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## Two Concepts of Miracle

There are four grand and powerful arguments, which strongly induce us to believe that the Bible must be from God, viz., miracles, prophecies, the goodness of the doctrine, and the moral character of the penmen. All the miracles flow from divine power; all the prophecies from divine understanding; the goodness of the doctrine from divine goodness; and the moral character of the penmen from divine holiness.

—John Wesley<sup>1</sup>

**J**ohn Wesley, founder of the Methodist branch of Protestant Christianity, states in the above passage from his writings a commonly assumed concept of the miraculous in its relation to religious faith. According to this concept, miracles provide necessary evidence of the reliability and truth of a religious outlook. The prophecies to which he points as additional essential evidence for the truth of the Christian religion he assumes also to be miraculous in their own way because they point with accurate detail beyond their own times to events distant in the future. For Wesley, miracles are particular acts of God that testify to his awesome presence and power and that give guidance, instruction, and conviction to his human creatures on earth. By his reasoning, any religion without a full store of attested and astounding miraculous occurrences would lack sufficient ground for its acceptance and truth.

In this book, I offer a different concept of miracle from the one Wesley has in mind, and I emphasize the central role this different concept can play in deeply meaningful and amply sustaining religious

faith. But before developing this concept in later chapters, I focus for the most part in this chapter on the view of miracles assumed by religious and nonreligious people alike—the view of it to which Wesley confidently alludes—and on the generally unquestioned major place of this view in various religious traditions.

Among numerous striking examples of this notion of what should rightly be regarded as a miracle is an example from the Hebrew Scriptures. A detailed explication of it can set the stage for what follows. The prophet Elijah denounces adherents of the Canaanite religion—with its focus on the god Baal, its presumed fertility god of sky, lightning, and rain—and challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest designed to show that Baal is a pretender to deity and not the true God of heaven and earth. Elijah invites the prophets of Baal to set up an altar to their god. He will do the same. The one who brings down fire from heaven on the altar and sets it ablaze will then be shown by that token to be the true God.

The prophets of Baal slaughter and dress a bullock, placing it on an altar underlain by piles of wood and surrounded by a trench. From morning to noon they cry out to Baal and perform ritual dances around the altar. As is their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances, causing blood to gush out from their bodies. But there is no response from Baal; no fire swooshes down from the heavens to light the wood under the altar. Elijah begins raucously to mock the prophets of Baal, suggesting that perhaps their god is daydreaming, away on a journey, or asleep, and thus unable to attend to their pleas.

Elijah then builds his own altar with its trench and wood and sets a dressed bullock on it. He even pours copious amounts of water over the sacrifice and wood and allows the water to overflow the trench surrounding the altar. He then prays to the God of Israel, asking God to confirm by a miracle that he is indeed the true God, and that Israelites have grievously erred in worshipping Baal or including this god in their ceremonies because Baal is a false god, neither to be implored, nor feared, nor obeyed.

“Then,” the passage recounting this event in the Book of I Kings reads, “the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.”<sup>2</sup> The people in attendance at this event fall on their faces and confess their fervent new commitment to the Israelite God

as the one true God. The startling miracle has convinced them and left them with no other recourse. This story in the Hebrew Bible is a vivid example of the conventional concept of miracle in its relation to religious faith. To a significant extent, such faith is said to rest upon and to be confirmed by extraordinary miraculous events believed to be direct acts of divine intervention into ordinary affairs of the world.

In this chapter, I stress in some detail how deeply rooted is the conviction in many religious traditions and among many if not most of their adherents that miracles of the sort recounted in the story about Elijah and the prophets of Baal are essential features of those traditions. If the truth of the miracle accounts in these traditions is not accepted, or so this kind of thinking goes, then the traditions themselves are left without essential support and convincingness. The traditions as a whole are thus said to stand or fall with the truth or falsity of their accounts of miraculous interventions into and consequent astounding interruptions of the normal course of events. I call this idea the *conventional* view of the nature and role of miracles.

