernatural entities responsible for possession and healing. Experiencing significant strain from such complicated human-divine interactions are rationally minded Catholic clergy who nonetheless stand to gain from pilgrimage traffic to their religious site. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger tells stories of *karamat*—miraculous feats performed by Sufi saints—as related by a Sufi healer and her husband in the south Indian city of Hyderabad. Although a reputation for wondrous powers can elevate individuals to sainthood, it can also—if their story is framed the wrong way according to Islamic theology—brand them as heretics. Flueckiger describes how storytellers and miracle workers, in order to keep *karamat* within the realm of orthodoxy, must strike a balance between secrecy and revelation in their accounts of the miraculous. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt recounts the content and reception of television advertisements produced on behalf of three modern-day miracle workers, advertisements aired in North America and the United Kingdom. These commercials, guaranteeing immediate relief from life's problems, deftly conjure up nostalgia for traditional religious and cultural modes while incorporating new world images and business strategies. The reception of these ads is equally mixed: the fact that they air frequently suggests a certain appeal to segments of the diaspora community. Yet strong disdain, bandied about on Internet sites, tells another side of the story.

Notes

My thanks to Selva Raj for his insightful reflections and comments, which I have incorporated into this introduction. Thanks also to our anonymous reviewers for their keen suggestions and encouragement. I gladly accept responsibility for all remaining oversights.

1. The folklorist Gillian Bennett notes that this avoidance of the supernatural results in a vicious circle of sorts: no one will tackle the subject because it is disreputable, and it remains disreputable because no one will tackle it (1987, 13).

2. Selva Raj helped explain to me the finer points of *putumai*. See also Davis (1998, 4, 8).

3. The folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand suggests a similar set of necessary conditions for narratives to be urban legends that are survivable in our culture. They must have a strong story appeal, have a foundation in actual belief, and have a meaningful message or moral (1981, 10). Likewise Benedicta Ward notes that early Christian texts portray miracles as less wondrous than meaningful. Events such as healings or surprisingly ethical behavior of animals were considered significant because they were signs of God's Kingdom, not because they broke with any preset law of nature. Since these actions were celebrated as a "special manifestation of the powers of heaven, which constitute the world at all times," the question of "how" they occurred was not as important as "why" (1992, 540–42).

4. See Lingis 1994 for a discussion of science along these lines. Lingis argues that the basis for building community is shared reason.

5. For more on the post-Enlightenment shift that conceived of nature as a closed rather than an open system, see Nichols 2002.

6. Kirin Narayan's article about European and North American perceptions of Hindu holy men nicely fleshes out the propensity to project all things mysterious and strange onto Indian religious traditions. Amartya Sen furthermore argues that colonial associations of India with religiosity—for better and for worse—has affected India's self-perception and undermined the rationalist strains of Indian intellectual traditions. (See also Davis 1998, 8, and Corner 2005, 21.)

7. Similar to Bynum's reference to medieval miracles is Babb's remark that within this Hindu worldview a miraculous event is so naturally anticipated that it "lacks any element of truly radical surprise" (1986, 177).

8. Of the Americans polled, 90 percent of the Christians said they believed in miracles in comparison to 46 percent of non-Christians polled. These statistics also reflect a possible increase in a belief in miracles since the 1995 *Time Magazine* poll that found that 69 percent of Americans believe in miracles (Mullin 1996, 262–64).

9. In some cases, extraordinary powers are attributed to non-natural forces as a means to give them—and those who display them—special significance. For instance, devotees of the godman Sai Baba consider his miraculous powers to be intrinsic to his nature rather than mere *siddhi* powers gained naturally through human accomplishment and discipline. Some skeptics who accuse Sai Baba of being a fraud argue derisively that his powers are mere *siddhis* and not miraculous (Babb 1986, 188, 192).

10. For a discussion of Wallace's unheralded contribution to Darwin's theory of evolution, see Shermer 2006, 202.

11. The folklorist Gillian Bennett likewise argues that folklore events associated with the supernatural are not necessarily "false" but are considered folklore because they are not accepted by mainstream society. To make her point, she lists a number of folk practices such as leaving apple rings and bread to mold for application on wounds and agricultural practices having to do with the waxing and waning of the moon, all of which ended up having scientific merit (1987, 12).

12. Griffin prefers the term "apparent precognition" to foreknowledge, since the capacity to know events in advance, he argues, has not to do with actually knowing

things before they happen but with the ability to transcend typical limitations of time in the same way that other paranormal capacities demonstrate the ability to transcend the typical constrictions of space (1997, 90).

13. The deistic position understands divinity as responsible for the creation of the world but maintains that, once the world is created, divinity stands remote from and unengaged in the natural realm. I do not include this position in my various descriptions, since it logically makes no room for the miraculous.

14. Interestingly, Bultmann here juxtaposes modern inventions with miraculous worldviews to argue for the latter's obsolescence. In comparison, H. C. Mathur and Alfred Russel Wallace, as noted earlier, describe technological advances to argue that anything is possible—even a seemingly supernatural event—when one considers the unforeseen astonishing appearance of technological gadgetry.

15. See Corner for a similar suggestion that the most “reasonable” explanation for an event can, at times, be a supernatural explanation (2005, 24–28).

16. As described by the philosophers David and Randal Basinger, classical theists cannot have it both ways: they cannot maintain a belief in an omnipotent God capable of acting in the world while also accounting for God's goodness in the presence of evil. God's relationship to and responsibility for evil must also be accounted for (1986, 117). The theologian Mark Corner attempts to resolve the problem of theodicy within a miraculous worldview by proposing that God's omniscience is limited. He reasons that since, according to classical theology, God does not determine human choice, God cannot always know future events. Corner proposes an analogy in which God is a chess player in life's game of chess. Although unable to predict humanity's next move, God can nonetheless reach into the game to make moves that steer the game's course (2005, 55–57).

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