In the succeeding chapter in I Kings, however, there is another story suggesting a different way of thinking about miracles. It is one to which I want to devote my attention in the following chapters of this book. In the present chapter, I continue to offer more discussion and explication of the usual view, but I want at least in passing to refer to the suggestion of a different view conveyed by this second story. In this story, Elijah is fleeing for his life from his Israelite enemies, led by their apostate king, Ahab, and his wife, Jezebel. He feels forsaken and alone and in fear for his life. The Lord comes to Elijah in a cave in which he has hidden himself and asks him what he is doing there. Elijah answers that he has tried to carry out his prophetic mission of calling the children of Israel back to faith in God as their one true Lord, but that they are now pursuing him with the intent to kill him. He is in a mood of dark despair.

God commands Elijah to ascend to a holy mountain and await his instructions. While he remains in the cave, a rushing wind erupts that causes the rocks around him to stir and even to break in pieces. A rumbling earthquake shakes the earth, and an intense fire begins to rage. But the voice of the Lord was in *none* of these stupendous events. Instead, it is contained in “a still small voice” sounding within Elijah himself.<sup>3</sup> Hearing it, he abruptly rises and moves to the entrance of

the cave with restored resolution and new confidence in the promise of his prophetic mission.

This still small voice, I suggest, can be construed as the symbol of a contemplative, openhearted spirit that is able to attend to the natural, everyday events of the world—not just those of a highly unusual or unfathomable character—with empowering religious insight, faith, and conviction. Experience of the authentically miraculous can in such cases lie in keen discernment of the profound religious significance of commonplace things and occurrences. *Here the familiar is the constant and convincing field of miracle.* It becomes such by cultivation of inward ways of experiencing, recognizing, and responding to the ordinary things of the world. This abiding sense of the miraculous does not require astonishingly strange happenings or radical interruptions of the usual courses of events. It is recognition of the extraordinariness of the ordinary when the latter is encountered in a radically receptive and discerning manner.

I argue that religious faith of an entirely adequate and wholly contemporary sort—one that does not presuppose ancient cosmological beliefs or credence given to accounts of miracles implying or resting on those beliefs—can grow out of, be sustained, and be continuously enriched by mindful openness to quotidian miracles, the abundant miracles of everyday life. I provide examples of this kind of miracle in the chapters to come. Profound awareness of the religious significance of such everyday miracles lies at the heart of another type of faith of a wholly naturalistic, this-worldly sort. I give to this faith the name of Religion of Nature and have written about it in earlier books.<sup>4</sup>

Other types of religious naturalism share in this general outlook as well. And even the more traditional forms of religion can be awakened to new life and meaning when this second sense of miracle is given a more central, if not the central, role. I should note that attention to this second sense of miracle is not entirely lacking in those traditions, even though it is generally accorded secondary importance when compared with the first sense.

But I anticipate and digress, struck for the moment by the contrast between the two very different accounts of Elijah's experiences, the second of which I interpret as alluding to the central theme of this book. Let me now return in this chapter to further discussion of the widely assumed concept of the character and role of miracles in their relation to religious outlooks and convictions.

## Miracles in the Abrahamic Traditions

If we continue to attend to the Hebrew Bible, we can note that its pages are pervaded with accounts of miracles in the conventional sense of that term. These miracles are usually accorded a key importance in the unfolding of the Hebrew Bible's religious vision. Among numerous examples of this fact are God's enabling Noah, his family, and creatures of the earth to survive a worldwide flood; Abraham's experience of cutting a covenant with God and becoming the father of the future Jewish people; Jacob's wrestling with an angel on one occasion and observing a magnificent stairway to heaven on another; the call of Moses by the God of the Burning Bush; the plague of locusts and the Passover in Egypt; the parting of the sea to allow the Jewish escape from bondage in Egypt and passage toward the Promised Land; and the descent of manna from heaven to feed the Israelites in their long journey through the Sinai peninsula.

Other notable miracles are the arrest of the sun's course to make more time for a close but finally successful battle with a Canaanite tribe in Palestine; Joshua's causing the walls of the city of Jericho to collapse by a divinely appointed miracle; and Isaiah's awesome vision of the Lord high and lifted up in the temple. The miraculous eight-day flame despite insufficient consecrated oil in the temple at the time of the Maccabees that is recounted in extra-biblical Jewish books such as the Mishnah and Talmud is another example of an outstanding miracle in the Jewish tradition. All of these and similar events are seen as critical evidences of the guiding and sustaining actions of God in the history of the Jewish people. The conventional concept of miracle plays a fundamental role in the development of their traditional religious outlook on the world.

In the Christian New Testament, Jesus is said to be born of a virgin as the consequence of her impregnation by the spirit of God; a dove descends from heaven at his baptism, with an announcement of his intimate relation to God the Father; he performs numerous miracles—such as healing the sick, the blind, and infirm; enabling his disciple Peter to walk on the water; feeding the multitudes out of a small supply of food; turning water into wine; and raising Lazarus after he had been dead for four days.

Such miracles are claimed to be essential signs of Jesus's divine call to his messianic ministry and of the coming into the world of

the Kingdom of God as the accompaniment of his ministry. Moreover, there is Jesus's mysterious transfiguration on the mountain that discloses his true nature to his disciples; his astonishing resurrection from the dead three days after his crucifixion; his subsequent appearances to some of his disciples and followers; and his visible ascent into heaven.

Also recounted in the New Testament are such miracles as the sudden appearance of the risen Christ to Saul on the road to Damascus that transforms him from a persecutor of the Christians to an apostle now named Paul; the Day of Pentecost (fiftieth day after Passover), on which the Holy Spirit descends upon the followers of Christ and they are miraculously enabled to speak in many different languages; and Peter's instruction by God in a dream to allow Gentiles to become Christians without first requiring them to be circumcised and observe other aspects of the traditional Jewish law.

These and other miracles of what I am calling the conventional sort are central aspects of the then-emerging and crystallizing Christian tradition. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is claimed by Paul in one of the canonical epistles to be the pivotal event of that tradition when he announces that if Christ is not raised from the dead, his own faith and that of all his fellow Christians is entirely in vain. Jesus's miraculous resurrection provides necessary confirmation, he asserts, of hope for the resurrections of all of them into newness of life after their own deaths.<sup>5</sup>

If we turn to the religion of Islam, we find that three miracles of the conventional sort also play a basic role in Muslims' outlook on themselves and the world. Muslims contend that the central confirming miracle of their tradition is the existence of the Holy Qur'an. Muhammad recited the Qur'an day after day in the marketplace, and it was later transcribed into a book. To the Muslim, the book containing these recitations is supremely beautiful and awesomely inspiring.<sup>6</sup> And yet it was authored by Muhammad, who is believed to have been unable either to read or to write.<sup>7</sup> This would clearly have been impossible, or so the Muslims claim, had the ultimate origin of the Qur'an not originated in Allah as its supernatural source and inspiration. This is indeed what the Qur'an and revered Islamic traditions proclaim in their account of how Muhammad was instructed to commit to memory and publicly recite what an angel of Allah transmitted to him over successive nights in a dark cave.<sup>8</sup>

A second major miraculous occurrence is briefly recounted in the Qur'an but greatly amplified in subsequent accounts. This is Muhammad's nighttime ascent into heaven, where he communes with renowned Jewish and Christian prophets and with Allah Himself.<sup>9</sup> This journey is for Muslims crucial evidence of Muhammad's divine call to be the seal of the prophets and to present Allah's consummatory revelation to humankind. It is a miracle of the conventional sort as I have described it—an extraordinary breakthrough into the ordinary course of events.

The third miracle held to be of central importance to dedicated Muslims and the eschatological confirmation of the truth of their faith is the promise of their being raised from the dead on the other side of this life and being brought into a lush garden with flowing water springs and many other highly desirable features, there to abide forever.<sup>10</sup> As with Paul's proclamation to Christians in the New Testament, the hope of miraculous resurrection into everlasting life in a glorious new realm presided over by Allah is a central aspect of the Islamic religious outlook.

Muhammad was not a routine miracle worker like Moses or Jesus. But the Qur'an endorses many of the miracles recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. It also affirms the Gospel accounts of the miraculous birth of John the Baptist to a barren mother and to a father well advanced in age, and of Jesus's birth by the Virgin Mary.<sup>11</sup> It does not, however, accept the idea of Jesus as God in human flesh. The Christian acclamations of the miracle of the Incarnation and of the doctrine of the Trinity are anathema to Muslims and rejected as flagrantly idolatrous. Jesus for Islam is a great prophet but only a human being. The same is true for them of Muhammad, the greatest of Allah's prophets.

Thus, miracles of the conventional kind figure importantly in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are relied upon as providing essential support for the claims to truth of those three traditions. In the next section, I reflect briefly on the role of miracles of this kind in two prominent religions that developed to the east of Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula: Hinduism and Buddhism.

## Miracles in Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism

Miracles in the conventional sense of the term are associated for the most part in Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism with beings that

fall under the class of what are called in Sanskrit *avatars*. Avatars are manifestations of supernatural beings in earthly form. As such, they are capable of performing astounding miracles of many different sorts as signs of their unearthly origin. In this section, I make mention of Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who has the leading role in the *Bhagavad-gita*,<sup>12</sup> and the avatar-like earthly appearance of the celestial Bodhisattva in a basic text of Mahayana Buddhism. The miraculous acts or disclosures of both of these beings serve for many faithful Hindus or devoted Mahayana Buddhists as essential evidence of these beings' supernatural origins and otherworldly natures as well as of the saving truths of the religious traditions in which the beings figure centrally.

In chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad-gita*, the warrior Arjuna, having been instructed by Krishna (in the guise of his charioteer) about his true nature as the Supreme Lord, asks Krishna to further exhibit his nature by revealing his universal form. This universal form can only be disclosed by a miracle, and the miracle is for Arjuna the final confirmation of Krishna as Lord of the universe in all of its forms over all the ages of its existence. Krishna's miracle of self-revelation to Arjuna can only be described with allusive imagery in the words of the text but is seen in its fullness by "divine eyes" given graciously if fleetingly to Arjuna.<sup>13</sup> Some suggestion of the fearsome majesty of the miraculous disclosure is contained in these passages translated from the text:

Arjuna saw in that universal form unlimited mouths and unlimited eyes. It was all wondrous. The form was decorated with divine, dazzling ornaments and arrayed in many garbs. He was garlanded gloriously, and there were many scents smeared over his body. All was magnificent, all expanding, all unlimited. This was seen by Arjuna.

If hundreds of thousands of suns rose up at once into the sky, they might resemble the effulgence of the Supreme Person in that universal form.

At that time Arjuna could see in the universal form of the Lord the unlimited expansions of the universe situated in one place although divided into many, many thousands.<sup>14</sup>

Krishna also ominously announces that in his universal form he is "Time...destroyer of the worlds."<sup>15</sup> Experiencing all of this, Arjuna



says to Krishna, now revealed beyond any question as avatar of the all-pervading God Vishnu, "I can no longer maintain my equilibrium. Seeing Your radiant colors fill the sky and beholding Your eyes and mouths, I am afraid."<sup>16</sup>

The miracle of Krishna's revelation has made him quake with trepidation and awe. In the following chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita*, Arjuna inquires of Krishna what the proper mode of responding to his transcendent, all-encompassing majesty should be. He is told that he should be a devotee of Krishna in the mode of *bhakti-yoga*, that is, throughout his life he should worship and serve Krishna as the sacred manifestation and earthly form of Vishnu. The miraculous vision will thus serve to reorient and transform his life. This vision is a striking example in Hindu literature of miracle in the conventional sense. It can be compared with the similar examples of the awesome revelation of God in the temple, recounted in the Book of Isaiah,<sup>17</sup> with the miraculous disclosure of the true nature of Jesus to his disciples in the transfiguration narratives of the Christian gospels,<sup>18</sup> and with Muhammad's nocturnal ascent to heaven and visit with other prophets in the presence of Allah.

The revelation to Arjuna is also analogous in some ways to the story of the celestial Bodhisattva's descent to earth and to his miraculous deeds while on earth in the Mahayana Buddhist text the *Lalitavistara* that I discuss next. In both cases, a transcendent divine being makes itself known by its miraculous incarnation, disclosures, and involvements in the affairs of the world. In the Christian case, there is but one such incarnation for all time, but in Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism there are many. In the *Bhagavad-gita*, for example, Krishna explains that he appears "in every millennium" and that he does so "in order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of religion."<sup>19</sup>

The *Lalitavistara* Buddhist text is in Sanskrit and dates in its present form to perhaps the third century CE, but it is a compilation of earlier documents, some of which may reach back to the early years of the Buddhist religion.<sup>20</sup> It is a story about how the celestial Bodhisattva became the historical Buddha and how he reached final enlightenment after long years of arduous preparation. He then began his ministry of spreading the truth of Buddhism throughout the world. The celestial Bodhisattva descends to earth by being inserted into the right side of the womb of Queen Maya, wife of an opulent and majestic king. (We

are reminded here of gospel accounts of the miracle of Jesus's virgin birth.) The Bodhisattva's celestial origin is shown by the miracles attending his birth and the many miracles he performs in his youth. The latter include feats of wrestling, where his merely touching his opponents throws them to the ground; his hurling a dead elephant a great distance with his toes; his solving complex mathematical problems with ease; and his stringing a great bow that no one else has been able to string.

When the future Buddha leaves his pleasant life in the palace of his father the king and begins his quest for enlightenment, his path is strewn with miracles of many different sorts. The gods of heaven bear witness to his austerities, and his seat of awakening under the Bodhi Tree is resplendent with miraculous displays. Miracles of healing throughout the earth attend his experience of enlightenment, and he sets in motion the Wheel of Dharma as he decides to teach his first disciples and begin the process of spreading the truth of Buddhism over the land. This Buddha is no mere human being. He is a celestial Lord in human disguise. His life is surrounded by miracles bearing witness to his celestial origin and nature. Such miracles are only to be expected in the view of Mahayana Buddhists. Without them, evidence of the Buddha's religious character and authority would be greatly diminished.

The examples of miracles I have cited here range from texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to a central text of Hinduism and a pivotal one of Mahayana Buddhism. The examples chime in with Wesley's allegation that miracles in the conventional connotation of this term play a critical role in the expression and confirmation of his own form of faith. Miracles of this sort in religions of both the West and the East have a wondrous quality that evokes shock and surprise, and often shuddering dread. They stand in stark contrast to life's familiar, usual, predictable course of events. They stoutly defy run-of-the-mill, mundane explanations. They are thought to be radical interventions into or striking upsettings of the ordinary character of things. They are regarded as inexplicable in principle unless acknowledged as abrupt breakings into the natural order from without by some sort of world-transcending being.

Such miracles are believed to provide necessary disclosures and confirmations of the transcendent being's reality, character, purpose, and relation to the ordinary world, and especially of its care and con-

cern for members of the religious tradition or group whose faith is centered on this being as the ultimate source of proper religious understanding, support, judgment, and transformation. The conventional concept of miracle also applies to astonishing experiences thought to be produced by actions or influences of gods, goddesses, demons, or other kinds of presences or powers radically different in their character from the familiar things of earthly life and experience. Actions of demons may be believed to produce miracles of a nefarious kind, but the miracles I have been discussing here are salutary in their intention and effects. So we need to distinguish good miracles from evil ones. And we should note that good miracles are sometimes if not often required in religious traditions to ward off the effects of evil or demonic ones.

My focus in this section has been on miracles of the good sort and on them as conventionally conceived. It has also been on religious views that are oriented around some sort of transcendent divine being, such as Yahweh, the cosmic Christ, Allah, Krishna-Vishnu, or the celestial Bodhisattva. In the next section, I consider the question of why belief in miracles of the conventional (and mainly good) sort has been so prominent in religious traditions of this kind and why it continues to be prominent in the outlooks of large numbers of contemporary adherents to these traditions.

### Why Miracles Are Prominent in Religious Traditions and Outlooks

The central place of miracles in the kinds of religious tradition I referenced in the previous section can be accounted for in several different ways. The first way relates to the very idea of a transcendent divine being and its crucial connection with human well-being. If one believes in such a being, as did Elijah in the story of his contest with the prophets of Baal, it only stands to reason that a God such as Yahweh would make himself miraculously known to his human subjects on occasions where he chooses to manifest his power and glory in some captivating manner, to lay out the path of their salvation, to decisively repudiate and bring under judgment certain human actions and commitments (such as the Israelites' temptation in Elijah's time to worship the false god Baal), or to provide guidance and succor for

humans in times of dire need. Yahweh's deliverance of the Jews from their bondage in Egypt, Jesus's divinely directed healing ministry, and the other miraculous acts and events accompanying his time on earth would fall under this first explanation, as would Allah's provision of the Qur'an, Krishna's revelation of his true nature in the *Bhagavad-gita*, or the celestial Bodhisattva's gracious descent to earth in order to bring liberation and enlightenment to the world in the *Lalitavistara*.

An image that comes to mind in this regard is one of humans huddling aimlessly and fearfully at the foot of a great wall. They have no hope of scaling it by themselves or benefiting from what might lie on the other side of the wall. They are in desperate straits without the aid of the divine being who resides there. They have no understanding of their nature and destiny as humans. They have no adequate guidance, aid, or resources with which to address and remedy their pitiable state of helplessness, misdirection, ignorance, suffering, and sin. They are in a state of malaise and despair. The widespread character of this state, together with our reluctance to acknowledge its depth and extent, is vividly described by novelist George Eliot in her brilliant novel *Middlemarch*:

[W]e do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.<sup>21</sup>

The divine being is said miraculously to reach down to forlorn humans from the top of the imaginary wall, to raise them up, and to provide them with essential guidance and strength for the living of their lives. They are saved and convinced that they could only have been saved by that being's loving concern and decisive action for the sake of their deliverance.

Without this being's miraculous initiative of reaching over the wall to lift them up, instruct them, and empower them—or so they have come to believe—their plight would have been hopeless. Miracles

are required in this way of thinking because without them there would be no recourse, no hope of salvation or fullness of life for humans. There would be no proper commitment to and no healing relationship with the ultimate source and sustaining power of the universe and of their creaturely lives.

In this picture, humans are incapable of going it alone. They depend crucially on the divine being's miraculous works. Without these works, they are lost. Miracles *have* to happen because there is no salvation apart from them. A person who is able to say, "I am saved by grace alone" must also confess, "I am saved by miracle alone"—miracle such as the divine deliverance from Egypt, the salvation made possible by the crucified and resurrected Christ, the definitive revelation of the Qur'an, the life-transforming manifestation of the all-pervading Vishnu, or the Bodhisattva come compassionately to earth to set spinning the saving Wheel of Dharma.

A second way of accounting for belief in miracles of the conventional sort is that to acknowledge something as strange, wonderful, and inexplicable as a miracle is to make it in that manner *explicable*. It is to provide an explanation for its occurrence that makes sense in the context of belief in a transcendent divine being that rules the world, is in constant concourse with it, and normally resides in another world where the possibility of such occurrences would be unsurprising and commonplace. This belief is especially easy to account for when people live in a pre-scientific culture where comprehensive laws of nature, such as those ushered in by the scientific revolution of the West, have not been formulated or brought to the fore. Theirs is already a precarious world full of many mysterious, unpredictable occurrences. They know nothing, for example, of El Niño's or La Niña's effects on temperature, winds, and jet streams when they experience droughts, storms, or seasons of bitter cold. And they have no knowledge of plate tectonics to account for earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. They are naturally inclined to yearn and pray for miraculous intervention when fearing for destructive effects of such phenomena on themselves, their loved ones, their villages, or their cities. The phenomena themselves may be seen as divinely appointed miracles of punishment and judgment, thus being rendered revelatory and explicable in this fashion.

However, to view such occurrences as miraculous or as calling for miraculous intervention and aid may no longer be deemed plausible or necessary once the prospect of being able to account for things

scientifically, making them regular and predictable instead of capricious and mysterious, has taken hold of thought and imagination. In this revised vision of the world, what may at one time have seemed inexplicable is now at least in principle open to scientific investigation and explanation. As such, it can promise the boon of being made subject to human utilization and control instead of requiring some kind of miraculous explanation or remedy. Scientific knowledge and human technology can increasingly replace what may formerly have been thought to call for miraculous intervention and aid. Advances in the etiology and treatment of medical conditions in today's world can be cited as one telling example. Darwinism's theory of natural selection, thereby accounting for the diversity of life forms on earth without need for special divine creations, is another. Acknowledgement of something as requiring miraculous intervention for its resolution in one cultural context can thus be quite normal, while in another it becomes increasingly outmoded, unnecessary, and unbelievable.

Nevertheless, many people in today's scientific culture, which is steadily becoming global, persist in believing in miracles of the conventional sort and in dealing with some happenings in these terms. Why is this the case? My answer to this question includes a third way of accounting for belief in such miracles. In brief, the answer is that hope for miraculous occurrences may become especially urgent in times of more personal or individual kinds of distress and need than the more general ones described in the first two modes of explanation. It arises when scientific techniques and other usual approaches seem hardly adequate.

A mother whose child is in the hospital with what is likely to be a fatal injury or disease may pray fervently for a miracle of the child's healing. An addict may despair of ever being rid of his or her addiction without some kind of divinely bestowed miracle and may constantly pray for such a miracle to take place. Previous human interventions and numerous times in detoxing centers have not helped. In such a time of need, perhaps God will perform a miracle of healing and grant the gift of finally enduring motivation and resolve. The addict cleaves to this hope. One can easily multiply such examples: the father who constantly fears for the fate of his son fighting on a faraway, extremely dangerous battlefield and prays for a miracle of divine protection; the mother who is anxious about her young son or daughter having to walk daily to and from school in a drug-infested, crime-ridden neigh-

borhood; the man or woman who has lost a job or has not been able to find one and is hungry, homeless, and depressed. Will God not intervene with miraculous saving grace and power? Such people may earnestly pray for miracles because of their sense of desperate need for a particular kind of protection or resolution. For them, science and technology cannot speak adequately to this need. Their hope for a miracle of the conventional kind is readily understandable.

People in such situations or just in general may also yearn for a miraculous afterlife in which the cares, concerns, sufferings, and anxieties of this life are left behind, both for themselves and for those they love. The mother with a sick child hopes that if the child's life is not saved in this world, it will be saved forever in another. The father has the same hope for his endangered son; the inner-city mother for her imperiled children; and the addict for a life beyond the grave where his or her destructive, enslaving craving is no more. Even in our modern age, ardent hope for the miracle of an afterlife of unthreatened, deeply fulfilling serenity and bliss—one where loved ones will be forever reunited—is a fourth reason I can cite for the persistence of belief in miracles of the conventional sort.

British philosophical theologian F. R. Tennant has noted one possible way of reconciling continuing belief in miracles of the more or less conventional sort with the rise of the natural sciences and the radically different conception of the universe they have brought into being. The revised view of miracles he outlines is one in which divinely ordered miracles *do not run counter* to laws of nature as science describes them, but rather *make use* of these laws in such a manner as to produce miraculous occurrences that would not otherwise take place.

Tennant draws on the analogy of human technology, where astoundingly new things have been produced by human technology, a technology that does not violate but has found ways to put to surprising new uses the regularities of nature. Human examples would be the invention of wheeled vehicles, mechanical pumps, electric lights, wireless telegraphy, airplanes, spaceships, digital computers, pacemakers, and GPS satellites. The invention of the airplane is an excellent example of the sort of thing Tennant has in mind. In August 1908, after Wilbur Wright had given an impressive demonstration in Le Mans, France, of the ability of his and his brother's 1905 Wright Flyer to ascend, stay aloft, maneuver, and land, another aviation pioneer, Louis Blériot—who later was to be the first to cross the English channel in a quite different

plane of his own creation—could only exclaim, “C’est merveilleux!” “It’s a miracle!” would not be a bad translation.<sup>22</sup> In similar fashion, Tennant suggests, God can perform special miracles by intentional, ingenious uses of these same regularities to fulfill his own purposes. He need not alter the laws of nature in doing so. It is, after all, a world of his creation.<sup>23</sup>

## Miracles of a Different Sort: Quotidian Miracles

The view of miracles noted by Tennant moves some distance in the direction of the view of them to be highlighted in this book because it requires no upsetting of the regular laws of nature, even though it appeals to a transcendent source of manipulation of those laws. What I want to emphasize, though, is the miraculous character of the events and things that lie around us on every side, a character that we can continually cultivate the ability to recognize and perceive. We may believe in the existence of a transcendent being or we may not. In either event, miracles of the routine and everyday can and should be constantly acknowledged and affirmed.

Our lives can be enriched and ennobled by this way of seeing and experiencing. We thereby can gain strength and awareness for living gratefully, courageously, and wisely. Most important, we can learn to contribute to the well-being of others through sharing with them in verbal expression and example a cultivated sensitivity to the diverse things of this world that are ordinary and routine and yet miraculous and awe inspiring, each in its own right and in its own distinctive manner. All of this can only happen when the jaded scales of habit are stripped from our eyes and the eyes of others, and when we learn together to see the world anew and as it amazingly is.

My now deceased mother exclaimed, when I visited her in Florida from my former teaching position in Colorado, “Every time you visit, you are to me brand new!” Every morning, when we awaken from our night’s sleep, we can learn to greet our otherwise familiar world as something brand new. To be able to do so is to experience a fundamental kind of empowering and saving grace. It is to encounter, marvel at, and take to heart the innumerable striking instances of a different sort of miracle than the conventionally assumed kind. These daily miracles may be explicable and familiar in one way, but we can also learn to



see them as astonishingly mysterious and extraordinary in another.

I do not argue that the quotidian miracles to which I call attention throughout the rest of this book can substitute for miracles in the conventional connotation of that term. If one believes in such, then they may well have essential roles to play in one's own religious outlook. As a religious naturalist who does not believe in or appeal to anything supernatural, my entire focus is on nature and on the wondrous features of nature considered in and of themselves. I also acknowledge that there is much in our lives as creatures of nature and in nature as a whole that is tragic, including such things as diseases, accidents, natural disasters, predations, the finality of death, and the sometimes horrible consequences of misuses of human freedom. For me, there is no recourse beyond nature and beyond our resources as creatures of nature for coping with these tragic dimensions.<sup>24</sup>

I respect those who differ from me on these points and do not argue that their views should be rejected out of hand. There is mystery enough in the world as we experience it to encompass or allow for both views. Who can claim to have the final and indisputable word on such matters? I do hope, however, that people of other religious faiths will agree with me that it is religiously essential to continuously recognize, contemplate, and celebrate the miracles of everyday life I describe in the chapters to follow.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I call attention to the nature and role of miracles as conventionally conceived in five religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Mahayana Buddhism. I stress the fact that miracles of this kind are generally deemed to be of central importance in these traditions and to provide essential evidences of their truth. I also suggest four routes of explanation for the continuing appeal to many religious people of this kind of miracle, an appeal that continues to be strong and compelling for them even in our scientific age. I contrast the conventional concept of miracle with the idea of coming to recognize and incorporate into one's life the profound religious significance of commonplace, everyday miracles. The next chapter focuses on the first of such miracles I bring into view in successive chapters of this book: the miracle of the passage of time.